

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

*Promises
Keep*

Sarah McCarty

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PROMISES KEEP

Sarah McCarty

Sarah McCarty

For Pam,

A wonderful woman with an incredible capacity to believe and inspire. May life reward you with the same positive enthusiasm you show others.

Sarah

Chapter One

*Cattle Crossing, Wyoming Territory
May, 1869*

Cougar downed his second scotch of the last twenty minutes. Quality stuff, not the rotgut he'd noticed the barkeep passing to most of the other customers who were so falling-down drunk, they couldn't tell the difference. The luxury had cost him an arm and a leg, but the way he figured it, a man didn't skimp when courting demons. He took a last drag of his cigarette and motioned at the barkeep to fill his glass again.

In an obscure corner, a man pounded the keys on a beat-up piano. Disgusted, Cougar blew a stream of smoke in the direction of the scrawny man's back. He wished the guy would just give it up. It wasn't as if anyone could tell what tune the fool was striving for. And about all he was accomplishing with the raucous rendition was a jarring of Cougar's already raw nerves. He flicked the cigarette onto the floor and ground it under his heel.

Running his finger over the flimsy bar, he grimaced. He wasn't a man overly concerned with dirt, but next time he came to one of these places, if there ever was a next time, he was going to select one with a little more emphasis on cleanliness and a lot less on obscurity. Madame Cecile's Pleasure Emporium was so damned rickety, he kept expecting the stairs to collapse if one more saddle bum set foot on them.

He wiped his grimy finger on his pants. One thing was for sure, it was a safe bet none of his acquaintances were going to walk through the door. For himself, he didn't care, but if Doc got wind of this, he'd be disappointed. And Dorothy, hell, Dorothy wouldn't say a word, but the old biddies in town would sure rub her face in it. They'd been waiting since the day the McKinnely's took "that breed" in for him to bring shame upon Doc and his wife. Which is why he'd come to Cattle Crossing for this endeavor.

Cattle Crossing was just a couple of miles east of his hometown Cheyenne, but they were pretty important miles. While Cheyenne was a town striving for respectability, Cattle Crossing was a cesspool of ill repute. The only people who came here, came with something to hide. So much so that anyone who recognized him wouldn't admit it in polite company, so that was one worry off his plate.

Which meant he still had his original worry to contend with. He swirled the scotch in his shot glass and sighed. And that worry wasn't going to go anywhere if all he did was sit here and count the nicks in the planks set across two crates that formed the bar.

He took a deep breath and viewed the seedy room from beneath the brim of his hat. What he beheld was shocking. Even after reminding himself that he was in one of the most disreputable whorehouses in the territory, he had to shake his head. Men and women were in various stages of mating, out in the open, without a care to privacy.

He'd never in all his born days seen anything like it. Oh, he'd seen lust a time or two before, but never like this.

He watched a young boy, barely out of knee pants, sidle up to a plump blonde. The kid was young, but his instincts were sound. With eager hands, the boy freed the woman's full, white breasts by simply yanking down her top. She had huge nipples. Pink, fat and mouthwatering. The boy took one look, grinned big, and latched onto a nipple with voracious hunger.

Cougar watched the couple intently, studying every nuance of the exchange, as if through sheer perseverance he could borrow some of the youngster's heat. He looked down at his crotch and silently ordered, "React."

But nothing happened. He tossed back the liquor in his glass, welcoming the burn as it slid down to his stomach. As the whore led her eager client up the stairs to the cribs above, Cougar slammed the empty glass down on the battered bar. His hand curled into a tight fist beside it. Had Emily's death unmanned him?

It had been a year since her passing. In that entire time, he hadn't successfully managed to bed a woman. Not once. Not even his housekeeper, whom he'd hired precisely because of her reputation in the bedroom. He motioned the barkeep for another shot as he contemplated life's little ironies. Hell, for six months before that fateful day, ever since he'd gotten engaged to Emily, he'd walked around perpetually cocked and ready to fire.

Emily had been everything a man could hope for in a wife. More than a half-breed should aspire to. When she'd agreed to marry him, he'd been through the roof. Blonde. Beautiful. Demure. Respectable. The perfect lady. Almost too perfect to touch. Which had him wondering if she'd meet his needs in bed. Which was why he'd pushed her so hard for a response the day before their wedding. The day she'd died.

He took a deep breath and let it out, remembering that day. He swallowed down his scotch. Damn! She'd been shocked. The glass hit the bar with a soft thunk. Horrified when he'd touched her breast. Repulsed that he'd wanted to put his mouth there. He pushed the empty glass away, wishing he could put the memories away as easily. The glass hit the seam in the planks, tipped and then rolled with an uneven thump to the edge of the makeshift bar. She'd called him every name in the book after he'd told her what he would expect as her husband. Words he had no idea she knew. The fury of the flash flood had been nothing compared to her fury that he, a dirty savage, expected her to let him do those animalistic things to her. He righted the glass but left it teetering on the brink of disaster.

She'd still been calling him names when the floodwaters had taken them both under. Fighting him, making it twice as hard to get them to the side of the gully. When the tree had slammed into them, she'd been wrenched out of his grip and he'd been unable to find her again. Three days later, the search party had found her body downstream. Two days after that, he'd helped put her in the ground. He gave the glass a nudge and it shattered on the floor.

And now he was here, in a rundown excuse of a whorehouse, looking for a miracle. He turned half around, leaned his elbow against the bar and pretended a nonchalance he didn't feel as he searched the room's occupants. He didn't need perfect. He just needed one woman who could break the curse Emily had left him with.

The smoky haze permeating the dimly lit room forced him to squint as one by one, he narrowed his choices. The young prostitute heading his way looked like a "possible". She had the wide hips and big breasts he favored in a woman even though there was too much paint on her face for his liking.

Hell, he admitted wryly, it wasn't the makeup he objected to. It was the woman herself. She looked like she'd been ridden hard and put up wet, but a man couldn't be too picky at times like this. He decided to motion her over, but in the time it took for him to make the decision, she'd veered to the right, latching onto the arm of an elderly gentleman. Damn! Obviously, he was going to have to put more pep in his step if he wanted anything but leftovers tonight. He resumed his lounging position and his search.

Despite his determination, when he heard the rustle of skirts behind him, his gut clenched. Maybe the woman was just passing by. Maybe she didn't want to talk to him. Maybe he was getting skittish for no damned reason.

"I couldn't help but notice that none of my girls appear to interest you. Is there something special you require?" That voice, coming from just right of his shoulder, was pure sin and seduction. His response to it marked him as a coward because as soon as she finished the asking, he had an inclination to get moving.

But it was too late to run and he wouldn't allow himself to even if he could. He was done running, hiding and making excuses. He'd either bury this problem tonight or learn to live with it for the rest of his life. He pulled himself straight, turned and faced the woman.

She was tall, he noted. Her head came to just beneath his chin. She had a shape on her that could knock a man's jaw to the floor. And there wasn't much of her running for cover, either. Especially above the waist. Her white breasts looked ready to take a leap for freedom from the pale blue material of her bodice. Like maybe if he held his hands out right now, he'd be just in time to catch them.

This one had possibilities, he decided, as he met her cool blue eyes. He'd been told a man owed a whore nothing but the money on the dresser, but he found twenty-nine years of preaching just wasn't as easy to shake as trail dust. He took off his hat.

"I'm not sure, Ma'am." He noticed no one else had taken off theirs. Damn, he was probably sticking out like a sore thumb, but there wasn't much he could do about it. She was a woman despite her profession, and in his world, women were treated with respect.

"Maybe if you could be more specific about your desires, I could help you," she suggested in a soft, throaty voice.

He'd come here looking for help with his problem. No doubt, this woman was an expert in men's problems, a well-paid one if the pearls around her neck were real. However, he'd been hoping to sort of drift into the subject if he couldn't avoid it altogether. Nowhere in his plans for the evening had he anticipated blurting out the humiliating suspicion that he wasn't capable anymore.

And he wasn't going to start now. He settled his hat back on his head. "I'm sorry Ma'am, but I think I might have come to the wrong place."

A perfectly manicured hand high on his thigh halted his retreat.

"Not necessarily," she contradicted in that same bedroom voice, leaning her chest against his arm. The heat of her breasts burned through the blue cotton of his shirt. Her perfume mingled with the scent of sweat and smoke. A heavy floral scent. Her hand slid up his buckskins to cup his balls. He froze. He shifted his hips. Her grip tightened to the point of pain.

He looked into her eyes and noted a ruthlessness he'd missed while admiring other assets. He had a feeling she'd squeeze his balls right off if he moved. He caught her wrist in his hand. He didn't take orders from anyone. She arched her brow at him, the question in her eyes giving him pause. He relaxed his grip and settled his weight more solidly into his moccasins. This was her place. Her show. And until he knew where she planned on taking him, he might as well stay put.

She petted his balls as if to reward his compliance as she said, "I have a woman upstairs who specializes in, shall we say, these 'little problems' that crop up now and then."

Her fingernail scratched along the curve of his scrotum through the supple leather of his pants. The heat of her hand penetrated the thin leather as her fingers slid behind his balls and pressed. Hot, shivery sensation shot up his spine and out to the tip of his cock.

"Her methods may appear a bit unorthodox at first," the woman continued rubbing those fingers in small circles, creating new sparks and increasing the sensation, "but they are successful."

He tightened his grip on her wrist. "Unorthodox?"

She didn't appear upset with his interference. Her smile broadened. She bracketed his cock with her fingers and began a milking motion through his buckskins. She pressed those huge breasts up against him and continued massaging his cock. Her cooing, "My, you are a big one," alerted him to the fact that if he didn't do something soon, his privates were going to be flapping in the breeze. He wasn't a shy man and sure enough, no one would notice this little show in the corner of the bar with all that was going on, but tonight was not a night he wanted to make a spectacle of himself.

"Ma'am, you've definitely misunderstood —"

She pressed her lips to his throat. Her fingers slid inside his buckskins, under his gun belt. Damn, she was quick! He twisted to the side but she grabbed his penis like a handle and started massaging. Hard. He wasn't sure if the slight swelling that began

was because of the abuse to his flesh or the stimulation. But a response was a response and he'd come here to see if he could still have one. He let her continue.

"Ooh, very nice." The woman's fingers stretched to encompass his width. "Lorraine is going to be a happy woman tonight."

His plan was for him to be the happy one. "I'm not sure Lorraine is going to be enough—"

"Ah," she breathed in his ear, her smile wickedly pleased. "So that's it. Well, honey, taking care of that fantasy will be my pleasure."

She slid down his body. Her heavy perfume wafted up to envelope him as her breasts rolled down his chest, and over his belly until they came to rest at his hips. He forgot about the witnesses, the crowd. Everything except the sight of her huge breasts cushioning the bulge of his erection.

For the first time in months, he felt a glimmer of hope. He stopped her when her hands went to his gun belt. He hitched it up and to the side instead. She made a moue with her lips, stroked his Bowie knife like it was a cock, and then pulled his blue shirt free from his pants. Her tongue dragged across the side of his belly until it tangled with the narrow line of hair that began low on his abdomen. She caught a few strands in her teeth, tugging them lightly.

He cupped her head in his hands as her fingers went to work on the ties of his pants. Her hair felt strangely brittle to the touch, but her breath was hot and moist against his stomach, and the things her tongue was doing to his belly promised paradise for his hardening cock.

Cougar gritted his teeth at the surge of pleasure that caught him by surprise when she pinched the head of his penis before sliding her hand down the length and lifting him free. Despite the crowd, despite his embarrassment, his cock had a mind of its own, and it was enjoying the attention.

A hooted, "Got yourself a big one there, Cecile!" from the stairs above had the woman smiling.

"A really nice big one," she murmured, running her tongue over her vivid red lips. She glanced up at him from under her lashes. "You don't mind if I warm him up for Lorraine, do you?"

She didn't wait for an answer but slid that brightly painted mouth around his shaft, taking him all the way to her throat. The debate of how much of a floorshow he wanted to provide died a quick death. He no longer cared.

Fire streaked outward from his cock. The woman knew what she was doing. What started as a little interest developed into pure lust. The crowd, the hoots, all dissolved into the background. His world focused on her hot mouth and his aching cock. Pleasure he hadn't known in months rolled over him. When Cecile pulled back to tongue fuck the tiny slit at the tip of his penis, he growled low in his throat and pulled her mouth back to where he needed it.

"No teasing." This was too important to him to chance anything going wrong.

She cupped his balls in her hands, rolling them gently in her fingers as she withdrew her mouth. "But, *cheri*," she glanced around the saloon, at the interest they were garnering, the money changing hands, "teasing is what this is all about."

Thinking about that was not good for his erection.

Cecile motioned with her hand to someone behind him as she lapped his flagging cock. "I am sure you will be more comfortable sitting."

He'd be more comfortable fucking the hell out of her mouth before this moment dissolved into yet another disappointment, but when the sound of chair legs scraping the wooden floor occurred behind him, he sat.

As much as it galled his pride, he was that desperate.

Her glance let him know she knew what he was thinking.

"My name is Madame Cecile. I own this place." She tugged her neckline down until it cupped her massive breasts in a tight embrace, pushing them together and up. "You're going to enjoy this. I promise you."

The nipples on her breasts were small and tight, whether from the cool air or excitement, he couldn't tell. She massaged his cock with the tips. She put her fingers in her mouth and then spread the saliva over her cleavage. When her white flesh was wet and glistening, she took his cock, and slid it into the deep valley.

Her flesh was hot. Fragrant. And hugged him as tight as any pussy. By rights, the top of his head should be coming off. It wasn't.

Cecile didn't seem at all concerned. She shifted forward until she was braced on her forearms, her mouth hovering above his cock as it pressed into her breasts. She lapped along its length, cooing when it quivered and jerked beneath the caress. As she leaned forward to nip the base, her ample buttocks pushed out behind her.

In the mirrors set on the wall kitty corner to the bar, he had a good view of both of them. Her white flesh was a stark contrast to the tan of his buckskins, the ruffles on her dress blending with the fringe of his knee-high moccasins, her mouth red against the darkness of his shaft as it slid through the pillowy whiteness of her breasts. She cooed again when the tip jerked against her chin and wiggled her ass like a puppy happy with its treat. In the mirror, he watched the plump flesh jiggle invitingly. So did half the patrons of the bar. Damn. That ass begged to be spanked.

Using his grip on her hair, he pulled her back onto him, watching as her ass shimmied again. Cecile motioned to a brown-haired, beefy looking man standing to the side. Cougar judged him to be the bouncer or the local blacksmith from the abundance of muscle in his chest and arms. Immediately, new energy whipped through the saloon. Catcalls dropped to murmurs and the crowd thickened. The atmosphere took on a dark expectancy that had the hairs on the back of Cougar's neck lifting.

Cougar leaned back as the man came up behind the woman. He didn't like the look of the guy. Cecile's hand blocked his as Cougar reached for his buckskins. The weight of her torso against his thighs kept him in his seat.

"It is all right, cheri. Do not worry over Aleric," she said. "No harm to you. It is just that they know my pleasures and are jealous of what you will..." she waved her hand descriptively, "enjoy."

On the last delicate flourish, her hand landed on his cock. She stroked it from base to tip, squeezing expertly in between. His cock warmed to her touch.

"See." She glanced up, a knowing smile on her lips. "Not bad at all."

He had to agree, as she lowered her hot mouth. It would be almost good if they weren't attracting such a crowd. She flicked the underside of his penis with her tongue. Once, twice and the third time she followed it with strong suction.

Flames of lust trickled out from his groin, licking over his nerves, burning out his inhibitions. He reconsidered his earlier assessment as he placed his hands on her head. It didn't matter where they were. Maybe it was even better this way. Impersonal. No emotion. No guilt. Just a professional plying her trade and his body's automatic response.

He closed his eyes and narrowed his focus to Cecile's talented lips and tongue. He flexed his fingers in her stiff hair. She taunted and teased, but it wasn't enough. Wasn't what he needed. She resisted his insistent tug on her head, encouraging her to take him deeper. She was back to flicking her tongue over the head, nibbling on the giving flesh. He needed more. The catcalls from the crowd and the hoots of excitement combined with the rip of material, popped his eyes open.

Cecile still knelt in front of him. Her skirt was now in a silken blue heap in the middle of her back. Behind her knelt the man she'd called Aleric. In the hand he waved above his head were the remnants of Cecile's pantaloons. When he dropped them to the floor, the crowd hushed. Cougar watched in the mirror along the bar as the other man leaned forward and placed his tanned hands on Cecile's white buttocks. With a smile at Cougar, he parted the large globes. From his vantage point in front of the mirror, Cougar could just make out a hint of darker skin within. Aleric stuck his tongue out and wagged it at the crowd. The cheers were deafening. Cougar had a feeling this scene had been acted out many times before.

Cecile's harsh "Stop playing and do it now!" confirmed his suspicions.

Cougar's breath sawed in his lungs as she reclaimed his cock, taking him to her throat before bobbing her head back up to the tip and repeating the procedure all over again. Where she had been slow and leisurely before, she was all business now. Her mouth almost harsh in its demand, denying him the ability to do anything but feel.

In front of him, Aleric leaned forward and pressed a kiss dead center of Cecile's crack. He had to be aiming for her anus.

Cougar's cock jerked in conjunction with the twitch of Cecile's ass. Aleric stayed planted between her buttocks, his cheeks flexing as his tongue worked. It was the most depraved thing Cougar had ever seen, but he couldn't look away. With every pass of Aleric's tongue, Cecile would jerk and suck harder on his cock. Whereas she seemed intent on devouring his cock, Aleric was content with licking and lapping gently at her

ass. No matter how much she squirmed, he played her with infinite delicacy. Tiny little flicks that barely moved the muscles in his cheeks. A type of loving totally incongruous with what a woman would expect from a man of his looks and build.

God, did the man have eyes? Cougar watched in the mirror as Cecile's buttocks flexed a plea and were ignored a third time. Instincts? How could he miss that winking little invitation to deepen the penetration? He should be thrusting his tongue in rather than lapping the edge. He should be taking her, stretching her, getting her ready. Letting her know what was to come.

Cougar's grip on Cecile's head tightened. When her ass flexed its invitation again, he pulled her hard onto his cock, forgetting his size until she gagged. He eased up, but kept his eyes on Aleric, silently encouraging the man to give Cecile what she needed. As Aleric's tongue skated the edge again, Cecile groaned around Cougar's shaft. The vibrations shot down to his balls, pulling them up tight.

The crowd's cheers faded to the background. His world narrowed to the hot mouth encompassing his cock and the almost forgotten urgency claiming his body. He pumped hard and deep into Cecile's mouth, desperately chasing the completion that had escaped him for so long, groaning when Aleric finally, finally treated her ass the way it deserved.

His balls ached, sweat dampened his shirt and stung his eyes, and still he couldn't come.

Around him, Cecile started to shudder and shake as her orgasm overtook her. Aleric had one hand out of sight, no doubt jacking off as he serviced the saloon owner. His face still plastered to her backside. He jerked and moaned as he shot his load.

Cougar was so hard, he was in pain. His cock was so sensitive that Cecile's gasping breath actually hurt. But he couldn't come anymore now than he could six months ago. He gritted his teeth and withdrew from Cecile's mouth. His cock bobbed hard and heavy in front of her face.

"Jesus! Look at the size of that guy!"

"And he's still hard!"

Cougar's humiliation knew no bounds. Not only had he failed, he'd done it in front of half the territory. He schooled his expression to calm, stuffed his softening cock back into his pants and got to his feet. He slid his knife sheath to the side, and held out his hand to Cecile. It wasn't her fault he'd lost his abilities.

Cecile rose, daintily dabbing at the side of her mouth as if he'd left evidence of coming. "Oui!" she called to the crowd, cupping his erection in one hand and clutching her still bare bosom with the other. "A stallion already set to go again! It will be a lucky woman who gets to ride him tonight."

"Who's that going to be Madame Cecile?" an older man called from the back of the crowd.

Cecile flashed a coy smile in the general direction of the questioner. She adjusted her bodice. "I have a new girl. Just in today. Very, very special."

"Yee-haw!" a cowboy whooped. "Fresh meat!"

"Talent," Cecile corrected firmly. "Fresh, expensive talent."

"Aw hell," a down-on-his-luck gambler grumbled. "When are you going to bring in some girls I can afford?"

"When you get around to winning at cards," Cecile snapped.

As the crowd guffawed and picked up the joke and ran with it, Cecile turned to Cougar. "You did enjoy our little play?"

Cougar accepted his hat from the pretty brunette who brought it to him. "Yeah."

Cecile nodded to the brunette. "Thank you, Lorraine."

The brunette smiled and stepped to the side. Cecile looked pointedly at the bulge in his pants. "But it is not your usual pleasure?"

He put his hat back on his head, feeling more like himself as he angled it over his eyes. "You could say that."

"But you would like to enjoy yourself...fully this evening."

"Doesn't look like that's going to happen." He wasn't even sure he wanted it to happen. Now that he wasn't caught up in the moment, he couldn't imagine anything happening in this place that wouldn't leave a bad taste.

"If you would tell me your preference, I imagine it is entirely possible." She shrugged. "It is obvious you do not like a crowd." With a graceful wave of her hand, she indicated the waiting brunette. "Perhaps Lorraine would be to your preference after all? She has a special paddle that her customers are very fond of."

Cougar glanced at the innocent looking woman who winked back at him. He couldn't imagine her paddling men's bare butts anymore than he could imagine grown men wanting their butts paddled.

He took a deep breath. "No. I don't think I'd enjoy that."

"I noticed you watching Aleric. While not as adventurous as some of our women, many of our male customers enjoy his attentions."

"Have you gone loco?" He lowered his voice as men turned their way. "I am not a goddamned pervert."

Cecile patted his arm. "Do not take offense. Here at Madame Cecile's we cater to all tastes. You just need to let me know what you want."

"I want to fuck," he muttered, the last of his arousal fading away.

Her expression became pained. "How?"

The only way there is, was the response that came immediately to mind, but he realized that what was normal for him, wasn't necessarily normal for the rest of the world. He pulled his hat off and slapped it against his thigh. How in hell had all this gotten so out of hand? His jaw clenched, he said, "Straight up, man on top, woman underneath."

"I see." She paused, looking at him expectantly.

"What?"

"Well, you've been here an hour and have yet to have selected anyone, I assume there is some sort of problem."

Yeah, I can't get off. He didn't say that of course. It seemed too crude, even if the woman he was speaking to had just had his cock in her mouth in front of a bar full of customers.

"I've been having problems..." he growled, holding her gaze.

"Performing?"

"Uh-huh."

She glanced at his crotch. "To completion?"

"Yeah."

"And you fear this is permanent?"

"Yeah."

Her smile patronized him. He would have taken offense except for what she said next. "You are not the first to come to me with this little problem."

"I'm not?" He didn't regard it as a little anything, but the fact that she did, gave him hope.

She patted his arm. "No." She arched her eyebrow at him. "The woman I spoke of before?"

"The new one?"

"Oui. I hired her specifically to deal with men who come in search of such...expertise."

Whores specialized? His skepticism must have shown on his face.

"She is very good at restoring a man's virility."

He hid his doubt behind a low drawl. "You're awfully sure about this."

"I know my business. Enough so, I'll give your money back if you are not satisfied."

He didn't claim to know much about whorehouses, or how they operated, but he'd never heard of anyone getting their money back. His confidence began to increase. Still, he did not want to end up in a room with a paddle, or with a hulking pervert. "Mind telling me how she goes about it?"

"She has her ways." Cecile shrugged as if it were immaterial how it was accomplished. The movement nearly displaced the bodice of her dress. Damn, Cougar thought, his eyes dropping to the sight. He did like the sight of breasts quivering.

"All you need to do is trust her instincts and play along."

"Play along?" That was too open-ended for his tastes.

"Yes, play along. It will be very clear within a few minutes of entering the room what you are supposed to do."

He twirled his hat in his hand as he pressed, "I think I'd like a little more information on how —"

An impatient slash of her hand cut off his sentence. He noticed her accent disappeared along with her patience. "You'll find out when you get there, but I guarantee your 'problem' will be solved and it will happen with a woman. Now, are you interested or not?"

God help him, but he was. He'd come here looking for solutions and the woman was offering him one with a money-back guarantee. A man couldn't ask for much more than that. He put his hat back on. "I'm interested."

"Such services don't come cheap."

He pulled a fat leather pouch from his shirt pocket.

"How much?"

She snatched it out of his hand, bounced it a couple of times and said, "This should be fine." The pouch disappeared into the depths of her cleavage, and the woman held out her hand. "We haven't formally introduced ourselves. I'm Madame Cecile."

"Cougar McKinnely." He raised the soft, white hand to his lips, placing an obligatory kiss on the back.

"Well, Cougar," Cecile sashayed toward the stairs, tossing the invite over her bare shoulder. "Follow me to your new territory." She paused on the bottom stair. "Consider it yours for the rest of the night."

Chapter Two

The door closed and locked behind him. Cougar turned and frowned. The hair on the back of his neck whispered a warning, but he shrugged it off, dismissing the unease as old ghosts popping in to visit.

He looked around the room. It was empty and dark. A single oil lamp over in the corner, turned down low, was the only source of light. He didn't sense any danger, but he couldn't shake the feeling that he was missing something. That everything wasn't what it appeared to be.

He waited by the door for the woman to show herself. After a few moments, his eyes adjusted to the gloom, and a rustle from the vicinity of the bed drew his attention. He took a step away from the door.

He located his "angel of mercy" after his second step. She was lying on the bed, a small froth of stark white on the red coverlet. As he watched, she rolled onto her back, her legs shifting with the movement.

His third step never materialized as he stared.

"Son...of...a...bitch!" He dragged out the curse, because well, he'd never seen anything like what he was seeing now, and as long as he was swearing, he figured he could keep staring. The woman was breathtaking, gorgeous, incredibly sexy. As he watched, she shifted position, her right knee drawing up and away from her body, causing the thin veil of white she wore to float away from her thighs. The faint light behind her illuminated the space between the raised thigh and the recumbent one. As he followed the shadow to its end, he could almost make out the darker cast of her pussy. He cleared his throat.

Madame Cecile might know what she was doing after all. He started to pull off his shirt. "No doubt Madame Cecile told you about me...?"

A word from her would have gone a long way to soothing his unease. Instead, she moaned seductively and rolled away. The movement pulled the sheer gown tight across her small ass, delineating the sharp rise of her hips and the firm line of her buttocks. He swore he could make out the crease between them. He paused with his shirt halfway to his head, his eyes locked on the sight. His mouth went dry and his heart started a slow thud. Lord, she had a beautiful ass. The curve of her right cheek looked like it would fit perfectly into his palm. He estimated the depth of the crease would encompass one knuckle. He wondered if her little rosette was a delicate pink or a soft tan.

She rolled again, this time onto her stomach. He lost all train of rational thought as she wiggled—there was no other way to put it—up onto her hands and knees and swayed, presenting him with a splendid view of her hindquarters. He slowly pulled his shirt the rest of the way off. His eyes narrowed as he focused on the shadowy crack. He

loved a woman's ass. Loved to tease it. Tempt it. Spank it. Coax it into accepting his cock. There was nothing like the first time a woman accepted him. He loved that moment when she gave herself to him, his cock parting her tight passage as he took her past her inhibitions to the pleasure beyond.

And damn! This woman had a perfect ass.

He rubbed his hand over his chest. She shifted backwards, her buttocks rising as if begging for his attention. The touch of his hand. There was a time when he would have stepped right up and given the cheeky butt the swat it was asking for, but times had changed. His hand curled into a fist. He was a begging man now.

Not even sure he could deliver on any promises his body would see fit to make. Until that changed, he was better off just sticking with the tried and true.

She wiggled some more, bending her elbows so the gown wafted over her hips, but he didn't get more than a glimpse of white flesh and a shockingly hairless pussy before she slid off the bed and stood up. He groaned when the gown fell back down over her thighs, covering the sight of that tantalizing bare flesh.

Damn! He'd been hoping she'd just kind of toss the floaty thing on the floor. He rarely got to see a woman fully naked. He'd discovered in his youth that respectable women had a tendency to bring their modesty to bed. He guessed that shyness extended to some prostitutes, and he mentally kicked another fantasy into the manure pile.

He could, he decided as she stood swaying in place, quickly come up with a few more but it would be tough for him to come up with anything more erotic than what she was doing now, standing as she was, feet slightly apart, her body undulating to a rhythm only she heard. Every time she moved, the gown billowed out, revealing with light and shadow, the outline of her sex. Then it would fall back into place, leaving only the impression to tempt his imagination. The glimmer of interest he felt before, spoke again. Louder, stronger, and hope began to keep pace with his heartbeat.

She took a step forward, then another. He held his breath, knowing the next one would take her into the light. It seemed an eternity before her small, bare foot moved forward. He released his breath on a low groan when she did.

Anticipation skittered along his nerves as she turned to face him, and his greedy eyes dropped to her body. He barely swallowed back his dismay. The slender prostitute stood before him, shoulders back, flaunting a body as delicately curved as a porcelain figurine. He placed his shirt on the room's only chair with weighted hands. This wasn't going to work.

The old fear, his constant companion for the last twelve months, surged in his stomach, jangling his nerves and stripping away the shreds of his confidence. He could feel the panic building, signaling the end of his hopes.

Dammit! He wouldn't fail again. Not here. Not now. Beads of perspiration dotted his upper lip. He wiped them away with the back of his hand, noting the tremor. His fingers curved into a fist. Every instinct for self-preservation screamed for him to run, to

avoid exposing himself to more humiliation, but sheer determination kept his feet rooted to the floor. When he spoke, he kept his voice at a low drawl. "Hello."

In response, she breathed something airy and short. He assumed it was "Hi." Truth be told, he didn't care because she was in motion again. He couldn't take his eyes off her body, the lithe way she moved, the deliberate manner in which she placed her feet, and the sway of her hips, which had that gown billowing again. She said something else. He could tell from the way her lips pursed and flattened, but he wasn't paying attention because for the first time in a year the only sound he could hear was the sound of his heart pounding in his ears.

When the gown caught between her thighs on the next step, he knew he was a goner. He couldn't concentrate on anything beyond wanting to free it from between her soft pussy lips, and replace it with his fingers. He crossed the distance between them with two strides. He tipped his head and caught a whiff of her flesh. She smelled sweet and clean, when he'd been expecting something exotic and spicy. She smelled of innocence. And cinnamon.

The discrepancy between what he expected and what his senses were telling him tugged at his suspicions. He frowned and studied her closer.

The woman frowned back. Her foot caught on the uneven floor. She stumbled into his chest. He grabbed her. His hand skimmed her breast on the way to her shoulder. Her soft nipple grazed his wrist. The more he thought on it, the more the spot burned.

She twisted in his arms. He let her go. She spun away. Her gown floated up, revealing shapely calves and delicate ankles before swinging back down.

His wrist burned, his groin ached and he was confused as all get out. What the hell was she doing? What was he supposed to be doing? Dammit, he'd had about enough of this.

"Madame Cecile said you'd let me know what you needed —"

She stumbled and almost fell. He caught her before she hit the floor. What the hell was she doing? Sliding his hand down to her waist, the heat of her skin seared his palm. She was tiny and petite with fine bones. His hand spanned from her hip halfway up the delicate ladder of her ribs, his thumb a hairsbreadth from the undercurve of her breast.

He'd never been so acutely aware of a woman before. The scent of her skin. The feel of her flesh through the sheer nightgown, the silken glide of her hair through his fingers as he caught the ends and tugged her head back.

This was desire, he realized, as her body rested against him. The real thing. Not something manufactured by manipulation of his flesh, but a bone-deep, genuine desire. Like he'd never felt before. Like he'd dreamed. Like Doc and Dorothy spun fairy tales about.

When the woman finally responded to his demand and tilted her face to him, his breath caught in his throat.

Her face was all gentle angles, blended with smooth skin, and touched with a hint of rose. Her lips were full, the upper one plumper than the bottom. Her nose was small

and straight, her chin pointed beneath her high cheekbones. But it was those eyes that captured his attention. Wide-set and tilted at the corners, they screamed seduction.

And innocence. In one of the most disreputable cathouses in the territory. The woman was one hell of an actress.

Actress or not, he wanted to taste those lips. He turned her chest into his. His bigger body easily absorbed her weight as she followed his lead. As he bent toward her, she shook her head.

He frowned, not sure whether she was negating speech or his hold. He shifted his grip, but all she did was shake her head again and jerk her chin in the direction of the bed. She had to do it twice more before it finally sunk into his thick skull that she wanted the comfort of the mattress.

"Sorry." No doubt she'd taken him for a saddle bum fresh off the trail. She had to if she thought he meant to take her right there in the middle of the room. He let her go long enough to drop his gun belt and knife sheath on the chair beside his shirt. He left the knife in the top of his right moccasin.

She took a step back. The motion took her into the pool of light and sent her hair swinging about her face. She had beautiful brown hair, sun-streaked and reflecting the reds and golds of autumn. His fingers itched to skim through its length on the way to her face, a face so daintily formed as to appear ethereal. There was something about her face with its wide-spaced eyes that appealed to him. A fragility that brought to the fore all his protective instincts while inspiring wild images of lust.

He sucked in a long, slow breath as the miracle continued below his belt. He prayed for it to keep on happening and focused on the "something" in those flashing cinnamon colored eyes that teased and taunted a response from deep within. A wild response that he'd never experienced before.

"You're a beautiful woman, Angel." His compliment sent her feet inching along the floor. Unfortunately, she was heading in the wrong direction. He set his course to intercept her. He couldn't wait any longer. He had to get her in his arms before the feeling had a chance to disintegrate like snow in summer.

He wrapped her in his arms. She felt surprisingly good. Tiny, fragile, and hotter than Texas in July. Too damned good. His jaw braced against the need to take her up on her invitation. He had other needs he wanted assuaged before he spilled his seed deep inside that tender flesh. A year full of wasted daydreams he wanted fulfilled. She flashed those eyes at him and his cock jerked against his belly.

He had to hurry or it would be all over before it even began. He urged the woman down to her knees, not understanding her resistance.

"Free me." His voice sounded low and guttural under the blow to his senses. "For God's sake, free me."

He eased the woman back when she didn't reach for his body. He could tell from her intense expression that she was still lost in her scheming. He should tell her it wasn't necessary, he thought, as he reached for the ties on his pants. He didn't need any

additional enticement to spur him on, but he was too afraid of losing the momentum to waste time on words.

His fingers tangled in the fastenings, and he gritted his teeth to control his impatience. With his free hand, he anchored the woman to his side. The laces finally gave way. Urgency made checking his impulses impossible. He released the woman to yank off his moccasins. As soon as the first one hit the floor, she was off. He easily caught her darting form as she made a blind, uncoordinated rush to the bed.

"Don't worry," he groaned. "I can make it to the bed."

Her low voiced "no" prompted him to repeat the reassurance. He bent to sweep her up in his arms and stepped on the edge of the gown. He winced as he heard the fragile material tear.

There was nothing fragile about her response. His Angel could out-swear a sailor. His "I'll buy you a new one" didn't halt her muttered curses. A couple of the more imaginative ones caused him to smile. He swung back toward the bed, being careful to keep his path clear of tables or chairs so she didn't rap her hand or foot.

No need for restraint, he reminded himself as he set her on the sagging mattress. This woman was a professional, used to taking men on a nightly basis. He pulled her gown up so her bare thighs collided with his buckskin-clad ones.

Thank the good Lord he'd come to an expert for this moment, because he knew there was no way anyone else could handle the madness that possessed him. It was as if he'd die if he didn't have her as hard and as fast as he could manage. He sat beside her. He placed his knife between the mattress and the platform, hilt out, before yanking off his other moccasin. A hand on her midsection kept her still as he stepped clear of his buckskins. His hand dwarfed her midriff, looking dark and alien against the frothy nightgown.

He breathed a sigh of relief as his cock sprang free. He thought he mumbled an apology for his lack of gentleness as he sank down upon her body, using his weight to restrain her movements. The one thing he didn't need was any more stimulation.

He leaned over her, held both of her hands over her head with one of his, and looked down. Her nipple peeked out from the bunched neckline of her nightgown. His breath caught in his throat. For such a small-breasted woman, she had damn tempting nipples. Plump as berries, and as pink as roses. He curved his spine until he could take the nubbin between his lips. His hair swung forward to brush her breast, obscuring all outside distractions so that nothing existed except the two of them in this moment. He needed to be gentle. He struggled to be gentle. She tasted so good, he wanted to devour her whole.

Her gasp whispered past his ear as he tested her textures. Beneath his tongue, her areola puckered and the tip elongated. It suddenly wasn't enough that he get what he wanted. Not if it meant leaving her behind. He wanted her with him. All the way. He needed to slow down, but she made it damned hard.

"That's right, Angel," he murmured as she arched up beneath him. "Show me what you like."

He laved the hardening nubbin again. It stretched against his tongue. He nibbled it, wrapped his lips around it, suckled it. She moaned beneath him. Her back arched. Her wrists tugged at his grip. He opened his mouth, accepting all of the breast she offered. Her gasps were sweet torture, unraveling his plan to go slow.

He pulled back slightly, dragging his lips over her flesh as he retreated. Her nipple glistened in the low light.

"Damn! You're beautiful."

And she was. Whereas he had always preferred big breasted women in the past, he couldn't imagine anything more beautiful than his angel's breasts. Small, perfect mounds topped with the longest nipples he'd ever seen. He rested his pinkie against her wet nipple, measuring its length. Aroused, it was as long as the tip of his little finger.

He glanced at her other breast. It shivered with her erratic breathing, but the nipple slept, undisturbed by his desire. He touched it lightly with the tip of his finger. Little by little, he applied pressure until her nipple formed a well in the center of her breast. When he pulled his finger away, her breast regained its shape, and her nipple saluted his efforts. He tweaked it for its impudence, smiling when the woman turned toward his hand.

He opened his fingers and accepted the slight weight. His hand was very dark against the pink and cream of her skin.

She was his complete opposite. Small where he was large. Soft where he was hard. Smooth where he was callused. Light where he was dark. He found every difference intriguing, deserving of exploration. Especially one place in particular.

He splayed his hand over her belly, spreading his fingers wide, absorbing the quiver of her skin beneath his hand. Letting his fingers drag against her stomach, he pulled his hand closed, gathering up her gown as he did so. Over and over he repeated the procedure. It wasn't until her gown was bunched at her waist, leaving her lower body exposed, that he looked down.

He couldn't look away. His hand clenched above her hips and his breath caught in his throat. A surge of lust hit him in the gut, so strong it almost doubled him over.

He hadn't been mistaken. Her pussy was bare of hair. Naked. Her woman's flesh was the same creamy white, flushed with rose as the rest of her body. Between the thick outer lips, he could just make out the hint of pink of her inner folds. Delicate and sweet, they called to him. He released the gown from his death grip, and slid his hand down, more than happy to accept their invite.

The only sound in the room as he inched toward that intimate playground was the hiss of the oil lamp, his Angel's soft gasps of surprise, and the harsh rasp of his own labored breathing.

It seemed an eternity until his fingers reached their destination. When they did, he couldn't suppress a groan. The skin was soft, incredibly smooth. Like the finest of silk. Against her thigh, his cock jerked and strained, wanting release. Wanting its home.

He wasn't going to last much longer. Not this time. Not with her.

He slid his fingers along the crease of her lips, dipping between, finding her heat. Her hips jerked, spearing his fingers deeper into her folds. She was slick. Unnaturally so. She'd used some sort of oil to ease his way. He tested her readiness. When he probed the entrance to her vagina, she tossed her head and moaned. He kissed her cheek and whispered a sincere "thank you" as her muscles gave way to his probing. When his finger entered the first tiny bit, her inner muscles clenched, clamping down like a vise.

He dropped his forehead to her collarbone, then kissed the hollow beneath. Her hushed moans echoed in his ears as he struggled for control. The woman was offering heaven to a dying man. She was very small. Tight. Just imagining her pussy's grip on his cock had his balls pulling up tight and tremors of release starting at the base of his spine. If he didn't want to come like a greenhorn on the bed sheets, he needed to be in her. Now.

She started getting restless as soon as he released her hands and settled between her thighs. He stilled her movements with his hand on her hip. His cock found its home with unerring accuracy, sliding through the outer lips as if guided by instinct to settle in the valley immediately below. He held himself there, relishing her heat, enjoying the caress of inner muscles, anticipating the moment they'd part and he'd be held tightly in their grasp.

He braced himself with a hand on either side of her hips and slowly walked them up her body, letting her get used to his weight as he did. The bed sagged as he rested his elbows on either side of her head. His hair slid over his shoulders, over hers, brushing her cheek before dropping to tangle possessively with her red-brown strands on the coverlet beneath.

He kissed the corner of her mouth and then slid his tongue along the lush fullness of her upper lip. It felt so good, he did it again. She gave another one of those sexy gasps that seemed to go straight to his cock. He took advantage of her parted lips to kiss her deeply. Her tongue pushed against his. There was shyness to the gesture that had him wondering if she'd been doing this long.

He brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. The sensation of looking at innocence struck him again.

He made a decision then and there.

"When I leave here, Angel, I'm taking you with me."

It was a promise he meant to keep.

But not now. Now he needed to be in her. Sliding his hand under her head, he pulled her mouth back to his, kissing her deeply as he pushed hard. His cock pressed firmly against the ring of oiled muscle. He stroked her hair, gradually increasing the

pressure, calming her restless shifting as the tense muscles slowly parted beneath his insistence. He caught her cry in his mouth as he wedged the broad head of his cock in that first tiny bit.

"Shh, Angel." He paused, giving her a moment to adjust. Her breaths hit his lips in soft pants as he whispered, "Just relax. You can take me. You know you can."

She was so small and delicate, he was afraid to move, but then her nails bit into his shoulders. Her hips twisted beneath his, sinking his cock another inch into her hot pussy. He took another of those high cries into his mouth, making it his as his hand dropped to her hips, holding her still.

"Easy, Angel. I'll give you all you want, but slowly. Very slowly."

Her pussy pulsed around him, rippling in response every time his cock jerked with eagerness. Her inner muscles clenched him to the point of pain. As he pressed forward he felt her walls cling to him, struggling to part for his width, to accept the demands he was making on her. He held himself still again, gritting his teeth against the urge to drive home. He angled his thumb across her pelvis, sliding his hand down her hip until he could test the delicate flesh holding him so tightly. It was stretched as tight as a drum.

Her hips bucked and he quickly pressed her down into the mattress, holding her in place. "No. Don't move. Just get used to me."

He didn't want her to tear. He didn't know any woman could be this tight, let alone a whore used to taking many men a night.

She moaned into his shoulder when he pressed a little deeper. He raised his torso up and over until her mouth was beneath his chest. He slid his hand under her head and raised her up until her lips rested against his nipple. "There, Angel. Suck on that while we wait."

She didn't immediately take his meaning. Holding her in place, he eased his torso back and forth, teasing himself with the promise of her lips and teeth. When he pushed his cock deeper into her pussy, she delivered on the promise, scraping her teeth against his nipple as his cock stretched her wider. His hips bucked helplessly under the sensation, the strength of his entry bringing her off the bed as her eyes flew wide. Her cry was muffled against his chest as he paused, one third of his cock held tight in her grip.

Her eyes flashed at him as he rocked against her, panic in their depths. No doubt she could feel how he got thicker toward the base. Balancing on his elbow, he smoothed the hair back from her brow. "It's ok. I know I'm big, but I won't hurt you. Just relax and let me do everything."

He lowered her head to the bed. As much as he loved her mouth on his skin, he was strung too tightly to risk hurting her with another uncontrolled response.

He pushed back away from her, pulling his knees beneath him so her legs draped over his. They were only touching thigh to thigh and pussy to cock, and still it was almost too much stimulation. He gritted his teeth and reined in his baser desires. He

couldn't hold back forever. Her pussy was too sweet, too tight, but he'd be damned if he'd come before she took all of him. Leaning back, shaking his hair off his face, he worked a little deeper, stopping when she tensed and grimly acknowledged this could be a very long night, but by the end of it, she would take him and his hell would be over.

Chapter Three

I am Mara Kincaid and I will survive this. I am Mara Kincaid and I will –

She bit her lip as pain came again. Differently, adding to the confusion hazing her brain. The pressure became unbearable. She twisted and squeezed muscles she'd never known she had, trying to make it stop. Or him stop. She couldn't remember.

"Oh God, Angel, not yet," a voice mumbled. "It's been too long for me. I want to savor this..."

Him. It was definitely a man causing her this pain and she wanted him dead, not savoring anything, least of all the violation of her body. She worked one of her hands free of his, and aimed a blow at his head. She put everything she had behind the blow and watched in disbelief as her hand landed gently against his cheek. A sob of frustration caught in her throat. Why was everything out of control? Why couldn't she get her mouth and limbs to move as she willed?

She pushed with her hand against his cheek. At least, she thought she was pushing, but when his response was to turn his face and kiss her palm while mumbling another apology, she almost set free the tears she swore would never fall. Dammit! She wanted to fight. She wanted to curse. She did not want to just lie here and endure.

The man pulled away. A wave of relief went through her. It was over. It was over. But then he was back. Somehow larger and stronger, ripping the resistance from her soul as the scream ripped from her throat. She sank her teeth deep into her lip to prevent the escape of another. She wouldn't give this animal the satisfaction of hearing her cry out. But she did, and the shame of that was more powerful than any other.

"I'm sorry," he rasped. "Maybe I'd just better get this first time behind us."

The pressure increased, as did his breathing. His fingers dug into her thighs, spreading them wide, as if through that action he could force her acceptance. Well, she wouldn't give him that. Through sheer force of will, she'd lock him out.

But he got his way in even that, lifting her hips as he drove forward into her body, tearing through the fog, tearing through her defenses until he reached the heart of her, the place she'd kept untouched. And filled it with darkness.

* * * * *

She came back to herself very shortly. She could feel wetness on her thighs and wondered in a disconnected way whether it was her blood or his seed. He turned her to her side, and she let him, limbs flopping about wherever they would. What did it

matter now? What did anything matter? She felt him slide back up her body. With icy calm, she groped for the oil lamp beside the bed. By touch, she turned down the wick until with a hiss, the lamp went out.

"I'm sorry," he gasped in the sudden darkness, his breath soughing in and out as his chest pressed against hers, his sweat dampening her breasts. "It's been so long and then I couldn't stop. You're sweeter than honey, Angel. Did I hurt—"

She brought the lamp crashing against his skull. He collapsed on top of her. The air whooshed out of her as she took his full weight. "I hope I killed you, you son of a bitch!"

It was a vain wish. The man's chest still rose and fell with his breath. But he was going to have a heck of a headache. She pushed and wiggled, but he was built like a mountain, and moving mountains was not something she did daily. Finally, she got her shoulder free and from there it was just a matter of twisting. She caught her breath at the edge of the bed. Her muscles shook as if she'd just run thirty miles. Going one more foot seemed impossible, but she didn't have much choice. She swung her legs to the floor. The room spun crazily. Her stomach churned.

"I don't have time for this," she told her body as she forced herself vertical. She immediately dropped to her knees, unable to detect up from down, reality from nightmare. The drugs they had given her were too strong.

After a minute or two, her eyes adjusted to the gloom. She struggled to her feet and made her way to where the man's shirt lay draped over the chair. She dragged it on, needing to cover her vulnerability as she swayed with the effort to remain standing. She closed her eyes tight. The odors of sweat and sex mingled in the air, clinging to her skin. She took a deep breath to clear her mind but that insidious cloud was back, hazing her brain. A million escape plans swirled like feathers tossed into the wind. There, but just out of reach. Her teeth sank deep into her lip. She could taste the blood but she couldn't feel the pain and that, she realized, was not good.

The outline of something large and rectangular against the opposite wall caught her eye. She concentrated with everything she had before finally figuring out what it was. The door. It was right before her. She focused on that. Getting to the door was the first step on her journey back to her mountain. All she had to do was get to it, and she would be free.

She took one step, and then another. The third got her to her destination. She cast a furtive look at the huge man collapsed on the bed. His face was turned away from her. His fingers twitched, and she dove for the handle like one possessed.

It came alive beneath her touch, turning under her fingers. She stared at it, not understanding. She was still staring when it hurtled inward. It caught her high on the shoulder, and the violence behind its opening sent her sailing across the room. The only thing that kept her from crashing into the wall was the upholstered chair she stumbled into. When she landed in its depths, she stayed there, dragging in deep breaths of air, trying to clear the nausea from her stomach and the fuzz from her brain.

When her head cleared enough to push herself up on her elbows, she saw Cecile and Aleric in the doorway. Aleric retrieved the lamp and calmly lit it, ignoring the shards of broken glass that remained of the globe. The smirk on his lips let her know that they'd planned this night right down to this humiliating moment. The malevolent promise shining in their eyes told her that her rape wasn't the end of their revenge for the trouble she'd given them.

Well, she wasn't done yet either. She sprang off the chair. Sheer determination kept her from swaying as the room spun crazily. She clenched her fists at her side to suppress the urge to vomit. She had no doubt they were aware of her trouble in staying upright, just as she had no doubt they were deriving no end of amusement from it. Damn them to hell! If it was the last thing she did, she'd see them pay for this. They'd pay with their blood just as she had, but first, she had to think. She shifted so the chair was between them.

"Well, Mara," Cecile purred, "I see the preceding events have failed to tame your arrogance." Her glance focused mainly on Mara's thighs. Her smile spread until her small white teeth were exposed. "Maybe a repeat performance?" One carefully plucked brow lifted.

Aleric stepped forward and kicked the chair out of the way. Mara ducked to the side, but he caught her by snagging a hand deep in her hair, holding her in place. She saw him pull back his fist. She saw it connect with her stomach, but for a blessed moment, she felt nothing. She was just thanking God for the drugs they'd given her when her whole being erupted in agony.

Her knees buckled and her gorge rose. Aleric held her to the side like a puppet as she retched and wheezed for air. When she was through, he used his grip on her hair to swivel her back in front of him. She took a swing at him. Lord only knew where the blow went, because it didn't connect with his face.

The amusement in his eyes burned all the way to her soul. Never before had she been so helpless. Never had her life been so out of her hands. And never, ever had she felt so dirty. She closed her eyes, and picked up the litany she'd abandoned before.

I am Mara Kincaid and I will survive this. She chanted it twice more before anger began replacing despair. *I am a Kincaid, and Kincaids never give up. Never give in.*

She opened her eyes and met Aleric's amused gaze dead on. She saw surprise flicker across his face. This time, she was the one to laugh. It was a small expulsion of sound, but it was hers, and she wasn't defeated.

And thank God, because if she hadn't found her feet in that preceding moment, she might have given up when he unfastened his pants, drawing her attention to his penis with a nod of his head and a superior smile. She wished there was something left in her stomach. She would have loved to vomit all over him as he leered down at her breasts while pumping leisurely into his fist. She tore her gaze from his display and concentrated on his face.

She didn't know what she expected to find there, maybe some sign of humanity, but the cold, hard smile he treated her to, killed any hope of reprieve. He forced her head back by pulling on her hair. When she looked into his eyes again, the victory she could see there spread to the smile on his lips.

With an upward yank of his hand in her hair, he forced her eyes to his groin. "Nice, huh?"

She didn't close her eyes fast enough to avoid viewing his obscene display. She pulled against his hold on her hair, willing to be bald if it meant she'd be free, but the ease with which he contained her struggles had her sobbing in frustration. It was so unfair that her strength amounted to nothing against his.

He dragged his thumb across the head of his penis and then roughly across her lips. She snapped at it, but instead of encountering bone, her teeth closed on air. He prodded her belly repeatedly with his organ. Just as repeatedly, she twisted away, the room spinning with each jerk, his chuckles turning into guffaws that blended with the endless spiral reality had dissolved into.

It seemed hours before he tired of his little game. When he lifted her with both hands until her face was level with his, she spat. It would have been a direct hit if there had been any spit in her mouth to spray him. Instead, there was only another useless effort on her part for him to enjoy. She gritted her teeth and matched him stare for stare. She would not be cowed.

"You should never have punched me, my dear," Cecile broke in, her voice conveying her enjoyment of the tense drama. "We might have broken you in more gently otherwise. You cost me a pretty penny, you know. Virgin whores come dear."

"I'm not a whore."

"Yes, you are. That man paid cold hard cash for your services, and from the looks of him, he more than got his money's worth."

"I am not a whore."

Cecile's laugh sent shivers down Mara's spine.

"Oh, yes you are, dear. You may not have come here willingly, but you are here, and you did have sex with a man for money." She shrugged philosophically though a slight bitterness tinged her tone. "As you will soon find out, nothing else matters to the outside world. They don't care how you got here. They aren't even interested in whether you fought. That man," she nodded her head toward Cougar's prostrate form, "spilled his seed in your body. It's as good as a brand."

Never, Mara vowed. She would never allow that to become the truth. She ignored Aleric who bounced her over his groin, trying to get her to flinch. If the man was too dumb to recognize the uselessness of his ploy, who was she to educate him? At least it kept him busy while she came up with a plan.

She closed her eyes. There. That was better. At least the room stopped spinning with her eyes closed. And she was spared Aleric's gloating. Her thoughts slowly began

to collect. She paid close attention to her speech, deliberately spacing her syllables. She had to make this clear. "You can't make me a whore."

"I already have," Cecile laughed. "It'll almost be worth the financial loss just to see that arrogance of yours get ground into the dust when every man in this territory gathers round for their chance to drive that point home."

"I won't let them." The words came out slow and inconsequential when she wanted them to be angry and determined.

"My dear, you won't be able to stop them. If I have to, I'll keep you drugged so that your struggles will be as ineffective as today. And if you keep resisting me, if you refuse to learn, I'll stake you out in the back room, and let any man who can get it up have at you. After that, I guarantee you, you won't need the drugs, because there will be nothing left inside to protect."

Aleric shifted his grip on her arms. Mara opened her eyes. The jostling caused Cecile's face to fade out of focus. Mara shaped her lips around a "no" she couldn't get out. She fought for the coordination to shake her head from side to side. She must have succeeded, because Cecile kept arguing.

"Yes, I will." Her face swam back into focus. She'd adopted an expression of benevolence. Mara thought it looked as out of place on her face as a smile on a rattler.

"But, as madam of this house," Cecile continued, "it's my job to try to salvage my investments. You could help me with that by accepting your lot, but I can see you have too much arrogance left in you for that." She bestowed a regal nod on her henchman.

"Maybe Aleric can convince you of the futility of rebelling."

Mara fought, but Aleric anticipated her move and easily evaded her knee.

Cecile laughed deep in her throat. "Really dear, you'll have to be more imaginative than that! Aleric is long accustomed to women and all their little tricks. Why don't you relax? While not as well endowed as your first lover, he is quite adequately equipped to service you." Mara ignored Aleric, staring over his shoulder at Cecile, projecting all of her hate and fury at the woman.

Despite her resolve, Mara winced when Aleric prodded her bruised flesh. Cecile watched the proceedings with fanatical intensity, her voice coarsening as she met Mara's gaze. "Isn't it the most exquisite pain?"

Mara closed her eyes. She eased her hands up between her body and Aleric's chest. She'd only have the one chance. At the most, they'd kill her. And right now, death didn't seem so bad. If she were very, very lucky, she'd take one of them with her. They would not make her into a whore. Clutching that conviction as her lifeline, Mara willed the remnants of her energy into her limbs.

Smiling coldly into Aleric's lust-contorted face, she drove her thumbs into his beady eyes, gouging fiercely. Aleric squealed like a stuck pig and dropped her. As soon as her feet hit the floor, she kicked him in the groin as hard as she could. He doubled over and dropped to his knees. It felt damned good seeing him like that.

She didn't waste time admiring her work. She rounded on an open-mouthed Cecile, the knife she'd whipped from Aleric's belt firmly clenched in her palm. She stumbled forward, the blade flashed in the faint moonlight, and Mara had the satisfaction of witnessing the woman who'd destroyed her life crumple to the floor, the knife buried in her throat, her expression frozen for all eternity into one of incredulous horror.

Her heart pounded madly in her throat as she drunkenly spun back toward Aleric. The sudden movement brought back the dizziness, and she wanted to scream her frustration as the image of his approach wavered in and out of focus. She couldn't tell anymore where reality began and illusion left off. She pressed the heels of her hands to her temples. She squeezed until she thought her head would explode. She would not succumb to the haze. She would think. She would fight.

Out of the corner of her eye, she sensed movement, but she couldn't force her head around to investigate. Oh damn, why couldn't she act? Her gaze landed on Cecile and the blood seeping from her body. She couldn't take her eyes away from the grotesque sight. She'd done that, she thought. And with every repetition of the thought, she felt her grasp on reality weaken. It was as if each drop of Cecile's blood pooling on the carpet sapped her own energy until there was nothing left.

Oh God, she thought as Aleric reached for her, his fingers curled like claws. She didn't want to die like this. She wanted a home. She wanted children. She wanted...dignity. It was the last thought she mustered before she tumbled to the floor.

With a roar of rage, Cougar stepped between Mara and certain death. Deflecting Aleric's blow with his forearm, he held the other man's gaze with his. He smiled as fear replaced the victory in his enemy's eyes. With a grim precision, he wielded his knife. First down and then up. He exacted justice in two quick slashes. Too quick. Months with which to punish his victim wouldn't begin to satisfy the anger he felt inside.

A rapist. He glared at Cecile's still warm body, the conversation he'd overheard echoing in his mind. She'd made him into a goddamned rapist with her lies and manipulations. Chest heaving with the depth of his emotions, fists clenched at his sides, Cougar observed Aleric's death throes dispassionately. As the last bloody gurgle bubbled through the castrated man's lips, he wiped his knife on Aleric's shirt and replaced it in its sheath. He turned to face the woman called Mara.

She sat half-propped against the wall. Those expressive eyes were open, but he doubted she saw him. Damn, how badly was she hurt? What drugs had they given her to force her cooperation? And what in hell was he going to do with her?

A pounding on the door and a clamoring of excited voices told him that she couldn't stay here. She deserved better than what would happen if that door gave. That being the case, she would just have to accept his aid, because there was no way in hell he was going to trust her welfare to any of the inhabitants of this godforsaken town.

An angry male voice demanded admittance. Knowing there wasn't any time to lose, Cougar scooped up the woman and carried her to the window. In two seconds, he had

the stained sheets off the bed. In another two, they were knotted, anchored, and flowing out the window where they swayed gently in the rising breeze.

Mara lolled where he had left her. Lightly slapping her cheeks, he was gratified to see a little color flush the waxen pallor. Holding her face between his palms, he eased his face close to hers. Each word was precisely enunciated.

"We've got to get out of here. Do you understand?"

"No."

The response was weak. Her chin shot up and defiance entered her vacant gaze. Cougar didn't know whether she was denying going with him or denying understanding. In the end, he figured it didn't matter.

He lowered his voice, trying hard to impart his regret while his fingers lightly caressed the fragile skin drawn too tightly over her high cheekbones. "I didn't know about Cecile's game until it was too late. I know you don't have any reason to believe that, but it's true." Was it his imagination or did her lips move? "You are going to have to trust me, Angel. At least until we get out of here."

There was no marked change in the mutinous face so close to his. Cougar felt his frustration mount. How could he get through to her? With the tail of the too-long shirt, he gently wiped most of the blood and grime from her face.

"The sheets won't hold both our weights," he explained. "I'm going first, then you. That way, I can catch you if you fall."

She didn't believe him. He watched as resignation crept over her face. She expected him to leave her to those ravenous wolves beating down the door. Her mouth quivered once before tightening resolutely. Cougar touched their straight line approvingly before leaning forward to place an infinitely gentle kiss on her forehead.

Her hand came up, as if to capture the sensation with her fingertips.

"That's right. Trust me. Just a little more and you'll be safe. Wait for my signal."

Pausing only to pull on his pants, he left.

Mara watched, strangely detached, as the man squeezed his big frame out the window. Was he two men? One brutal, one gentle? Was it a trick? She heard the whistle just as the door began to crack. What did it matter now? Far better to have only one enemy to vanquish than one hundred. She dragged her tortured body to the window, fighting back the crippling fear. She would survive. Over and over she repeated the litany in her mind until it became the talisman that gave her the strength to throw her leg over the windowsill and her body into the darkness below.

Cougar was just in time to halt her plummeting fall. She was no bigger than a minute, he marveled as he caught her close. Such a little thing to harbor such a huge spirit. And he'd hurt her. Lord, that was hard to stomach.

The descent must have drained the last of her reserves, for his little warrior slumped meekly against his chest. And meekness just wasn't something he associated

with this woman. Arranging her legs across his in the saddle, he nudged Flame Dancer into a full gallop, leaving the seedy town and all its disreputable populous far behind.

When he felt it was safe, he stopped. He wrapped his poncho around the woman's limbs, grimacing at the blood seeping through his buckskins. He had to get her to Doc and fast. No telling how much harm had been done. He wanted to be sick. He wanted to atone, but what could he say to an innocent girl he'd raped? How could he make it right? How could he earn forgiveness for the unforgivable?

He swallowed hard, knowing he couldn't undo what had been done. He rubbed his chin reflexively against the sun-streaked silk tucked into the curve of his neck. "I'm sorry," he whispered hoarsely. "I'm so very, very sorry."

What a pointless thing to say. As if an apology could remove the shame and taint. As if anything could make what he'd done palatable. He wondered if she'd ever get past tonight. God, he hoped she wasn't gently reared. He'd been a Marshal too long, and first rescued and then buried too many women who felt rape made them less than human. They'd chosen death instead of life to spare their families shame. It still struck him as an obscene waste.

He pictured his Angel holding off Aleric and killing Cecile. His grip tightened. If he had to, he'd watch her day and night until he was sure she didn't have suicidal tendencies. The thought of all that fire being senselessly extinguished was unbearable.

"I'll make it up to you," he vowed. "Somehow, someday, I'll make it up to you."

The only response he got was a faint moan from the woman in his arms. He chose to interpret it as acceptance.

Chapter Four

Two months later, Cheyenne

He'd never had to work so hard to keep a promise.

Cougar stepped out of the shadowed livery and into the street. A wagon loaded with squealing pigs rolled by, slipping in the mud left over from a steady rain. He held his breath until it passed, not only because of the stench, but because if those back wheels lodged, he'd be obliged to help out. If he did that, all the trouble he'd taken with his appearance this morning would be for nothing.

The wagon lurched free. Cougar started breathing again and immediately wished he had gills so he could breathe without his nose getting involved. The hot humid air was loaded with the scents of animals, manure and garbage. The first two he could live with, seeing as how they were natural like, but the last –

He shook his head. Pure and simple, toss garbage into an alley, drown it in moisture, and then bake it in the sun and the resulting stench would have a skunk begging for mercy.

He angled the brim of his hat to better shade his vision as he waited for a flatbed tied high with lumber to pass so he could search the other side of the street. It wouldn't be hard to locate his quarry since his eyes were trained to pick out a tiny woman inevitably dressed in brown, who walked like the world was hers for the taking.

That never ceased to amuse him. The only dress he had ever seen Mara Kincaid wear was too big, obviously a cast-off. The damned thing had been mended so often, it was in danger of disintegrating with the next light breeze, but she carried herself as if she were a queen in silks, casually making her way to her throne.

There was something about that arrogant defiance that just made him smile and want to wrap her in cotton wool to keep her safe. Unfortunately, accepting his protection seemed something she was loath to do. For two months he'd been trying, and he was no closer today than he'd been at the beginning. At first, he'd thought it a blessing that Mara didn't remember him from the Pleasure Emporium. Doc said large doses of laudanum had that effect on people, breaking their memories into senseless bits and pieces. He'd figured he could use the memory loss to his advantage, but his relief had died a quick death when it became apparent that Mara's sole focus was getting enough money together to start over. Somewhere else.

He shook his head. As if he'd let that happen. She might not recognize it yet, since she'd been ducking his attempts at conversation with a quickly muttered "excuse me", and an equally quick departure, but she was staying put. And not just because of his promise, though that was reason enough. No. She was staying because she intrigued him.

She wasn't his normal type. She had no breasts, no hips and no confidence. She had no social status and wouldn't bring anything to his life but scandal. Worse yet, she was terrified of sex, and he was a man of healthy appetites, but none of that seemed to matter when he looked at her. She flashed those eyes, set that chin, overcame another challenge, and he'd be intrigued all over again. So she was staying, and he had to consider how far he wanted to take his promise because something had to be done. Mara could not continue as she was, a woman alone with no man's claim to protect her.

An unattached woman of questionable background was too much temptation for some men to resist, and though he'd done his best to let everyone know she was under his protection, Mara's continual snubs were putting her in serious jeopardy.

He stepped to the side to let Cyrus Johnson get past. As the big plow horse Cyrus rode plodded out from the livery, he nodded to the farmer.

"Howdy, Cyrus."

Cyrus' response was a nod. Cougar didn't take offense. Cyrus was as tight with his words as with his money, but he was a likable sort for all that. Lousy at cards though, which was a shame because the man had a penchant for playing that landed him in hot water with his wife. A body could always tell when Cyrus landed on the wrong side of his wife's tongue. He'd turn up the next day in town, buy a pound of penny candy, and leave as quickly as he'd come. It happened so regularly, men had taken to betting on the dates the same way they'd bet on births. It'd been a month since Cyrus' last candy purchase. From the set of the older man's shoulders, it appeared that money would be changing hands tomorrow.

Cougar chuckled and resumed his search of the opposite side of the street. This time of day, Mara would be heading for the restaurant where she washed dishes. The woman worked from sunup to sundown, and he wasn't sure she didn't work the hours in between.

Another wagon lumbered past. While he waited for it to get out of the way, he noted he was beginning to sweat. He moved his arms away from his body. Things were going to be tough enough without him adding aromas of his own to the mix.

The wagon cleared his sight. In the same split second he spotted Mara, he saw the cowboy confronting her. The wrangler had his hand around Mara's arm. Cougar saw her tug to get free. He saw the man yank her back. He saw the frantic glance she cast at the nearby group of men. He saw two of the four men look the other way. Another pretended indifference while the last stepped closer to view the show.

Cougar settled his black Stetson more firmly on his head. For too long, he'd been forced by society's rules to stand aside while the citizens of this town directly or indirectly tormented a woman with more guts than sense. While no one could be sure that Mara had come from The Pleasure Emporium, enough rumor had followed her from Cattle Crossing to Cheyenne to make the less scrupulous think they could take advantage. He'd been biding his time, waiting for Mara Kincaid to acknowledge his

interest, to make it known to everyone that she accepted his protection, but enough was enough.

He stepped between riders and wagons. He sighed as muck squished over the tops of his brand new “courting” boots. If he was a superstitious man, he’d take it as a bad omen, but he wasn’t superstitious. He was just damned tired of waiting. Mara was his. He wanted her in his bed. In his life. He wanted that stubborn, opinionated little spitfire like hell on fire and he’d stopped questioning why after the first month. It wasn’t the circumstances surrounding their meeting, and it wasn’t the fact that she’d made him come when no one else had. It was the woman herself that called to him. Just looking at her gave him pleasure, and watching her move could set his back teeth to aching and his cock straining in his pants.

The cowboy grabbed Mara’s arm again with fingers so dirty and tanned, they were almost invisible against the brown material of her dress. The contrast between the size of that hand and the thinness of the arm it encircled enraged Cougar. He could imagine how frightened she was. The frantic glance she cast his way spurred him on. There was an acceptance in that look that made his blood heat. She would not lump him in with the rest of the worthless scum who didn’t know how a woman should be treated.

The cowboy jerked her up short, slamming Mara against the storefront. Her angry shout coincided with her shoulder hitting the building. The cowboy really shouldn’t have done that, Cougar decided. That was going to cost him. Big time. He could have let the rest go, putting the loss of judgment down to too long on the trail and too long at the bottle, but no one manhandled his woman. No one.

Cougar had about ten more steps to go before he came into the cowboy’s view. He hoped that Mara would restrain herself long enough for him to come to her rescue. It was a pretty slim hope. When push came to shove, she had a habit of striking first and being cautious later.

He watched Mara’s chin come up almost fatalistically. He started to run, but it was too late two steps into the decision, because along with her chin came the parcel in her hand. There was the sound of breaking glass as it smashed into the cowboy’s face and then all hell broke loose.

The cowboy’s retaliation was quick and sure. While still reeling from the impact, he struck Mara in the side with his fist. She smashed back against the storefront, her head cracking the glass pane in the window. For a moment, she held still, her expression frozen before she drifted slowly, like a discarded feather, to the ground.

With a roar, Cougar leapt on the wrangler, seeing nothing but red as the image of that huge fist connecting with that tiny body repeated itself in his head. With every repetition, he pummeled his victim harder, searching for all the vulnerable places where he knew the effect of his two hundred pound frame would be felt the most.

It took four men to pull him off the useless skunk. When he looked down, there was a spot on the man’s cheek that was clean. The sight of it insulted him.

"Take it easy, McKinnely," one of the men growled when Cougar's elbow connected with his stomach. "For all her airs, she's just a whore."

With great satisfaction, Cougar felt his knuckles split as they connected with the man's teeth.

"Anyone else got an opinion?" he asked as he turned, silently challenging any of the rest to open their mouths and say something equally as stupid. As one, they threw up their hands and backed off. That suited him just fine.

He stepped over to where Mara lolled against the building. Her eyes were closed, and he got a sick feeling in his gut. Spirit aside, she was a tiny thing. A mere nothing against a man's fist. Lightly tapping her cheeks, he was gratified to note her breathing was regular, if a little wispy. Holding her cheeks between his big palms, he eased his face close to hers. Each word was precisely enunciated.

"Miss Kincaid? Can you hear me? I've got to get you to Doc."

Her eyes fluttered open. "No."

The response was weak, but her chin shot up and defiance entered her gaze. Cougar didn't know whether she was denying going with him or hearing him. In the end, he figured it didn't matter. From the wetness on his fingertips, he figured the back of her head had been cut by the glass.

He gentled his voice, trying to suppress the anger edging his drawl while his thumbs smoothed across the skin drawn too tightly over her high cheekbones. "I'm sorry I didn't get across the street fast enough to prevent this."

Was it his imagination or was that a "bullshit" he saw her lips shape? His mouth quirked up at the thought. "You're going to have to trust me, Miss. At least until we get out of here."

There was no marked change in her face, so close to his. Cougar shook his head. The woman was sitting in the middle of the sidewalk, the rags she wore tossed well above her ankles. She was barely able to breathe, yet she still clung to her dignity like a child clutching a blanket.

"I'm going to have to carry you," he explained in the face of another violent shake of her head that had her moaning. "There's no way you can get there yourself."

He settled back on his heels as he slid his hands around her body. "Though I suppose I could bring Doc to you, but he'd have to unbutton your dress to check your ribs, and that would draw a crowd. On a hot day like today, the last place I want to be is corralled on the street with a bunch of sweaty, leering wranglers."

This time there was no mistaking the words her lips were twisting around, even if he hadn't managed to catch the breathy, "Go to Hell."

He laughed as he very gently lifted her up. Her chin went up two degrees higher. He looked down and his laughter lingered. Delicate was not a word a body used to describe a chin like that. Pugnacious, yes, but delicate, never. In the last two months, he'd developed a real liking for pugnacious.

"I can walk," she gasped.

Her face was waxen. The limbs draped across his arms trembled and she couldn't get a decent breath to swear at him, yet she intended to walk clear across town to Doc's office? "Yeah. Right."

That chin crept up another notch. "If you will just put me down, I will prove it to you."

"You can prove anything you like when we get to Doc's."

"If you don't put me down, Mr. McKinnely, I'm going to hurt you."

If he wasn't mistaken, the hand trapped between their bodies was groping for his privates. A surge of tenderness snuck up on his blind side.

"Well, I'm not going to hurt you," he countered quietly as he stepped back down into the muddy street. In this position, she wouldn't be able to reach her target. In this position, she was pretty much defenseless. Her hand retreated as she realized it, too.

Cougar watched resignation creep over her face. She expected him to carry her off to some dark corner and have his way with her. The terror of that was there in her eyes right along with her determination to prevent it. Her lips quivered once before tightening resolutely. She would fight him with whatever she had. Damn, she was something.

"Take heart, Angel," he murmured, his gaze trapping her cinnamon-brown eyes. "Everything's going to be all right from here on out. You've got my word on it."

With a slow movement, she shook her head. There was no way she'd given up the fight.

He ignored the negative. "That's right. You trust me from here to Doc's office, and I'll prove to you that not every man in this town is so eager to get under your skirts that they can't remember how a decent woman is supposed to be treated."

She avoided his gaze. "I'm not decent."

"Well," he admitted, "I'll allow that you're not showing your best, but it's nothing a good bath and a mirror wouldn't fix."

The repercussions of his light humor had her gaze slamming back into his. Her mouth opened and closed. Once. Twice. On the third attempt, she just huffed and glared at him. From deep within, her eyes lit with anger. The sight held his attention.

Her features were even, her nose small, her mouth full and wide. In short, she was pretty enough, but it was her eyes that drove him crazy. Brown, lit with a touch of fire, they screamed every thought she suppressed, and belied the delicacy of her face and body. The woman was all grit and determination. She'd make a hell of a wife. A hell of a mother. And a hell of a lover if she brought that fire to his bed.

He met the anger in her gaze with calm. She didn't understand it yet but it was a misplaced emotion. He wasn't an easy man or necessarily a civilized one, but he was a man a woman could put her trust in. He couldn't keep her safe from a distance. He

couldn't keep her safe following polite rules. The only way he could keep her safe was to make his claim public. Which he intended to do as soon as possible.

"If you weren't such an impulsive little thing, you wouldn't have gotten hurt at all," he pointed out. A grin tugged at the corners of his mouth as she uttered an "Excuse me?" that would have done a schoolmarm proud.

"Well, if you'd waited long enough for me to get my boots unstuck from the mud," he continued, "I'd have taken care of that yahoo for you."

An unladylike, very sarcastic snort was her response. "I suppose you'd have been right in line behind the rest of this town's inhabitants?"

He stopped in front of the door to Doc's office. He glanced down into her belligerent face. "Now that's where you'd be wrong."

He shifted her weight in his arms so he could reach the door latch. "I'd be heading up the line and putting as much distance between them and me as possible."

He deposited her in the chair just inside the door. He wasn't too surprised to see her chin still reaching for the sky or her fists clenched in her lap. The town hadn't been too open to her arrival on their doorstep. He'd done everything he could to ease her acceptance, but too many people suspected where she'd come from for it to go smoothly.

"Mr. McKinnely, I have a fair idea why you have gone to all this trouble, and," her eyes met his bravely, "I'm afraid you have been wasting your time. I am not going to fall into your lap like a ripe plum just because you happen to display a shred of human decency."

Cougar shrugged. "My luck has never been that good."

"Excuse me?"

"I've always had to fight for what I want," he elaborated on his way to the far wall where Doc had scribbled a message on a slate board. Doc had offices in three towns. A message system was the only way to keep track of him.

She didn't like the sound of that, Mara decided. She pulled herself upright, ignoring the pain in her head and her ribs. "I'll thank you not to want me."

He didn't even spare her a glance over his shoulder as he calmly stated, "That'd be like telling me not to breathe."

She swallowed back a gasp. It wasn't what he said but more the way he said it that started her stomach churning. This wasn't the first time she'd dealt with a determined male, but this was the first time she'd had to deal with one that made her feel...unsure. Maybe it was the sheer size of him that intimidated her.

He was tall, but also big-boned. The breadth of his shoulders made her heart trip in dismay. If he ever decided he wanted her, there was no way she could escape. Not like when that skinny Orville had presumed too much. A right to the chin combined with a knee to the groin had convinced him he'd been mistaken.

Her fingers tangled in the material of her skirt as McKinnely turned to face her. The determination in his deep gold eyes nearly made her rip open the side seam she'd repaired last night. Word was that once McKinnely decided he wanted something, not even the devil could dissuade him. She'd heard somewhere that he'd spent time as a marshal. She bet he'd been a good one. There was a ruthlessness about him that scared her silly. She absolutely could not have him wanting her.

He took two steps in her direction, and she leapt to her feet. The sudden move made her ribs scream like she wanted to. She put the chair between them, and then laughed out loud at her lunacy. An entire army troop wouldn't stop this man if he wanted her, let alone the flimsy ladder-back chair she'd chosen as protection.

The feel of a callused palm sliding across the back of her hand choked off the hysterical laughter more effectively than if that hand had slid across her mouth. Paralyzed, she closed her eyes and garnered her courage. *I am a Kincaid. I will survive this.*

The hand continued its slow glide. Equally callused fingers encircled her wrist and tugged. The floorboards creaked as he took the step necessary to bring him alongside. Despite her best intentions, a gasp escaped as McKinnely surely, inexorably brought her against his belly. His hand cupped the back of her head. She braced herself for the pain that would tear through her scalp when he curled his fingers into her hair and yanked her head back for the descent of his mouth.

Instead, his hand pressed her cheek against his chest. He smelled of soap, tobacco and something else. Something uniquely male. Something uniquely him. Something pleasant. Enticing. Beneath her ear, she heard his heart's steady rhythm. She heard his breath escape in a long sigh and felt her hair part where that breath blew across her head.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Miss Kincaid."

Thrown off balance, she could only ask, "Why?"

The fingers on the back of her head threaded through the shambles of her bun and massaged small circles on her scalp. "Because it's not my way."

Two hairpins hit the floor with little pings of protest. Mara closed her eyes against the urge to melt into the first kindness she'd experienced in a long, long time. "It's been my experience that men and women define hurt differently."

"I wouldn't base the opinions of a lifetime on the last few months if I were you."

It was probably a trick caused by the way his chest muffled his voice, but somehow his tone sounded kinder and gentler than she'd remembered from their previous encounters. She tried to pull back, but he wouldn't allow it and that fueled her anger more than a slap ever could. "Well, you're not me, and until you've been drugged, torn apart by a man's lust, and then ostracized because of it, you've no right to think anything."

Was that her imagination, or did the man just wince?

"I'm sorry that happened to you."

So was she, but that didn't change anything. "Let me go, Mr. McKinnely."

"I can't do that."

"Yes. You can. All you have to do is drop your hands to your sides and keep them there."

His response to her snapping was a laugh that rumbled up from deep within. "If I do that," he pointed out in a reasonable voice, "you'll fall."

He was right. For all her belligerence, her body was resting against his as if he was the sole support in a world gone awry. Her face flooded with heat. She pushed herself away. Mara ducked her head in the hopes that her hair would hide her embarrassment.

It was a vain hope.

Cougar chuckled and steadied her with a hand to her shoulder. "Doc's back at his place," he said. "We're going to have to get you out there."

She slowly straightened and flicked at his hand with her fingers. "You may go anywhere you like," she snapped. "I'm staying here."

"You are going with me." He slid his hands around her body, lifting her up.

The ease with which he sidestepped her wishes struck a raw nerve. The gentleness with which he accomplished it was even more galling. She didn't understand him, nor did she want to. She just wanted him to go away. Wrapping her fingers in the chest hair peeking between the dangling buttons on his shirt, she twisted viciously, wanting to hurt him the way he was hurting her with his casual arrogance. "Let me down, you, you—"

"Bastard?" he supplied with a lift of his brow. "Son of a bitch?"

"Yes." She twisted harder. She knew it had to hurt, yet he gave no sign. Unless the broadening of his smile could be considered one. Leaning forward, she bit him in the hard muscle of his chest. Let him ignore her now.

He swore and stopped moving. Mara bit down harder, bracing her body for the blow to come.

A thumb and finger surrounded her face and then applied force to her jaw. There came a point when she had to admit his greater strength and unlock her teeth. The body beneath hers was tense, the muscles corded. She could feel him staring at her as he tilted her face up. Finally, she couldn't stand the tension any longer and she opened her eyes. To her surprise, his hand wasn't raised to strike.

She searched his dark face for anger and found none. There was only a strange sorrow and something else. Something so disgusting, she wanted to kill him.

"Don't," she hissed. "Don't you dare pity me!"

He took the bandana from around his neck with his right hand and dabbed at the blood on her mouth.

"Why not?" he asked, transferring the bandana to his chest where he scrubbed with a lot less gentleness. "Nothing much more pathetic than attacking someone who's trying to help."

"I don't want your help," she growled.

"Well, that's neither here nor there, seeing as how I was raised that a man doesn't desert a lady in distress."

"I am not a lady, and I am not in distress."

"Uh-huh."

She was tempted to point out that the only distress she was in was caused by him, but her brief stint with lunacy was apparently over. Angering him while he had her in his arms was no longer desirable. The man was a keg of dynamite. She could tell that from the energy pulsing beneath his skin. She just couldn't figure out what would set him off. An unknown enemy was a dangerous one. She forced the anger out of her tone.

"Mr. McKinnely, I appreciate all you've done for me, but I'm truly all right now. If you'll put me down, I'll be on my way."

If she wasn't mistaken, the look he shot her was reproachful.

"I'll put you down as soon as Doc says it's all right. That was a hell of a shot you took." His eyes ran the length of her body. "And there's not much of you to go around."

Not much to go around? Where on Earth did he plan on...spreading her? She lifted her chin, put on her most off-putting expression, and stated with cool implacability, "I assure you, Mr. McKinnely, I am perfectly fine. Bruised at the most."

A muscle along the side of his jaw snapped tight. "That's something we'll let Doc decide."

"Where do you get this 'we' from? I should know how I feel."

He ignored that. He shot a glare out the window as he hitched her up in his arms. "It shouldn't have happened at all."

"At last we agree on something. Now, if you could just see your way to being reasonable." She pushed tentatively at his chest. Nothing happened.

"I'm always reasonable," he said as he shifted her weight in his arms.

That was debatable. Mara took a calming breath. She could see that he was taking special care not to jostle her more than necessary. Still, it hurt. The minute she gasped, she had his full attention and an apology. She wanted neither.

"Mr. McKinnely, I can see that you are a true gentleman. I'm grateful you stepped in and put an end to that cowboy's insult."

"Sweet-talking me isn't going to get you anywhere."

"Excuse me?"

"You're right fond of that expression, aren't you?" He grabbed a black shawl that was hanging on a peg and draped it over her, before continuing, "I'm not putting you down until Doc says it's okay. And leave that on."

Mara kept on pushing at the shawl. "It's hot enough to fry an egg out there."

"You might be in shock."

"For the last time, Mr. McKinnely, I am perfectly fine."

He snagged the edge of the shawl with his fingers, stopping its tumble. "I'm not taking any chances."

"Nobody is asking you to."

"I made you a promise, Miss Kincaid. I intend to keep it."

All this hassle was because of some promise she didn't remember? Lord help her! "What promise?"

He paused in reaching for the door. This close, Mara could see the wrinkles fanning out from his eyes above the sharp plane of his cheekbones. His Indian ancestry was evident in the darkness of his skin and the blue-black sheen of his long hair as it fell on either side of his face in a thick curtain, framing his rugged features. She followed the flow of his hair from his wide forehead to the sharp edge of his cheekbones, down the flat planes of his cheeks to his full, purely masculine lips. And there she paused, her attention caught by the way his mouth lifted slightly at the corners as if in anticipation of a smile. It just seemed so at odds with what she'd heard about him. What her fear said about him. What she knew about him. This was a very, very dangerous man.

She looked at his mouth again and then back at his eyes. At the lines that she knew in her gut were caused by laughter rather than long hours spent in the sun. And adjusted her assessment. Cougar McKinnely was a very dangerous man, but apparently, he was also a dangerous man who liked to laugh.

He dipped his head until his nose tapped hers, bringing her attention back to here and now. She forced herself not to look away from the intensity of his gaze as he uttered with the utmost sincerity, something impossible to believe.

"I promised you everything is going to be all right from here on out."

Chapter Five

Everything was going to be all right. The intriguing, totally ludicrous thought lingered in Mara's mind. She pondered it silently as Cougar took her to the livery stable and rented a buckboard. She pondered it while he refused to listen to every argument she had as to why she didn't need to be taken to Doc's place. She pondered it in the face of the proprietary hovering Cougar seemed determined to maintain. She pondered it not only because it was enticing, but also because pondering that theory helped her to ignore the panic that surged through her with every turn of the buckboard's wheels.

The residents of Cheyenne might not have been the most gracious, but in their midst, she'd been able to maintain an illusion of safety. Here, on the road out of town, there was nothing but woods, fields and crickets.

The buckboard hit another one of those large bumps that made up the road. Despite the musty corn shuck mattress Cougar had retrieved from Lord knows where, the jarring hurt and a low moan escaped. Cougar turned in his seat.

"Sorry about that."

Her "I'm fine," went ignored as he pulled on the reins. The buckboard came to a halt. In the time it took her to blink in slow resignation, he was down off the seat and coming around the wagon bed.

"Just this once, couldn't you take my word for it that I'm fine?"

He vaulted up onto the wagon. "Nope."

She frowned as he rested his hand on her forehead. "Why not?"

His hands slipped down to where she was clutching the gray blanket he'd tossed over her. "Because you lie."

"I most certainly do not!"

"Yes, you do."

She managed to swat his hands away from her torso, but they just slipped around the back of her neck and started massaging the stiff muscles there.

"Because you hate to be touched so much, short of dying, your answer to my question would always be the same."

"If you understand me so well, you should know what you're doing now is annoying me greatly." She tugged at his wrist with her hand. "Please."

"Okay."

To her horror, he took off his blue cotton shirt. He took his packet of makings out of the pocket and tossed them on the wagon bed. He held the shirt up, turned it this way

and that, and a wry smile touched his mouth. "Not much left worth saving after that fight."

Mara swallowed and managed a choked agreement. She stared in fascinated horror as the muscles on his chest and arms bunched and then relaxed as he tore the shirt in half. Above his left nipple, two bloody half circles where she'd bitten him stood out clearly. She glanced over the tail of the wagon and saw nothing but green grass and leafed out trees. Oh God, they were miles from anywhere!

She couldn't fight, so she did the next best thing. She started talking.

"Did I remember to thank you for saving me back in town?"

"Nope. I think you've been a tad remiss in the manners department."

Rip!

Mara jumped as the shirt divided into fourths. "Well, thank you. Do you know how much further it is to Doc's?"

He picked up a section and she couldn't take her eyes off his hands as they diminished the blue cotton into four-inch wide strips. "Yup."

She looked down the muddy stretch of road as it snaked across the plain and disappeared into the horizon. "How far?"

"We've a fair piece to go yet."

Which told her nothing. He had five or six of the strips in his hands as he hunkered down beside her. They looked about the right size to act as bonds. She clutched the neck of her dress with one hand. The other slid across the mattress in search of a weapon. At this point, she'd settle for a piece of straw. Her heart slammed against her ribs. For the life of her, she couldn't think of anywhere to take this conversation that would distract him from his purpose.

"You might want to close your eyes for this," he said as the mattress sank beneath his weight.

She set her teeth against the fear building in her gut. She braced her heels into the mattress and prepared to fight. "I don't think so."

"Well," he said, reaching for her, "it might make it easier for you to pretend it isn't happening."

She looked down her nose at him, waiting for that moment when he'd be off balance. "I don't think there's enough pretending in the world for me to do that."

"I think you should give it a try."

The blanket was whisked away. She felt so vulnerable lying there in her brown dress, she might as well have been naked. Though she didn't think it possible, her muscles bunched tighter. Bile rose to her throat. Her hand clutched harder at the neck of her dress. It gave her a feeling of confidence to hold onto something, even if it was only brown wool.

"I'll get even with you for this."

He didn't even have the decency to look away as he said, "I'll allow where you might be mad and a bit uncomfortable, but seeing as I'll be as gentle as I can, I don't really see the need for getting even."

No, she acknowledged silently as he dropped the strips onto her belly and reached for her hands, a man wouldn't see the need. They didn't see the harm in venting their lust where they would. As long as the woman was alive afterwards, they regarded their actions as harmless. He took her other wrist in his hand and removed it from its death grip on the neck of her dress. The wagon creaked and dipped as his weight shifted. For a second, his shadow blocked the setting sun. The loss of heat radiated all the way to her soul.

"This will go a lot easier if you cooperate." He grunted as her knee collided with his side. "Because it's happening, whether you want it to or not. You'll feel a lot better when I'm done."

She closed her eyes. Only a man would think this made a woman feel better. She counted to ten and battled with her rage. When she opened her eyes, she discovered his nose within easy reach. Her reaction was pure reflex. She punched him there as hard as she could. Unfortunately, it wasn't hard enough because he shifted at the same moment and her blow glanced off rather than landing solidly. Still, she managed to dislodge a few curses from his complacency.

He sat back on his haunches, his hand cupping his nose. "What in hell did you do that for? Isn't there a lick of sense in your head?" He pulled his hand away from his injury and checked for blood. "If we don't get those ribs bound, the next bump could send one through your lung!"

Mara felt like a fool as fear converted to sickening humiliation. "Well, why didn't you tell me that's what you were doing?"

He gingerly fingered his nose. "I thought it was obvious. Why in hell else would I tear up my shirt?"

Her gaze skittered away from his. Heat crept into her cheeks, but she held her tongue. If he didn't know, she certainly wasn't going to give him ideas.

There was a long silence during which Mara stared at the buckboard and Cougar stared at the distant mountains. They stood tall, immobile, their tops rising above the shadows cast by the setting sun. He took three deep breaths before looking down at Mara Kincaid. The strips of blue resting on her stomach caught his attention. They looked so harmless curled there, it was hard to believe they could panic anyone. But they had. And so had he. He fingered the bite marks on his chest.

Damn, this wasn't going well.

The silence stretched awkwardly on, and from the set of Mara's mouth, she had no intention of breaking it. He guessed he had to, the same way he had to bind those ribs.

"The road only gets worse from here on out."

"I'll be fine."

He sighed. "You can say that fifty times over, but saying it's not going to make it a reality."

"I'll risk it."

Damn, the woman was stubborn. "Well, I won't." He reached for the front of her dress. Her hands intercepted his. Her fingers wrapped themselves like manacles around his wrists. The panic in her eyes belied the anger in her voice.

"What do you think you're doing?"

"I'm unbuttoning your dress."

"If I thought my dress needed unbuttoning, I'd do it myself."

"That's why I'm doing it." Her hands tugged at his but he managed to get the top button free anyway. "Because you and I see this matter differently."

She started beating at him, an ineffectual pummeling that he knew had to hurt her a lot more than it hurt him. "Please calm down, Miss Kincaid."

He might as well have been talking to himself. By the time the hollow in her throat was exposed, she was beyond reason. One look into her face told him it wasn't him she was fighting. She was locked in the past, twisting and turning, her breath wheezing in and out, catching now and then with pain. If he didn't get her under control soon, she damn well might put a rib through her lung. Damn, and he hadn't done anything more than loosen her collar!

He figured the most effective method of holding her still would be to straddle her hips. He did that and discovered very little of his weight was required to keep them from moving. Unfortunately, immobilizing her hips had the effect of causing her to wrench her torso this way and that. A trickle of blood from the corner of her mouth told him she'd bitten through her lip. He caught her shoulders in his hands and gradually added pressure until he could hold them immobile against the mattress. He shook his head. Here was a pretty pickle. He had her still, but he needed another set of hands if he expected to wrap her ribs.

"Miss Kincaid, please quiet down. I'm not going to hurt you. I'm just going to wrap your ribs."

She spat at him. He should have expected it, but he'd been holding onto the hope that she'd find her reason. He wiped his cheek with his shoulder. Her knee came up and connected with his back. He grunted and debated sitting on her harder and wrapping his feet over her shins, but he didn't have the heart. She was scared, and he was at fault. If putting a few bruises on his body helped, the least he could do was allow it.

He sighed and tried one more time. He stroked smooth, comforting circles on her shoulder with his thumbs as he said, "I'm not going to hurt you, Angel."

She twisted her head and tried to sink those sharp white teeth into his wrist. "Ah, you're not going to make this easy for us, are you?"

He supposed he could take her wild thrashing as an answer. Holding her down with one hand on the sharp edge of her collarbone, he reached into the saddlebags he'd hung over the side of the wagon, and pulled out the bottle of laudanum he'd carried ever since he'd had to set a man's leg with no anesthetic. He slipped the spoon out of the tie off the side. He laid it on the wagon bed.

He popped the cork with his teeth and filled the spoon. While she lay quivering beneath his hold, he slid his hand up until it cupped her chin. His fingers spread easily from one side of her jaw to the other. While he applied pressure to open her mouth, he made a mental note to halve the dosage Doc had said it would take to down a grown man. It took three spluttering tries before he got a sparse amount down her throat. He waited until she calmed before he experimentally slipped off her hips. She moaned as if lost without his weight.

"Miss Kincaid? Mara?"

She didn't so much as twitch. He checked her pulse. It was steady, and her color was fine. Those were the two things Doc said to check besides her breathing. He reached up and tugged on her arms. Nothing. He breathed a sigh of relief and eased her hands down to the mattress above her head. So far so good.

He moved the pile of material off her stomach and onto the wagon bed beside him. When he touched the buttons on her dress, she moaned and turned her head. He paused. "Shhh, Angel. You're safe. Everything's all right."

Some trust must have lingered beneath all the bitterness of the last two months, because she took him at his word and went back to her dreams. However, the minute his fingers started fumbling with her bodice, she started fussing and her hands manacled themselves to his wrists again. When he took his hands away, she sighed and relaxed. He frowned. This wasn't going to work in any conventional manner, he could see. He took his Bowie knife out of its sheath. The blade was damned near as long as her torso.

"Angel, I want you to hold very still."

She moaned and he guessed that was as close to a "yes" as he could expect. Holding one of the buttons between his fingers, he pulled the fabric away from her body. Gingerly, he slid the knife between the coarse material and her skin. It wasn't as if he'd never used the thing before, it was just that he'd never used it on someone so fragile.

As material parted with a rasping hiss beneath the blade, he felt a bone-deep satisfaction. Every button that popped into the air to land with a soft thud on the wagon floor deepened his satisfaction. If he never saw that ugly brown dress again, he'd dance a jig. Especially when he saw what lay beneath. Creamy white flesh kissed with rose. Whoever had given Mara that drab creation should have been shot. He touched a red spot on her neck where the material had chafed her skin. With a bit more vigor, he sliced through the rest of the dress. A smile touched his lips. Just let her try to repair that!

With the exception of pantaloons, she was bare. He let that knowledge seep in. Damn! Not one of the town's "good women" had even seen fit to outfit her with the most basic of clothes a decent woman required. It was appalling. Almost as appalling as the painful thinness of her body. He couldn't even get interested in the sight of her breasts because he was too distracted by the nubs of her chest bones poking up between them.

He reached for the blanket. He pictured her as he so often saw her, walking through the town, head held high, shoulders back, pride etched into every line of her body. The blanket bunched into a ball as his fingers curled into a fist. Damn them all!

He slowly released his grip on the blanket. It fell on her chest, reminding him that he had the woman practically bare-assed naked in the middle of the road. He shook his head and restored her modesty by rearranging the material over her torso in a way that wouldn't hinder his work.

He sat back on his heels and took a moment to assess the damage. Where the cowboy's punch had landed was easy to detect. The flesh was already turning purple. He probed the area with his fingertips. He didn't think anything was broken, but he didn't know. She was so damned fragile looking. He wrapped her ribs and pulled the covering down over her unconscious body.

He touched his finger to her cheek. It was warm, the approaching night not yet having had a chance to steal the kiss of the sun. "It's going to be all right, Angel. From here on out, you're going to be safe."

If it was the last thing he ever did, he was going to fulfill that vow. A smart man just didn't walk away from the kind of spirit this woman had.

He checked the sky. Pink chased blue as dusk made its entrance. They'd wasted a lot of time, first by trying to avoid the ruts in the makeshift road and then in wrapping her ribs. There was no way they'd make it to Doc's by dark. Not even if he could get his horse to do anything but express his indignation at being in a harness. He grabbed his makings and climbed back into the seat. He pulled an oil lamp out from beneath it, and hung it high on the pole set vertically into the front of the wagon. He rolled a cigarette, lit it, then reached over, lifted the mantle and lit the lamp. Warm yellow light spilled over the seat and the barely discernible road. It would have to do until the moon came up. He slapped the reins against Flame Dancer's rump. The horse leapt into the traces and for all of ten feet, they made good time. Then Dancer remembered his dignity and slowed to a disgruntled walk. Cougar sighed, flicked the ash off his cigarette, and let the horse have his way. As long as they were making progress, he wasn't going to quibble about how. He'd fought all the pointless battles he cared to for one day. Right now, he'd settle for some peace.

* * * * *

Mara drifted slowly out of the darkness. She took a deep breath, relishing the scent of simmering stew and freshly brewed coffee. It'd been so long since she'd had a good meal and a cup of real coffee. Her stomach cramped with persistent hope.

To distract herself from hunger pangs, she focused on her surroundings. She was in a bed. She didn't have to open her eyes to know it. She could feel the softness of a mattress beneath her back. Not a corn shuck mattress, but an honest to goodness feather mattress. From the angle of her body, she concluded at least four pillows were stacked behind her shoulders, and something as soft as a cloud covered her body.

She kept her eyes closed tight, not wanting to lose the luxury, but the thought that she didn't remember changing gowns kept nagging at her, nipping at her peace until the memories started to howl.

The last thing she recalled clearly was Doc pouring something vile down her throat. There was a vague recollection of voices, and of someone touching her intimately. And pain. She frowned, trying to bring the memory into sharper focus, because, somehow, it had been different.

"You're safe now."

Mara opened her eyes and stared at the plump woman who stood by the bed. Safe from what? From being kidnapped? From being used again. She didn't think so.

"You are safe," the woman repeated. She leaned forward. Mara felt like a fool for flinching when all the woman did was tuck the quilt a little tighter around her.

"I don't think so." Mara looked toward the door. Cougar McKinnely had to be on the other side. He'd brought her here, for what purpose, she didn't know, but he'd gone to too much trouble to simply disappear. She looked back at the woman and a piece of the puzzle fell into place. "I've seen you around," she said, taking in the woman's square face with its rounded cheeks and friendly looking dimples. She attempted to shift higher on the pillows. Pain lanced through her body, and she gave up on the plan with a small sigh. "I don't remember your name, but you're Doc's wife, aren't you?"

"Yes. I'm Dorothy." She shook out her gingham apron, and smoothed her red-blond hair back into the bun at the nape of her neck. "Dorothy McKinnely."

Mara didn't bother to fuss with her appearance. She knew she looked a fright. "I suppose you know who I am?"

"Yes, but I have to admit it's nice addressing you face to face, Miss Kincaid. I'm more accustomed to speaking to the back of your head."

There was a time when she would have blushed for being chided so on her manners. Now, she merely shrugged. "I didn't want to take a chance on you being one of those 'good citizens' who wants to run me out of town."

"No chance of that." Dorothy rested the back of her hand against Mara's brow. "Good, you don't have a fever."

"I'm fine," Mara fiddled with a loose thread on the brightly colored quilt covering her bed. She twisted the thread around her finger. "How bad is it?"

"Your injuries?"

The thread broke loose. She stared at it, dangling from her finger. "Yes."

"Your ribs are bound, but Horace doesn't think they're broken. And you've got three stitches in your head, but any scar will be hidden by your hair."

Dorothy tucked the quilt under Mara's other side. "You're going to be as right as rain in no time."

And Hell was scheduled to freeze over tomorrow. "Thank you."

Dorothy crossed to the dresser and put away the shiny instruments lying on top. Mara wished she could put away her own troubles so neatly. She was so tired of being afraid.

Dorothy's brusque movements slowed. "Did you know Cougar's my son?"

"I've heard talk."

The last instrument fell into the drawer with a soft clank.

"Did you know that Cougar isn't my real son? That Horace and I adopted him when he was thirteen?"

Dorothy fussed some more with the drawer's contents. Mara wished she had something equally distracting to do with her hands.

"I figured something like that from his appearance."

Dorothy looked over her shoulder. "Just because he isn't my flesh and blood doesn't mean I love him any less."

"I never thought you would." Actually, she'd never thought about it at all. She pulled the thread straight, measuring its length against the size of the quilt squares. It came up short.

"His happiness is very important to me." Dorothy added.

Mara pulled the ends of the thread. Hard. "I'm sure it is."

The drawer gave a soft thump as wood met wood. "Just so long as we understand one another."

"I understand perfectly, Mrs. McKinnely, but I'll assure you just as I've assured every other woman around here. I have no intention chasing after your son or your husband."

The thread snapped in two.

"Now that's a picture," Dorothy laughed. "You carrying on with my Horace."

Mara blinked. She'd been expecting outrage, not humor. The thread finally broke into pieces too small to be distracting. She dropped the remains on the quilt and brushed off her hands. "I don't understand you."

"No. I don't suppose you do, but if you ever decide to go after Horace, I think there is something you should know."

"What?"

"If you can take him, you can have him." Dorothy lifted her brows at her. "But I think you'll find it harder to take him than you think."

Mara bit back an impatient exclamation. *God! Would any of them ever listen to her?* "I don't want your husband."

"I know." Dorothy smoothed her apron down as she approached the bed and stated matter-of-factly, "I'm more concerned about my son."

"You're worried I'm going to hurt him," Mara sighed wearily, wondering how many times she was going to have this conversation with women over the course of her life.

Dorothy shrugged. "Frankly, yes. You've been through a lot, and you're not recovered yet."

How do I recover from being sold and raped? How do I know when I've gotten better? She put all the confidence she could feign into her response. "I'm working on it."

Dorothy stood by the bed, looking at Mara, the way people did when they wanted to say something. Beyond the door, Mara could hear the murmur of men's voices. Chairs creaked, footsteps sounded. There was the clank of metal on metal as something was shifted on the stove. And still Dorothy stared.

"What?" Mara finally asked, folding the sheet over the quilt, unable to bear it.

"You do know it was Cougar who took you out of that place, don't you?"

She carefully smoothed out a crease in the sheet, just below the fold. "Today?"

"No. Two months ago."

She was afraid she meant that. "No. I don't remember much besides killing Cecile."

"There was a woman who needed killing."

Maybe, but Mara wished she wasn't the one who had to live with the memory of her hand sinking the knife into the brothel owner's flesh. The desperate thrust that had earned her freedom demanded a high price, turning her dreams to nightmares where everything good drowned in a relentless, blood-red tide. She fought back the tight band of nausea constricting her throat.

"Cougar is the one who brought me to Doc?" Mara asked.

"You didn't know?"

"No." There wasn't much about that night she had tried to remember.

"Well, Cougar is the one who brought you here. He was down in the saloon when he heard a woman scream." Dorothy set the glass on the table and tightened the strings on her apron. "He killed Cecile's henchman Aleric."

"He did?" She finally subdued the crease. She glanced up. "Why?"

"Cougar doesn't hold with men mistreating women."

"I'll be sure to thank him." There was a bulge in the quilt next to her left thigh.

"I don't think he believes you owe him any thanks."

"The man risked his life to save mine." She patted the bulge flat as she added, "Not once, but twice."

"He doesn't feel right about the last two months."

Mara froze, her hand in the middle of the red square, fingers splayed, a sick feeling welling. "Excuse me?"

"He feels responsible for you, Mara." Dorothy shrugged. "We all do. You walked away from that brothel without a backward glance and then froze off anyone who tried to get close enough to give you a hand up."

Mara pushed herself up higher. "I didn't accept any help because I didn't need any."

"That, young lady, is pure bull."

"I don't think so." Mara countered, anger creeping past her gratitude. "The one thing I've learned this last year is that a body has to count on herself if she doesn't want a whole ton of greedy creditors suddenly appearing at her door." She yanked the sheet over her midriff. "I'll pay my debt to you, Doc, and...Cougar. After that, I have no intention of being beholden to anyone again. Ever."

"You're setting yourself up for a fall, young lady."

"It's my fall."

"No," Dorothy countered, taking two steps toward the bed. "It isn't. If you go down, you're going to take good people with you, including my son."

"Don't worry," she sneered bitterly, "I have no intention of stealing your son from you."

"That's not what I'm talking about."

"Then why don't you just say what you mean?" Mara pressed her hand to her aching head.

"I was trying to approach the subject delicately, but since you insist," Dorothy snapped her apron straight. Mara felt like a bug pinned to a box under her stare. "Did you ever wonder why no one from that brothel ever showed up to drag you back?"

"No." She'd been too busy being grateful for the fact.

"Well, maybe you should have."

She had a sneaking suspicion Dorothy was right. She was sure of it as words kept rolling over the older woman's lips in an avalanche of truth.

"The only reason the new ownership of the Pleasure Emporium," Dorothy's upper lip curled over the name, "didn't drag you back is because Cougar convinced them it wouldn't be in their best interest."

"It was Doc who got me the room at the boarding house," Mara countered quickly. With every word out of Dorothy's mouth, her debt to McKinnely grew to intolerable levels.

"And hated doing it," Dorothy agreed grimly. "Everyone knows Gertie wants a slave, not an employee."

"That's why I took the job at the restaurant, so I wouldn't be trapped with no money."

Dorothy ran her hand over her hair, sat down on the side of the bed, unclenching Mara's hand so she could take it in hers. "That was your scariest move to date."

Mara braced herself. No one's demeanor softened that quickly unless they were getting ready to deliver a blow. "Why?"

"Because of your boss."

"Mr. Dawson?"

"Shorty Dawson is the biggest lecher this side of the Mississippi."

Mara pictured the rotund little man with the twinkling eyes in her mind. "He looks like an elf!"

"Well, if he's an elf, he's an excessively randy one and not too particular about how he goes about getting his way."

Mara eyed Dorothy suspiciously. "He never bothered me."

"I don't suspect he would after Cougar held his knife to the old goat's privates and warned him he'd be doing without them should Cougar even suspect him of thinking about you that way."

Mara slowly withdrew her hand from Dorothy's. The things the older woman had said whirled through her mind. There had to be a reason McKinnely was doing all this. There had to be, so she forced herself to ask, "Why?"

Instead of answering, Dorothy avoided her gaze. From the other room came the sound of a chair scraping across the floor. It was the hopeful, almost desperate look Dorothy cast in the direction of the sound that clued Mara in.

"Oh God!" she rasped, staring at Dorothy as the horrible truth dawned. Cougar McKinnely wanted her. Oh no. Oh God! "No."

Chapter Six

"You had to know," Dorothy said, standing up. "You've been taking too many risks. You had to know..."

"That Cougar McKinnely wants me?" Mara interrupted. "That what Cougar McKinnely wants, he gets? Pardon me, but I've heard all that before and it's still a pile of manure." She tried to swing her legs to the floor, but Dorothy blocked her. Mara pushed at her restraining arms. "I've got to get out of here!" Pain tore up from her ribs. It was nothing compared to the pain in her soul. "God! I never learn." His kindness had been a trick. And she'd fallen for it. She yanked at Dorothy's arms. "Let me go!"

Dorothy didn't let go, she didn't move, and she didn't speak. She just stared at Mara. The silence grew heavier and heavier until, finally, Dorothy broke it on a weary sigh.

"I can see from your expression, you're determined not to hear what I have to say, so I'm going to tell you this much and then I'll leave you be." She released Mara's arms. "You're here in my house. You are going to stay here until you are healed. And no one is going to hurt you again."

"You can't guarantee that."

Dorothy's hands landed squarely on her hips and Mara finally got to see the temper everyone claimed went with red hair. "Look at me."

The way the order was rapped out, Mara didn't have any choice.

"I can guarantee your safety, Mara Kincaid, because that big man out there," Dorothy pointed toward the door, her body jerking with the force of the movement. "The one that you're so determined to think the worst of is going to make it his life's mission to see that you are. And I'll tell you another thing." That finger came to point at Mara with the same subdued force. "About the only hands you'd be safer in would be God's."

"He's a man."

"He's a good man."

"That doesn't change anything."

"It changes everything."

Mara tightened her grip on the quilt covering her legs. The same quilt this angry woman had just finished tucking in so carefully. The woman who wanted to wrap her in gift wrap as a present for her son. "I don't want anything changed!"

Except the last few months.

"Change is part of life, Mara," Dorothy argued almost gently. "You can't fight it."

"Leave her be, Dorothy."

Mara whipped her head around and saw Cougar standing in the doorway. Lord, he was big. All muscle, confidence and cool control.

"It needs to be said, Cougar," Dorothy countered, love for her son in her voice. "She can't go on as she has, risking her life and yours."

"I can do whatever I like!" Mara struggled to rise off the mountain of pillows propped behind her. She needed to gain some advantage.

All she gained was McKinnely's attention.

In three strides, he was at her side, his big hands swallowing her shoulders as he pushed her back into the pillows. His long black hair swung forward, casting his dark eyes in shadow as he drawled, "Steady."

The ease with which he subdued her struggles drove a nail through her soul.

"You can't keep me here," she hissed, hating the quaver that shook the last word. McKinnely scared her, plain and simple. He was too intense. Too big. Too close. And now, because she couldn't control her voice, he knew he scared her.

She closed her eyes and counted to ten. His hands left her shoulders. She opened her eyes. He was still standing beside the bed, looking totally out of place against the blue flowered wallpaper that covered the top half of the walls. And he was still looking at her with that mixture of cool control and banked possession, as he always did.

"I didn't drag you halfway across the territory only to have you do yourself damage in my mother's home," he informed her.

"Then let me go home."

"No." One word, but it brooked no argument. She gave it to him anyway, matching him glare for glare, pitting her will against his.

"Yes."

"You can't leave, Mara," Dorothy interjected, looking anxiously between them. "You're hurt."

Cougar reached for Mara. Her flinch was involuntary. So was her gasp, but all he did was take the sleeve of her borrowed nightgown and slip it back up over her shoulder from where it had fallen. She caught it before it could fall again. A quick glance showed Cougar wasn't even looking at her. He was staring across the bed at his mother.

"Whatever you're trying to do, this is not the time."

"Hrmph." Dorothy snapped her apron straight, and shoved a hairpin back into her graying red hair. "When do you think the right time might be? When I'm standing by your grave, crying my eyes out over the waste?"

"No one's going to kill me."

He seemed very sure of that.

"How do you know? One of these days, you might have to threaten the wrong man in an effort to keep her safe, and then what?"

And then she would be alone without even her secret illusion that there was someone, somewhere she could count on.

"This isn't any of your business," he told his mother. It was a softly worded order, but an order nonetheless. Dorothy didn't seem to notice.

"It most certainly is."

While pretending to smooth the quilt, Mara watched Cougar out of the corner of her eye. He folded his arms across his chest, his muscles straining his shirt as he said, "No. It isn't."

Mara didn't know where Dorothy got the courage to argue with him, but her arms crossed over her ample bosom and her mouth opened, obviously prepared to do just that.

He silenced her with another shake of his head and a frown. Dorothy huffed in disgust and turned away. "I'll get Mara something to eat," she said as she pulled the door open.

"Thank you."

Dorothy closed the door behind her, and that left just him and her in this small frilly room together. Mara took a breath for strength. She'd never been good at arguing. Up until Cecile's, she'd always been more inclined to follow orders than give them. She released the breath in a slow steady exhale. A lot of things had changed since then.

"Do you need anything?" he asked.

"No." At least none of her inner shakiness showed in her voice.

"When Dorothy gets back with dinner, you eat all she brings."

Who in heaven's name does he think he is? The retort that sprang to her lips died as her eyes met his. He was looking at her with a combination of amusement and expectation, his right brow arched in an invitation or a challenge. She wasn't sure which. As a result, her "I'll eat what I want" was more a whisper than a statement.

"As long as what you want is everything, I can live with that."

Well, she couldn't live with the mouse she turned into whenever he was around. She had a backbone for goodness sake. She put it to use, lifting her chin and straightening her spine. "What you can and cannot live with is not one of my concerns."

His answer was a flat "It will be."

What was she supposed to say to that? By the time she thought of something, the silence had gone on too long for it to have any impact. How did people argue like this daily? Her stomach churned. She pressed her hand against it, while she focused on a list of potential retorts to his potential arguments. She'd discovered arguing was easier when she was prepared.

"Everything's going to be all right for you now," he vowed quietly.

She hadn't prepared for that or the memory it tickled. She frowned. "You promised me that before?"

"Yes. On the ride here."

She skimmed her left wrist with her right hand, remembering the feeling of being restrained. "You held me down?"

"Yes. I did." He was matter-of-fact as he picked up her arm and shoved back her sleeve, ignoring her tugs to free herself. "You were fighting so hard, I thought you'd hurt yourself." He touched the mark on her wrist, his frown deepening. "I'm sorry."

"Don't say that!"

His gaze flicked to her in surprise. "What?"

"That you're sorry!" She jerked her hand free. She never wanted to hear those words from anyone again. "Don't say it!"

He stared at her with knowing eyes and in one sentence, made the nightmare real again.

"He said that when he raped you."

The man saying that was one of her few clear memories of that night. She took a deep breath, held it and slowly unclenched her fingers. There wasn't much point in lying. "Yes."

He leaned forward. She shrank back, but the headboard limited her movement. He tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear. When he stepped back, she could breathe again. When she did, her lungs filled with the scent of sage, tobacco, and man. His scent.

"I would give anything for it not to have happened," he said quietly.

Mara shifted her body into a better position. "Me, too."

Even more immediately, she'd give about anything not to be having this conversation. She was lying in a bed, dressed in nothing more than a nightgown, for heaven's sake!

Cougar transferred his weight from his left foot to his right. A floorboard creaked. The sound scraped Mara's nerves. She felt raw, exposed, and so confused, she had to know the truth. "Is it true?"

"What?"

"Have you been helping me all these months?"

The floorboard creaked again. "Yes."

"Why?" When he didn't answer immediately, she asked him again, "Why have you been helping me? What do you want from me?"

"I don't want anything."

"Yes. You do. No one goes to all that trouble for nothing."

"Some do."

She eyed him consideringly. The man radiated intensity and purpose. "You don't."

His head snapped up. The board gave one final squeak as his weight landed squarely on it. The flick of his eyebrow told her he was surprised she'd figured that out about him.

"You're right. I don't."

"So what do you want?"

"Your attention."

Two little words that scared her to death. "Why?"

This time, the look he sent her questioned her sanity. "You've got to know how beautiful you are from the way the men flock around you."

"And here I thought my reputation was the draw."

Her sarcasm took him aback. She could tell from the way his eyes widened before narrowing and the way his hands settled on his lean hips. Well, if he thought he could win her with lies, he had another think coming. Her own Daddy had told her he wouldn't be able to marry her off without a poke of gold to up the ante, so he'd sold her instead. A girl didn't have any illusions left after something like that, so she wasn't falling for this big man's lies. But it would be nice, she thought, as he kept spinning yarns. Very nice, if half of what he said was true.

"Maybe, at first, the men thought you round in the heels." He shrugged. "Women who work above stairs are. But, Mara, only a rabid fool would interpret your behavior these last months as anything but proper. You, Miss Kincaid, are a lady from the top of your head to the tips of your shoes."

A lady dressed in the rag she wore on her back and the shoes she stuffed paper in to fill the holes in the soles? Did he think she was a fool? "Lies are not necessary, Mr. McKinnely. I know who I am, and I'm content with it."

He leaned his shoulder against the wall and drawled, "Not yet you're not."

"I am."

"Not."

She folded her arms across her chest, as he had. She hoped it lent her the same appearance of authority as it did him. "Do you have to argue about everything?"

The smile in his voice was unmistakable. "Just some things."

What did he find so constantly amusing about her? "Why this thing?"

"Because I've always had a preference for ladies."

Did he think because he willed it, he could make it so? "I'm not a lady."

"You are."

She blinked back tears that tried to well. Her fingers sank into her upper arms. There was no avoiding the truth. "Ladies aren't intimate with a man for money."

"No, they aren't. Not if they've got a choice."

She wanted this charade over. She met his gaze dead on. "I won't be your mistress."

He blinked, and then, impossibly, smiled. "You might want to wait until asked."

Her stomach heaved and churned. She needed to get away from here. "I don't understand you."

"I don't imagine you do." He pushed away from the wall and took a step forward. It brought him so close, his knees hit the bed. He was imposingly big, this close. She had to tip her head back to see his face as he said, "But I won't ever hurt you."

She could only stare at him as his fingers brushed down the side of her head. Two deep breaths and she had the urge to cringe under control.

"Or let anyone else," he added as she met his gaze.

His hand slid to her shoulder, where it rested heavy and warm.

"Do you hate my touching you?"

Did he expect her to lie? Want her to lie? Well, she wouldn't. "Yes."

"Because he hurt you?"

Her chin inched up a notch. "Yes."

"I guess you've got cause to distrust men," he admitted on a sigh, patting her shoulder before removing his hand.

She took a steadying breath. What did he want from her? She ran her eyes over his face from hair to chin. He was a handsome man with high cheekbones, deeply bronzed skin, full lips and a straight nose. His chin, however, gave her pause. It was way too aggressive for her peace of mind. Her gaze dropped to his shoulders, wider than her arms could wrap around. She moved her gaze down to his chest, equally massive. He was a man built for strength. For endurance. Her gaze rose back to his stubborn chin that told her he wouldn't be averse to using that strength to get his way. He was probably well used to getting his way.

She pulled her gaze from his chin and studied his eyes. They were, by far, his best feature. More gold than brown, and they were very expressive. As much as she wanted to hate him, she couldn't. There was too much regret in those eyes, too much guilty sympathy for her plight, and too damned much consideration for her feelings in his manner for her to hate him. But she could try. She could really try.

"I want to leave."

"It's not possible right now."

"If I got here, I can get home."

"No."

"You can't keep me here against my will!"

His smile was a flash of straight, white teeth in his dark face. "Angel, I can pretty much do whatever I want."

The truth of that churned in her gut. She pressed her hand to her stomach.

His finger under her chin brought her gaze to his. "But I'm not feeling much like kidnapping anyone today."

Her "Good" was a weak reflection of how she wanted to sound.

"How old are you?"

Mara blinked once before answering. "Twenty-three." And then because the way she'd snapped the answer out annoyed her, she asked one of her own, "How old are you?"

"Twenty-nine." Cougar stroked the underside of her chin once, his gaze lingering on her face before he stepped away. She breathed a little easier with the distance, but she kept her eyes on him. Not sure what he was up to but sure he was up to something. He didn't seem to do anything without a reason.

"Would you like a drink of water?" he asked.

Her "No" trailed behind him as he cleared the foot of the bed. Amusement lurked around him like a good friend. As he drew level with her, she noticed her nightgown had slipped. One more inch and her breast would be exposed. Oh Lord, what if he noticed?

She yanked the gown back up. She had it up with the excess material tucked securely beneath her arm, and he was still fussing with that glass of water. She closed her eyes as understanding sank in. He was giving her time. "You can turn around now."

He did, waiting for her to make the next move, that stupid glass of water resting in his hand.

"I'll take that." She held out her hand for the water.

"Do you really want it?"

"Since you went to all that trouble, the least I can do is drink it."

His eyebrow rose as he released the glass into her care. Her eyes met his for a second.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"You're welcome."

They both knew she wasn't thanking him for the water. She wished it were different, but she couldn't be beholden to him. For anything. She had to get out of here.

"I want to leave."

"I'm afraid that's not possible until we straighten things out between us."

"There's nothing to straighten out. I want to go home."

"Do you have family anxiously awaiting your return?"

Her lips shaped around a lie, but what sighed past them was the truth. Dammit. "No."

"There could be repercussions from last night."

"There won't be." There couldn't be. The fragile level of peace she'd attained wouldn't survive the slightest misstep.

"There could be," Cougar argued in that low drawl that made her want to scream. "People in town are always eager to leap on a juicy bit of gossip like your spending the night with me."

"As you said, that's nothing new."

"So we'll have to deal with it," he explained patiently.

"There's nothing to deal with."

He sighed and ran his hand through his thick black hair. "Guess there really was no hope you'd be reasonable."

"I'm always reasonable."

"Uh-huh." He folded his arms across his chest. "It's because of me that you're in this mess, so that means it's up to me to get you out of it."

"A drunken cowboy got me into this mess."

"Would you rather marry up with him?"

"No."

"Then we'll get the Reverend out here as soon as possible and get the deed done."

"Deed?"

"Our marriage."

He had to be kidding, Mara thought, staring at Cougar as he stared back, looking stubborn to the bone, too obstinate to admit the craziness of his own words. "You can't want to marry me. A woman from a brothel."

"I'm marrying you."

Didn't he have a single, predictable bone in his body? She pressed her hand harder into her stomach and rubbed the ache beginning behind her eyes with the other. Her fingers trembled ever so slightly as they slid around to massage the crease from her brow. She hid them beneath the cover as she asked wearily, "You can't think marrying me is going to make me more acceptable to anyone?"

"I'm not worried about anyone but me finding you acceptable."

"You will," she whispered, dropping her gaze to the quilt. "When people start whispering behind your back, when social invitations drop off, and when decent women cross the street to avoid tainting the air that they breathe with your filth, you'll care."

His hand landed on her head, smoothing down her back, the pressure on her hair pulling her chin up. It was inevitable that her gaze would meet his.

"I won't," he repeated. Nothing in his gaze or the hard set of his mouth indicated he meant other than what he said.

She knew exactly how to shake him out of his complacency. "What if I'm with child?"

His hand paused mid-stroke. The lift of his right eyebrow was the only change in his expression. "You don't know?"

She dug her nails into her thighs and dropped her gaze. "It's not likely as I've never been regular. The midwife told my mother I might never have a baby because of that." She brought her gaze back to his. "I suppose you ought to know that, too, that I may never be able to give you children."

His hand resumed its stroking and he shrugged. "Early, late or never, I expect we'll manage however it plays out."

That was it. No anger. No backpedaling. Just a practical accommodation to a potential problem. She didn't believe him for a minute. Every man wanted a son to carry on his name, and no man wanted a child not his own.

"I won't have a child of mine punished for something he or she can't help."

"Then you'd better marry me because nothing hurts a kid more than being labeled a bastard."

He had her there. A child born out of wedlock had no hope of acceptance. If she was pregnant, she was early enough that no one would ever know for sure that Cougar was not the father. Except for her. And him. And if he became resentful of the child after its birth and they were married, she would have no way of protecting it. The child's fate would be sealed. She forced her fingers to unclench. She brought her gaze back to his.

"I'm not marrying you."

"Because you're worried I won't accept a child not of my blood?"

She forced her fingers to open and her expression to stay firm. "Yes."

He stared at her for the longest moment. His expression impassive. "Is that your final word?" he asked.

"Yes." She closed her eyes and sank deeper into the comforting softness of the mattress. She faked a yawn. "I'm tired. I'd like you to leave."

He took a step back. The floorboard creaked under his weight. She could feel his eyes boring into her. She forced her breath to slow and her tight muscles to relax in an approximation of sleep.

He still didn't leave. He vastly underestimated her if he thought he could out-stubborn her. She'd fake sleep from here to eternity if that's what it took. And it did seem an eternity before the board creaked again and she heard his boot heels rap across the floor. Only after she heard the knob rattle and then the door click closed behind him did she open her eyes. What in God's name was she going to do?

Chapter Seven

"Hello. Anybody up?"

The cheery, feminine call yanked Mara from sleep. An equally forceful yank on her scalp kept her from leaping to her feet. Turning to the right, she saw what had kept her from leaving the bed. Beside her lay McKinnely, all six foot plus inches of uncompromising hard masculinity. One heavily muscled arm was lying across her hair, the dark tan of his skin almost invisible in her red-brown hair. As she followed the rise and fall of muscle over his forearm and up to his shoulder, she gasped and froze. He wasn't wearing a shirt.

"What are you doing in my bed?"

In response to her demand, his right eye cracked open. "Sleeping."

"In my bed?"

"Relax," Cougar mumbled, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "We're going to be married."

"No, we are not." She tugged on her hair while he continued as if he hadn't been interrupted.

"It's perfectly all right for us to be in bed together." His hand dropped to the space between them, pulling the sheets tight. His eyes, fully open now, surveyed her with a lazy possessiveness that set her teeth on edge.

"You'll pardon me if I don't take your word for it." An elbow in his side generated a lazy "umph" but not a lot of movement.

"Get out of my bed," she hissed, conscious that she could be overheard.

He rolled to his back and stretched his arms high above his head like a big lazy cat. A scar on his left biceps flexed with the movement. "I don't think that's a good idea." A yawn accompanied the statement.

Mara wrestled her hair free. She could tell from the sound of Dorothy's footsteps she was almost to the door. "It's a wonderful idea." She scooted as fast as her injuries allowed and pointed to the door. "Get out!"

He shrugged those big shoulders. On a "Have it your way," he tweaked the covers aside and slid out. He was completely naked. Totally, completely naked, and as much as she was horrified, Mara was also fascinated. There was just no ignoring the perfection of his big body. The way his broad shoulders tapered to tight buttocks in a ripple of flexing muscle was pure beauty. The puckering of scars here and there did nothing to distract. His thighs were strong and thickly roped with hard stretches of dense muscle. Standing as he was with his legs slightly parted, she could see the heavy

sac of his balls swinging between, and below them, the broad mushroom-shaped head of his penis dangled. One thing was clear. This was a man in his prime.

The morning sun glanced off the slant of his cheek as he looked over his shoulder at her. His wickedly victorious smile coincided with Dorothy's "Mara, are you up?" Before the echo of the last tap had ended, Dorothy was opening the door. Cougar did not grab for the covers.

Mara hurled a pillow at him as it dawned on her exactly why he wasn't afraid of being caught naked in her bedroom. He hadn't given up on his plan to marry her, he'd just changed tactics to force the issue.

Cougar caught the pillow. Dorothy stepped into the room. Mara couldn't decide whether to apologize or swear as the older woman's gaze took in the compromising situation. For a long moment, she stared at Cougar. Then at Mara.

"I guess I won't be inviting the Simpsons over Saturday next, after all." Dorothy pulled the quilt off the bed and passed it to Cougar. "Cover yourself."

He was slow to comply. As he turned to wrap the quilt around his lean hips, Mara got a glimpse of his broad chest, the flat male nipples nestled amidst the curling black hair. More of that hair began below his navel. It drew her eye like a beacon, and before she could check the impulse, she was staring at his manhood. Even at rest, it looked huge, almost as thick as her arm, and reaching down his thigh. As she stared, fascinated despite herself, it twitched. She gasped. As if in response to her horror, he flipped the quilt across his hips, obscuring her vision.

Dorothy asked, "How you feeling, honey?"

"Better." Mara tried to keep her blush down by her toes, but Cougar's knowing grin kept spiking it up.

Okay. So she'd looked. What was the harm in that? She snagged the sheet with her toe. Surely the most notorious woman in the territory should know what a naked man looked like. She shifted so her back was to Cougar.

"Where have you been?" she asked Dorothy to cover her embarrassment.

Dorothy came closer. She brought the scent of clean air and summer flowers. She caught the sheet Mara was inching up and dropped it in Mara's lap.

"Elijah Ware's wife had her little girl last night."

"He must be over the moon," Cougar drawled.

"He is though it wasn't an easy birth."

"Everything all right?"

"Yes."

"Where's Doc?" Mara asked.

"He's putting the carriage away," Dorothy answered.

Cougar laughed as he tucked the end of the quilt around his waist. "Grumbling, no doubt, about the abuse to his old bones."

Dorothy nodded and smiled, but her gaze remained on Mara as she answered. "Loud enough to be heard two valleys over."

"Dorothy has an aversion to good horseflesh," Cougar offered wryly, walking to stand by Mara's side at the headboard.

It was a proprietary gesture. One Mara did not appreciate. Her glare bounced off his half smile.

"Or bad horseflesh for that matter," Dorothy admitted. She frowned as she glanced between the two of them, but Mara couldn't tell what she was thinking.

"Dorothy's carriage is in reality an abandoned flatbed a patient fixed up and gave to Doc," Cougar explained. Angry footsteps in the other room only seemed to inspire his grin to widen. "The da...darn thing has no springs. Every time Dorothy decides to go along on a visit, Doc has to suffer his bones being rattled and..."

"What I have to suffer is inhuman." Doc broke into Cougar's explanation as he stomped into the room. Red-faced, his grizzled hair sticking up every which way, he crossed the short distance separating him from his wife in three indignant strides. This close, Mara could see the little beads of sweat dotting his upper lip and feel the tension in his body.

"That's the absolute last time, woman," he growled, shaking his finger in her face. "I will no longer tolerate having my joints bounced asunder just because of your foolish fears."

"Of course, Horace," Dorothy responded sweetly. "But..."

"No buts," Doc countered. "You learn to ride today."

"If you make me ride a horse, darlin'," Dorothy slowly pointed out, stepping so close to her husband, her skirts swayed against his legs. "I'd get all sore."

Doc pulled up straight. "A touch of liniment would take care of that."

"Liniment?" Dorothy managed a delicate shudder while her fingers toyed with the buttons on Doc's plain white shirt. "You surely wouldn't want me to put that awful, burning stuff on my...limbs, would you?"

Doc was not so easily swayed. "Plenty of folk use the stuff."

Dorothy smoothed his hair. The hint of daylight between their bodies winked out as she leaned her chest into his. "Even if you rubbed it on yourself, I'm sure I wouldn't be good for anything for a week." Her fingers slipped between the buttons of his lapel. "Why, I'd probably be so uncomfortable, I'd have to make up a bed in the parlor, just so you could get some rest."

"All right." Doc cleared his throat, caught Dorothy's hand in his and stepped back. "Maybe you don't have to start today."

Mara noted he didn't let go of Dorothy's hand, she also noted Dorothy didn't seem in any hurry for him to do so. Instead, she smiled. Her eyes crinkled at the corners as she kissed his cheek, "Thank you."

"Don't get too excited," Doc warned. He put his hands on his hips, but Mara could tell the fight had gone out of him. "There's always tomorrow."

Stepping up against his chest, Dorothy cupped his face in her hands and delivered a lingering kiss to his mouth. "You're so good to me," she whispered against his lips. Mara watched, fascinated despite herself. She'd never seen two people so obviously in love. When Dorothy stepped back, Doc leaned forward, prolonging the kiss.

The room suddenly seemed too small. Cougar too close. She took a slow breath and concentrated on counting the tiny flowers in one of the quilt blocks. The floorboards creaked and she saw Dorothy's skirts swish out the door.

"Give me a half hour and I'll have breakfast on the table," Dorothy called over her shoulder.

Doc stared after his wife. His hands clutched his worn black hat against his chest. A soft smile curved his formerly angry mouth.

"It's easy to see why Dorothy was considered the belle of Charleston," Cougar drawled.

"Yes." Doc straightened his hat and slapped it against his thigh. "And one of these days, she's not going to be able to distract me so easily with that sweet-talking trick of hers."

"Just give it another twenty years, Doc," Cougar said grabbing his clothes off the chair. "You'll eventually work up to immunity."

"Not so sure I want to, son." Doc seemed to notice Cougar's attire for the first time. His hands landed back on his hips. A jerk of his chin indicated his son's state of undress. "Any particular reason you've taken to wearing the bed linens?"

From where she sat, Mara had an excellent view of Cougar's back. The muscles over his shoulder blades tensed, causing the scar on the left one to bunch. Fascinating.

"Yeah," Cougar drawled.

"And while we're on the subject," Doc continued with easygoing relentlessness. "What exactly are you doing in such a state in the bedroom of a young lady under my protection?"

Mara wanted to hear the answer to that question herself.

"It's not what you think," Cougar hedged.

"Uh-huh."

"For Gods sake, Doc. I'm a grown man."

"Who is, at present, under my roof in extremely questionable circumstances."

"We're getting married," Cougar bit off quickly.

"Oh no, we're not!" Mara countered just as quickly. She struggled to get into a sitting position. If it was the last thing she did, someone was going to listen to her.

"Don't get your feathers in an uproar, missy," Doc said, stepping around Cougar, placing his hand on Mara's shoulder and pressing her back against the mattress. "I've got a fair idea what's going on here."

"Nothing's going on that shouldn't," Cougar muttered, turning to face Doc.

"Uh-huh." Doc was only half Cougar's size. The only comparison that came to Mara's mind was a banty rooster facing down a mountain lion, but it was clear who was in charge by the censure in Doc's tone, and the deference in Cougar's posture.

"You trying to tell me, son," the older man asked, "that you didn't mean for us to come back and find you in a rather compromising position?"

"Well..."

"A simple yes or no will do."

"For heaven's sake, Doc. The woman's in no condition for tomfoolery!"

"That wasn't what I asked you." Doc took his hand off Mara's shoulder to place it back on his hip. "Did you or did you not arrange for your mother, the Reverend Swanson, and myself to come back and find you and Miss Kincaid in a compromising position?"

Mara shot Doc a horrified look. They'd brought a Reverend back with them?

"The woman won't listen to reason," Cougar offered his father by way of explanation.

"So you thought to force the issue." Doc shook his head. "There are some traits, son, I wish you hadn't picked up from your mother."

Cougar threw up his hands. "What would you have me do?"

His quilt slipped, following the sweep of chiseled muscle across his abdomen, sliding down over his hipbones and revealing a lightly furred expanse before his desperate grab preserved his decency. He looked impossibly huge and male as he asked, "Send her back to that hellhole?"

Doc shook his head. "No one wants that." He eyed Cougar's covering. "Before you slip totally into decadence, I suggest you retire to another room and get dressed."

Cougar seemed loath to leave on such a note. "She's going to marry me, Doc."

Before Doc could argue the point, a tall blond man stepped into the doorway. As he leaned against the doorjamb he said, "Cougar's got a point, Doc. Even if we don't say a word about last night—"

"Nothing happened last night!" Mara pointed out again.

All she got for her vehemence was a patient nod from the man before he continued, "The story of what happened at Cecile's is all over the territory. Everyone in Cattle Crossing knows she left with Cougar and didn't come back. It won't take long for the story to spread to Cheyenne. Without the protection of a man's name..." He shook his head, his doubt clear. He shrugged. "And even married, I'm not sure."

"No one will dare touch her once she has the protection of my name," Cougar stated with complete assurance.

As if Cougar didn't exist, the blond man tipped his hat at Mara. "I'm Reverend Brad Swanson, Ma'am."

She was now having formal introductions in the bedroom. The morning was getting even more bizarre, Mara decided as she nodded back. "Mara Kincaid."

"Soon to be McKinnely," Cougar inserted.

Mara rolled her eyes. "Your saying it won't make it happen. I'm not marrying anyone."

The Reverend sighed. "Well, there goes my second solution."

Doc looked at the man in surprise. "You planning on casting your hat into the ring, Swanson?"

Mara stared at the Reverend in shock as he shrugged. "From what Dorothy's told me, Miss Kincaid is a brave, honorable woman. With your permission, I'd like to pay her court to see if we'd suit."

"She's not for you." Cougar stepped into Mara's line of sight. It was both a protective and a possessive gesture.

The Reverend circumvented him simply by stepping to the left. The smile he tossed Cougar was congenial. "That's not for you to say."

Cougar took another step toward the Reverend. His bare feet made no noise as he crossed the floor. "The hell it isn't."

The Reverend's smile broadened to a taunt as he drew up from the door. Mara realized he was roughly Cougar's age and size as he returned just as congenially, "The hell it is."

"In case anybody is interested," Mara interjected dryly from her bed. "You're arguing over nothing."

"You heard the woman." Doc stepped between the two giants and thumped them on the chest with the palms of his hands. "As neither one of you is impressing the heck out of our guest, why don't you hightail it out of here so I can examine her?"

The Reverend nodded to Mara. "Miss Kincaid. I hope to have the pleasure of your company at breakfast."

Mara could feel the beginnings of a headache starting. And her stomach was churning again. She pinched the bridge of her nose between her forefinger and thumb and pressed her hand against her abdomen "At the moment, I'm not entertaining breakfast invitations."

And she wouldn't ever be, as long as he had anything to say about it, Cougar decided. "Find your own woman, Reverend."

"What makes you think I haven't already done so?" Reverend Swanson asked, cocking his eyebrow at Cougar in a manner that made Cougar set his teeth against a growl. Brad caught Mara's hand in his.

"You can call me Brad."

Cougar saw the tug Mara gave her hand. He saw Brad's fingers tighten imperceptibly. Saw the slow smile spread across his face as he added in a voice as smooth as cream, "And maybe put me on your dance card at next month's social?"

The man was openly flirting. With his woman. Something wild and savage rose in Cougar, like when he was a kid and he'd managed to scavenge something decent to eat after days of nothing but hunger pangs. It increased when he saw Mara's chin come up and heard the slight hitch in her breath. Swanson's flirting was scaring her.

Cougar knocked Swanson's arm aside. "Get your hands off her."

"I was only..."

Cougar stepped back and to the side until he was between Swanson and Mara. "You've said all you're going to."

"The hell you say!" Brad growled.

"Nice talk for a Reverend," Cougar mocked, shielding Mara with his body, tamping down his unreasoning anger.

"Big talk for a gunslinger," Swanson retaliated.

"Lawman," Cougar corrected.

"Seems to me there's a mighty fine line between the two."

"Not for me."

"That's enough out of both of you." Doc countered in his harsh growl. He shook his head. "Like two tomcats on the prowl." He pushed Cougar aside. "If Miss Kincaid had any sense, she wouldn't entertain the thought of either of you."

"I'm not."

Cougar kept Mara in his side vision while he kept Brad in front of him. "You are," he tossed over his shoulder.

She carefully folded her arms across her chest. "Not."

Doc's elbow in his gut shut Cougar up. He settled for hitching up his quilt and glaring at Brad who bared his teeth at him.

"Let's take a look at that cut, eh Mara?" Doc said, as he tilted her head forward. Her long hair fell over her shoulder and spilled onto the white sheets, as Doc pressed her chin to her chest. "And you pay no mind to those two yahoos," he glanced up from inspecting Mara's stitches. "They're going out to see if Dorothy needs any help before breakfast."

The look in Doc's eyes brooked no refusal. Swanson left the room, but Cougar wasn't going anywhere. "How's it look?"

"Didn't I tell you to leave?" Doc asked.

"Yeah." The pants draped over Cougar's arm swung out as he indicated the cut Doc had stitched. "How's it look?"

"No sign of infection." Doc sat on the edge of the bed and held his finger in front of Mara's face. "Follow my finger now without moving your head."

Cougar had to duck down to see over Doc's shoulder how her eyes were tracking.

He stopped when he realized both Doc and Mara were staring at him.

"You're blocking my light," Doc snapped.

"Sorry."

"That line would be more believable if you looked it," Doc rasped. "Why don't you get out of here and find a way to make yourself useful?"

Mara shot Cougar a smile so sweet, his back teeth ached as she suggested, "Like digging out the privy?"

Cougar shot her an equally sweet smile. "We have a water closet. No digging necessary."

"Too bad."

"Not really," Cougar argued. "This way, we've got plenty of time to talk."

"We don't have anything to talk about."

"See. Right there is one of the things needing discussing."

Doc stood and Cougar had an unhampered view of Mara's expression. About the only thing she looked ready to discuss was his castration.

Doc cleared his throat. Cougar glanced down. Doc looked pointedly at the clothes in Cougar's hand. "I'd suggest you put those on, son, before you plead your case. Women tend to pay more heed to a man when he at least pretends to be civilized."

Cougar felt that slow creep of heat up his neck as Doc turned to leave the room. Damn! The man could reduce him to the age of knee pants and hard candy with just a few chosen words.

"You've got five minutes," Doc warned as he left the room.

Cougar closed the door and turned around. Mara was leaning against the headboard, her arms wrapped around her middle, her mouth set in lines of resignation. From the way she stared sightlessly at the far wall, he knew it wasn't the cabbage rose print paper that had her attention. Bottom line, she couldn't have been further away from him than if a canyon yawned between. Suddenly, his dismissal of Doc seemed the height of stupidity. He'd never been long on words and now he'd set himself up to talk a woman round to reason?

He dragged his shirt on, not bothering with the buttons as he stared at Mara, debating his best approach. As he stared, the sleeve of the gown did a slow slide off her shoulder. Every inch of flesh it exposed heightened the image of fragility.

She looked so damned defenseless in the oversized thing that he had the sudden urge to sweep her up and carry her high into the mountains where no other man could find her. Especially that sweet-talking, no-holier-than-he-had-to-be Reverend.

Beneath the quilt, he pulled on his buckskin pants. He tossed the bulky lump of quilt onto the foot of the bed when he was done. Not by a blink of an eyelid did Mara let on that she'd noticed the movement or even that he was still in the room. He ran his hands through his hair. His finger snagged on a snarl. He tugged it out and took two steps to the bed. One of his five minutes was already gone and he hadn't accomplished anything more than establishing he didn't know a darned thing about women. After debating the merits of standing or sitting, he opted for the side of the bed as his perch.

"You ready to talk yet?" he asked and immediately winced. It wasn't the best of opening gambits. He braced himself for her retort, the perverse part of him actually anticipating it. He knew from the last two months that Mara had a wicked sense of humor and a sharp tongue. He'd grown fond of seeing her in action.

The one thing he hadn't expected was for her not to react at all. Instead of coming at him, she just sat as she was, pretending he didn't exist. She looked so alone. Almost lost.

The lace window curtains fluttered as a breeze wandered through. A strand of hair blew across her cheek. He brushed it away. It seemed natural from there to let his hand slide down, to follow the bend of her shoulder until it slid over the soft cotton of her nightdress and down over her back. He might have imagined she leaned toward him. Then again, he might not have because when he tested his theory by tugging, she put up no resistance.

He drew her across the mattress until she rested against his chest. The silky swathe of her hair intertwined with the curling hair on his chest. It tickled. He moved the strands aside, before rubbing his hands up and down her arms, the calluses on his palms dragging on the goose bumps she couldn't hide.

"Are you going to talk to me, Angel?"

There was a long silence. She took a deep breath. He waited. It shuddered back out. She took another deep breath. Again he waited. This time, he wasn't disappointed. She didn't look at him, but she at least found her voice.

"You aren't going away, are you?" she whispered.

"No."

She seemed to take that hard, the little starch left in her backbone leaking out.

"The others won't go away either, will they?"

"What others?"

"The others out there."

He assumed she didn't mean just the Reverend by the all inclusive gesture she made.

"You want the truth or a lie dressed up pretty?"

She sat up, pushing slightly away from him. "Start with the lie."

His bark of laughter took him by surprise. "You serious?"

Her sigh pushed his hand on her back against the headboard.

"No. I don't need to hear a lie."

"You ready to accept you need to marry me?"

"No."

"No?"

She shook her head, "I don't want to marry anyone."

"You can't go on as you are."

"I know."

"In that case," he pressed, "you need to marry. Once you have the protection of my name, no man would dare even look at you crosswise."

It must be nice to possess that much self-confidence, Mara thought. To be so convinced the world held you in such awe and respect that they wouldn't dare say you nay. Her confidence had taken quite a beating lately. There had been a time when she'd thought herself invulnerable, but that illusion had been ruthlessly ripped from her. She sighed. "I need to think on this."

"What's there to think about?"

"Not much," Mara acknowledged as Cougar's hand slid whisper soft down her spine. "There's no going back is there?"

That was hard to accept, that she had no choice but to go forward. That what she had been was gone. That this was all that was left, and on this she had to base her choices. "Even if I could go back home, it wouldn't be the same, would it?"

Cougar's sigh ruffled the hair on the top of her head.

"No."

She reached up to smooth the hairs flat, bumped her fingers on the prickly beard on his chin, and quickly dropped her hand back to her lap. "It isn't fair."

"Life seldom is."

That was the truth. She thought of her alternatives and knew they were few. She didn't kid herself. In the time it took to spit, the story of where she'd spent the night would be added to her reputation. Every male around would consider her fair game from here on out. While she could hold off a few, the ones with scruples, there were enough men like the one yesterday who would succeed. She shuddered at the thought.

Mara dropped her gaze to the quilt. The stitches binding the squares were so tiny and intricate. Strong despite their size. Put into the quilt one at a time, with thought and precision. The way she wanted to rebuild her life.

She took a breath to steady her nerves before asking, "You really want to marry me?"

"Yes."

The matter-of-factness of his reply when she'd been expecting vehemence startled her into looking up. His gaze was steady. Confident. Sincere.

"What kind of marriage do you think this will be?"

"The best I can make it."

It wasn't lost on her that he didn't think he required her cooperation. "Would you be willing to forego..." How did one address these things? He took the matter out of her hands.

"You wanting to know if I'll stay out of your bed?"

She couldn't look at him. "Yes."

"No."

That was blunt. She risked a quick glance at his face and immediately dropped her gaze back to the quilt. His expression had been hard. Resolute. Not open for negotiations but she had to try. "Maybe just until we get to know one another?"

"No."

"Well, why not? Surely you see the sense in getting to know one another."

The slight shift of his head sent his thick black hair sliding over his shoulder. "We'll either start as we mean to go on or we won't start at all."

Which left her between a rock and a hard place. He was the devil she knew, but he was a hard, dangerous, uncompromising man. To the point that she wasn't sure she'd ever be able to hold her own with him. But he was an honest man, not given to games. She'd always know where she stood with him. That counted for a lot. She just wasn't sure it was enough.

"You trying to figure out what I'll be like in bed?" he asked.

Shock brought her gaze flying to his. She was half hoping to find a joke lurking in the golden depths, but there was only a steady regard. For the life of her, she didn't know what to answer. She settled for "I hadn't gotten that far."

"I won't hurt you."

"Thank you."

He leaned back as if trying to get a glance at her expression. She tucked her chin tighter. He erased her efforts by the simple act of sliding his hand around the base of her neck. His thumb under her chin brought her face up and her eyes with it.

"If you agree to marry me, there won't be any hiding or any games." His face, along with his voice was serious, but there was an underlying steadiness that told her he wasn't boasting but making her a promise. "From the moment you say yes, you'll sleep in my bed, accept my touch, accept me into your body, and share my life."

"And in return?"

"In return, you get my promise that I'll do my best to make you happy, and that no one will ever hurt you again." His thumb slid back and forth under her chin almost like a caress. "Anyone wanting to get to you or our children will have to go through me and, Angel, for all my flaws, I'm not an easy man to take down."

That Mara could believe. She closed her eyes, swallowed and then asked what she was afraid of most. "What if I can't?"

"Can't what?"

"Accept your touch?"

The finger under her chin paused. Her heart beat in her ears as that thumb pressed up and over. As her head tilted, he said, "Let's find out."

He was going to kiss her. She froze, the old terror beating at her sanity.

"Steady," he whispered just before his long black hair fell like a silk curtain between her and the light. She closed her eyes and clenched her fists, but held still.

His lips were dry and firm as they touched hers. He pressed lightly. Once. Twice. She didn't breathe until he pulled a fraction back after the third. Her gasp for air was loud in the room.

"Open your eyes."

It was impossibly hard to do with his hand holding her head, his scent surrounding her, his face just inches from hers. She felt trapped, overwhelmed.

"Open them." Somehow, his insistence made it easier to obey.

The light was behind him so she couldn't make out much beyond the slant of his cheekbones and the darkness of his eyes. "I want you to keep your eyes open while I kiss you."

"Why?"

"I want you to know who's kissing you."

"Oh." He stared at her a long moment. What did he want her to say?

His thumb slid over her chin. It came to rest against her bottom lip. His thumb was much rougher than his lips. Harder, too. He pulled down, sliding his thumb in until it rested against the barrier of her teeth and was cushioned on the moist inner lining of her lip. There was the kiss of cool air and then he was bending his head again. Light disappeared and something hot and moist traced around his thumb. Lightly. Ever so lightly it almost tickled. She tried to pull away.

His hand tightened on the back of her neck. His hair brushed her cheek as he shook his head. "Uh-uh."

"But," her lips closed over his thumb with the word. It felt strange.

"You accept my touch however I want it. That's the deal."

Technically, he was expanding on the deal, but since this was awkward but not sinister, she held her tongue. As curious as he, as to how much she could take.

This time, when he bent his head, she forced herself to relax.

When he stroked her lips with his tongue, she was better prepared. She didn't jump. She leaned back into his hand and let him take charge. She took his low hum as approval. She closed her eyes.

"Keep them open."

Startled, she jumped, rapping his thumbnail on her teeth. He withdrew his thumb.

"Why? I can't see anything."

"I told you why."

So he had. She sighed, but this time kept her eyes open as he pressed his mouth to hers. His tongue traced her lips, teasing and flirting with the slit. More of those tickling sensations had her lips twitching and her hands coming up to rest on his shoulders. Even through his shirt, he was warm. She curled her fingers into the muscle. There was no give. Just hard solid man beneath her touch.

As if he sensed the tension creeping into her thoughts, he whispered, "Relax, I've got you."

And he did, but not in a way that terrified. He was in control. She could see it in his eyes. Feel it in his touch. She relaxed a little more, allowing him to guide her in this. Feeling a burgeoning curiosity where she'd expected revulsion. Interest, where she'd expected fear.

His tongue slid past the seal of her lips and brushed the lining of her upper lip. A shock of pure sensation shot through her body. Her nails pressed into his shoulder as she struggled to make sense of it.

He caught her lower lip and sucked it into his mouth, slowly releasing it, letting it slide between his teeth as it sprang back into place. He absorbed her shiver into his big frame, holding her a little closer as she tried to make sense of the feeling gliding through her, giving her time to adjust.

While her lips were still tingling, he said, "Open your mouth."

"Why?"

Before her lips could close, his mouth was on hers, his teeth against hers, his tongue between her teeth stroking hers. It was strange, foreign, and mildly alarming.

She held perfectly still as he plundered her mouth. Not breathing, not doing anything, not sure she should be doing anything. Uncertainty gnawed at her control. His big hand slid down her chest, cupping her breast. Memories roared. She couldn't help bracing against him.

"Steady," he murmured into her mouth. "Just relax into my hand."

She gathered the last of her courage and gave herself to him. His thumb drew slowly across her nipple, pushing her control. It was now or never to protest. It took everything she had, but she didn't move, didn't jerk away. She put her faith in him, his promise, and held on.

And it got better. The uncertainty remained, but the fear receded. She was able to stay still beneath him, feeling his finger stroke her nipple, feeling fleeting shivers of something radiate out from his touch, and then, when her lungs burned with the need to draw a breath and her fingers ached from their grip on his shoulders, he pulled back. "Breathe."

She did, hard shuddering breaths that hurt as much as they relieved. It was only as her breath stabilized that she realized she was still staring into his eyes and he didn't look displeased.

His thumb stole over her lips, smoothing the moisture from the corners. "I'm satisfied."

He was satisfied. The unspoken question of whether she was, hung between them. She had to make a decision. Cougar or one of a hundred other men. She looked out the window, beyond the trees, to where the frothy clouds shifted and regrouped as the winds tossed them this way and that. They made the best of what they had, and they endured. She could do no less.

She brought her gaze back to his, studying every nuance of his expression as she asked, "If I'm with child, do you promise to love him or her as your own?"

"Yes."

"Even if the baby doesn't look like you?"

His hand dropped to her stomach. His eyes didn't flinch from hers. "Any child of your body is mine in my heart and in my mind. Anyone who implies differently will have to deal with me."

"You promise?"

"I promise."

She'd never find a better hedge against future harm. The day Cougar McKinnely broke his word would be the day they'd be making snowballs in Hell.

Feeling like she was stepping off a cliff she said, "I'll marry you."

Three little words and Mara sealed her fate. Outside, the birds still sang their happy songs, and the sun still hung yellow and bright in the morning sky. It was only she who felt changed forever.

* * * * *

"Well, young lady," Doc said a half hour later, straightening Mara's nightgown. "I'd say you're well on the road to recovery."

"Thank you." It was all she could do to squeak out the one syllable. She'd never been so embarrassed in her life as when Doc had lifted her clothes to look at her ribs. She felt the bed shift as Doc stood. The quilt settled lightly over her chest.

"You can open your eyes now."

She shook her head, keeping them tightly closed. "I'd rather wait until you leave the room."

"I don't know whether this will reassure you or not, but I haven't lost a single patient to embarrassment yet."

She could tell from the tone of his raspy voice, Doc was smiling. "I might just be your first."

"Nah. Heidi Bickle was seven shades redder than you when I examined her during her first pregnancy."

She cracked her right eye, just wide enough to see Doc's ear-to-ear grin. "I take it she didn't just poof off in an embarrassed rush to see her maker?"

"Far from it. She gave birth to her seventh child last month."

Mara cracked her left eye and studied her tormentor. "You're not going away, are you?"

"Nope."

"Rats."

"Lots of folk feel that way." Doc took the ladder-back chair from against the wall and set it perpendicular to the bed. His knees cracked as he sat in it. He rubbed the left one, as he said, "Getting on in years."

Mara smiled and levered herself carefully up against the pillows. "Not that I can tell."

He smiled, reaching for his pipe. "Ah, a diplomat."

"I'm trying to get out of any future examinations."

Doc poured tobacco from a pouch into his pipe. With his forefinger, he tapped the mixture down. "I've still got to take the stitches out of your head in a week."

"Can't I do it myself?"

"Only if you're double-jointed."

"That's a no, right?"

He smiled around the pipe stem. "That's a no." His left eyebrow arched in her direction. "Mind if I smoke?"

What was she supposed to say? It was his house. "No."

The sound of the match rasping against his boot was loud in the silence. The smell of spice and tobacco filtered through the room as Doc puffed three times before pointing the stem in her direction.

"You agreed to marry the boy."

"Yes."

"Of your own free will?" The chair creaked as he shifted his weight.

"Yes."

Doc put the pipe back in his mouth. "Tough decision?"

She grimaced. "Very."

"He point you out any options?" he asked around the stem, one bushy eyebrow raised in a way that made her think of his son.

"No."

That inspired a smile. "Didn't think so."

"You find that amusing?"

"Yup." He blew another smoke ring toward the ceiling. "You'd think so too if you knew Cougar the way I do. The boy's got a fair streak a mile long and six deep."

Mara watched the ring drift in an ever widening circle toward the whitewashed ceiling until it disintegrated into nothingness, and said nothing.

"You don't believe me," Doc asked.

"Not really."

"Can't say that I'm surprised, but when you're ready, you'll see signs."

"I'll take your word for it."

He chuckled. "For now, I guess you'll have to."

Mara stared at him, the way he seemed so comfortable sitting in that chair, as if he had nothing better to do with his time than to while away the hours, blowing smoke rings and telling tales. She didn't believe it for a moment.

"Did you want to talk to me about something?"

"As a matter of fact, I do." He rocked the chair back onto two legs. "You don't have to marry Cougar."

He could have knocked her over with a feather. "What?"

Doc smiled gently around the pipe he had clenched in his teeth. "You have options, Mara, whether Cougar felt obliged to offer them or not."

Mara pushed her hair off her face and grimaced. "I don't particularly want to marry the Reverend either."

Doc chuckled and crossed his ankle over his knee. "I can see the wisdom of sticking with the devil you know, but marrying Swanson wasn't what I had in mind."

A flutter of hope made itself known in her chest. "Just what did you have in mind?" she asked cautiously.

"You are more than welcome to stay here with Dorothy and me."

She didn't realize she'd been holding her breath until she let it out on a disappointed sigh. "I overheard Dorothy say my only option was to marry."

"I've no doubt you did," Doc shrugged, "but there are a couple of things you've got to understand about my wife. She's a good woman, but it fair grates her nature to see young folk walking around unhitched. The other thing is, she dotes on Cougar."

"And what Cougar wants, she does her best to see he gets?" Mara asked, unable to keep the resentment out of her voice.

Instead of taking offense, Doc laughed outright. "Not quite."

He blew another smoke ring, this one not so perfect due to the smile tugging at his lips. "A couple of years ago, Cougar went and got engaged to a young woman named Emily Carmichael."

"No doubt a totally respectable woman."

"That's about all she had going for her," Doc said, surprising her. "I thought Dorothy was going to bring down the roof when Cougar announced his intentions."

"What did she have against her? Didn't she come from a good family?"

"Yes."

Recognizing a cue when she heard one, Mara asked, "Then what was the problem?"

"The woman was about as useful as dandelion fluff, and, Lord, could she whine."

"Whine?"

"She whined if Cougar was late to pick her up. She whined when he messed her hair. She whined if it was too hot, too cold. Hell, the woman whined even if it was just right."

"You didn't like her either."

"Nope." Doc's teeth clenched around his pipe stem before he uncrossed his legs. His boot made a soft thump as it landed on the floor. "The more I got to know her, the more she wore on me. I think she wore on Cougar too. If his honor hadn't been involved, I think Cougar would have been out of the engagement three months after he got into it."

"People break engagements all the time. My mamma was engaged twice before she married my father."

"Maybe it's different for a woman. Maybe it's how the boy grew up, but honor is everything to Cougar. Once he gives his word, he'd rather die than break it."

That was good to know seeing as how she'd gambled her future on Cougar's word. "Cougar mentioned Emily died a year ago?"

Doc took a puff on his pipe, grimaced, and set it on the bed stand. "Gone out," he offered by way of explanation. The chair creaked as he settled back in it. "The girl died last year in a flash flood."

"How terrible!"

Doc ran his hands over his hair. "To my way of thinking, the terrible part is, she didn't need to die at all."

"I'm sure she couldn't help a flood."

He sighed, ran his hands over his hair again and then finally said, "I shouldn't speak ill of the dead, but if the woman wouldn't have been so worried about getting her new dress wet, she needn't have died at all. And I wouldn't have come within inches of losing my son!"

His vehemence took Mara by surprise. It must have shown on her face because Doc waved his hand in her direction. "Forgive me. There was no reason to go on about that just to explain why Dorothy wants you for Cougar. Not when the answer is so clear."

Mara raised her eyebrows. "It is?"

"Yup." Doc rolled to his feet. "Dorothy believes you've got the guts it'll take to make Cougar's dreams come true."

"And you don't agree."

Doc turned to her in surprise. "Oh, I agree. I just don't like to see anybody railroaded into anything."

Mara smiled. "You're a nice man."

"Well, I expect you won't have to go far to find someone to tell you different." His grin defied the statement. "Still, you keep in mind that you're welcome to stay with Dorothy and me. No matter how that ruffles folks' feathers."

By folks, she assumed he meant Dorothy and Cougar.

"Thank you. You don't know how much that means to me."

He nodded and headed for the door.

His "I expect I do," lit a warm ember in the chill of her despair, but despite Doc's offer, she knew she had to marry. To take him up on his offer would only delay the inevitable and bring shame and ostracism to the only people who'd ever shown her kindness. And that she simply would not do.

Chapter Eight

What she would apparently do was sit still while Cougar gathered everyone around for a hasty wedding that seemed as unreal as her agreement to marry him in the first place. She sat in the bed while he stood, his only compromise to her insistence that she be upright. In her hands, she held the bouquet of roses he'd handed her. All she'd had time to do with her hair was run a quick brush through it, because when Dorothy suggested they put it up, Cougar had turned those intense eyes on her and said, "No." Dorothy had been upset, but he had stated in the low drawl that brooked no argument that she was beautiful the way she was, and had gone out to get the flowers.

So, now she sat in bed, her groom on her left side, Doc and Dorothy on the right and the Reverend Swanson at the foot, bible in hand, and she was getting married. This was not how she'd pictured her wedding.

To Cougar McKinnely, of all people.

He said his vows, steady and sure. No doubt in his voice, and if it'd made sense, she would have said satisfaction in his gaze as he glanced at her. When the Reverend came to the part in the ceremony where rings were to be exchanged, he stumbled to a halt, his glance flicking between Cougar and Mara.

"We can just skip that part."

Her objection was overridden.

"No." Cougar caught her hand in his. His skin was warm and hard under her palm. She looked down as he slipped a gold band on her finger. It was smooth and heavy and glowed softly against the backdrop of his dark skin. There were intricate carvings across the band that rubbed against the inside of her fingers as he closed his fingers around hers.

Dorothy leaned over and the small frown that had been pleating her brow, dissolved. "Your mother's ring?"

Cougar tightened his fingers over Mara's. "Yes."

She had the crazy desire to rip it off. She couldn't live up to the expectations that came with a man giving his bride his mother's ring, but another hand came over her free one. She glanced up to see Doc looking at her, his gaze understanding. Doc squeezed her hand.

"It's a good beginning," was all he said.

* * * * *

And it seemed to be. While her wedding breakfast took place in the same small bedroom as her wedding, the tension had been replaced with good-natured teasing. It was almost as if an exchange of "I do's" had rewritten the past, erasing the bitterness and recriminations and replacing them with hope and potential. She shook her head in wonder, and made a grab for her plate, which Cougar had displaced when he'd opted for the bed as his seat.

"Sorry about that." He checked the tilt of his own plate as warm syrup made a beeline for the edge. "Dorothy would probably have my head if I got this load on her best quilt."

"Not only your head," Dorothy corrected, "but a few more vital parts too."

"Ouch." Brad Swanson mouthed around a bite of blueberry pancake. Mara stared at the man. She'd been doing it a lot for the last hour. She simply couldn't connect someone as young and handsome as he with the church.

A whisper that could be likened to a growl came from Cougar, "He snores."

"So do you, I imagine." Mara settled her napkin in her lap. "Is he really a Reverend?"

"Yes." Cougar sent the man a glance that should have had Brad choking on his next mouthful. "He's a Reverend, for all he sometimes forgets."

"He seemed competent enough when he married us." She couldn't decide whether that was a blessing or a sin.

Cougar took a vicious bite of pancake. "If you're staring at the man because you're wondering if we are really husband and wife – we are."

Obviously, the Reverend Swanson was a touchy subject with her husband. "Actually," she admitted, "I've been trying to reconcile in my mind that someone that good-looking could be a man of God."

Cougar's knife clattered on his china plate, cutting through the joking going on about them.

"He's not that good-looking," he hissed.

In the sudden silence, his words were clear to all.

"Who's not that good-looking?" Doc asked.

"No one," Cougar growled.

"Nothing," Mara muttered, no more pleased than Cougar to have her comment overheard.

Brad Swanson smiled around his cup of coffee. "Must be talking about me."

"Figures you'd assume we were talking about you," Cougar said.

Brad held up a hand to ward off the insult. "Hey, it was an easy deduction. Especially when you take into account the way Mara was glowering at you when she said it."

Doc cleared his throat and ran his hand over his hair. "Appears to me, Mara could've had someone else entirely in mind when she brought up the subject of good-looking men."

His lips were twitching before he finished the comment.

Cougar leapt onto the opening. "Heck, Doc. For Mara to call you good-looking, it would have had to have been her eyes that were damaged rather than her ribs."

"Either that or she's been chewing loco weed," Brad offered as he cut into his pancake.

"I'll have you know," Dorothy interrupted, "Doc has always stood out in the crowd."

"At least his hair," Cougar teased.

Doc did nothing to defend himself. He merely settled back on his chair, and calmly lit his pipe. His complacency surprised Mara almost as much as the small smile hovering around his lips. She followed his gaze to see it settle squarely on Dorothy as that woman set her empty plate on the floor with a decisive click.

"Doc is and always has been a man to set a woman's heart to fluttering." Dorothy got to her feet and jammed a hairpin back into her bun. "Every woman in Charleston was panting after him—"

"Sure they weren't panting from the fright he gave them?" Swanson interrupted.

The silence in the wake of his teasing was deafening.

In the seconds it took Dorothy to get around the bed to his side, the Reverend had time enough to realize he'd made a mistake. He had to know it for sure when Dorothy snatched his still full plate from his hand.

"Hey!"

Dorothy held the plate out of his reach. "Doc is a fine man."

"I never said he wasn't," the Reverend argued, a grin tilting his lips as he assessed Dorothy's reaction.

"Doc is a fine looking man."

The look the Reverend shot Doc was full of incredulity, but he covered it with a hasty, "Well, not being a woman, maybe I'm not qualified to judge."

"That may be so," Dorothy agreed. "But for having the poor taste to voice your opinion at my table, you may be excused from it."

"Ah, Dorothy," Brad groaned, making a halfhearted attempt for his breakfast. "Have a heart."

Dorothy whisked the plate behind her back. "I have a heart and it's belonged to Doc since I was eighteen years old." She took two steps backwards. The move brought the plate within touching distance of Cougar and Mara. The aroma of bacon, eggs and pancakes intensified.

Cougar reached out and snagged the meal, putting his empty plate on the floor. "No sense letting this go to waste."

"Hey!" Brad protested, reaching around Dorothy who stood as immobile as a rock, blocking his path. "That's mine!"

Cougar smiled as he bit through a piece of bacon. He waved the remaining bite in Dorothy's direction. "Not anymore."

"You can't let him have that!" Brad told Dorothy.

"Why not?" Dorothy asked. Though Mara couldn't see the woman's expression, she could hear the smile in her voice. If anyone had told her a year ago she'd be sitting in a bed surrounded by a family that spent more time teasing than fighting, she'd have said they were crazy, especially as in her experience, teasing led to violence, but no one here looked ready to battle, though there did appear to be some maneuvering going on.

Brad ran his fingers through his hair before pointing an exasperated finger at Cougar who was contentedly munching on a second piece of bacon. "Because he started it."

"He's right, Dorothy," Doc offered from his seat. The chair legs squeaked as he got to his feet. "And that being the case," he reached over and plucked the plate from Cougar's unsuspecting hands. "It appears these particular spoils belong to me."

"Hey!" Now it was Cougar's turn to protest and Brad's turn to be satisfied.

Doc shrugged and cut off a large chunk of pancake. "Don't know how many times I've told you, son," he pointed his fork at Cougar, "never start something you can't finish." A drop of syrup dripped off to land on the plate with silent punctuation.

Dorothy grinned over her shoulder at Mara. "Let this be a lesson to you in husband management, Mara. A woman doesn't need to scream to get her point across."

"I'll keep it in mind," Mara answered. As strange as it was to be in the midst of good-natured teasing, it felt good. Like there might be a part of herself she'd never explored.

Cougar shot his mother a disgruntled look. "These aren't the kinds of lessons I want you teaching my wife."

"And what exactly would you suggest I teach her?" Dorothy asked, going back to where she'd left her own plate.

Cougar ran his finger through a tiny puddle of syrup left in his plate. "How to cook like you might be a start."

"And be like every other mother-in-law in the territory?" Dorothy asked as she straightened, plate in hand. "I'd rather learn to ride astride." Which considering her distaste of horses, said a lot.

"And I'd rather know about husband management," Mara offered.

Cougar frowned at her as he sucked the syrup off his finger. "I don't think that's a subject you need to be studying."

She clenched her fingers on the plate on her lap. She thought he was joking, but she couldn't be sure. Doc's hoot coincided with Brad's guffaw, and Dorothy's snort. All three gave Mara the courage to go on.

"I disagree." She lowered her lashes as she'd seen Dorothy do. "I feel it's a subject I should devote a great deal of time to."

"Uh-huh." Cougar took her empty plate, leaving her fingers with nothing to clench around. She opened them flat on her thighs instead.

She felt extraordinarily brave as she said, "I'm glad you agree."

"That wasn't agreement," Cougar corrected dryly, his golden eyes meeting hers, the force of his personality hitting her anew.

"It wasn't disagreement, either," she said, keeping her voice even, fighting the instinct that screamed "back off". She'd sworn when she'd left Cecile's, she was never going to live to please someone again. All that had ever gotten her was abandoned, kidnapped and raped. She was a new person with a new plan. And that plan included standing up for herself.

"She's got you there," Brad offered as he took a sip of his coffee, the only thing remaining of his breakfast.

"Keep it up and you could lose that, too." With a jerk of his chin, Cougar indicated the coffee.

Brad shrugged, "Just trying to help."

Mara was quick with her "Thank you." Too quick for Cougar's peace of mind. He couldn't get it out of his head that she had been staring at the big blond. A bystander might say she was fascinated with the man.

"There's no reason to be thanking him," Cougar pointed out as reasonably as he could. "The only thing he's done this morning is insult Doc, and upset Dorothy."

"He took my side in a discussion," Mara corrected him, her eyes glittering briefly beneath her lashes. "Good manners dictate that I thank him."

"Seems to me you're forgetting something," Cougar countered.

Mara lifted her face to meet his gaze, her expression so serious, he knew it wasn't fake. "I don't think so."

"An hour ago," he pointed lazily at Brad, "the man took my side against yours."

"When did I do that?" Brad demanded.

Cougar gave him a smile that showed all of his teeth. "When you married her to me."

Dorothy snorted in disgust. "That was nothing more than good sense."

Doc took his unlit pipe out of his mouth and shook his head. "You disappoint me, son. That's a damned weak point to be making."

Cougar kept his gaze on Mara, watching all the emotions chasing across her face, not the least of which was resentment. He shrugged. "It was the best I could come up with."

"My point exactly," Doc rebutted. "The Reverend had no choice but to marry you two. Especially as Mara was all for the union."

"Yeah," Brad piped up. "I didn't have a choice. Things being the way —"

"He's right," Mara interrupted, still serious, as if she'd missed the underlying humor in the situation. It was almost as if she were feeling her way through the conversation. "I can hardly blame the man for doing something I asked him to do."

"Since when?" Cougar asked.

The look Mara gave him suggested he'd taken leave of his senses. "Since the beginning of time."

"May I remind you that you didn't ask him to marry us? That you thought him a lecher out to take advantage?"

"She what?" Brad asked.

"I did no such thing!" Mara sputtered.

She pushed herself higher on the pillows. The sheet fell to her lap. If he stared hard enough, Cougar could make out the gentle curve of her breasts. The outline became clearer when she took an outraged breath.

"I really didn't think you a lecher," Mara placated the Reverend. "I was a little surprised when you tried to touch me..."

"You acted like he planned on stripping you then and there," Cougar countered.

"I did not!"

"Did, too." Cougar reached down to retrieve his coffee cup from the floor. Something soft thumped him on the head. When he straightened, the pillow squashed around his face.

"Ignore him." He heard Doc order the Reverend. "He's just upset because you're better-looking."

"He is not!" Cougar didn't know if anyone heard his denial through the muffling pillow. He tugged at it, but Doc pressed harder.

"Before I answer that," the Reverend said, "I've got to ask Dorothy something."

"What?"

"Is Cougar off-limits?"

"Nope. I love him but he has a way of bringing things on himself."

Cougar frowned behind the pillow. His own mother taking sides with that no-account preacher. He grabbed the pillow, intending to yank it free.

Doc's "Hold this, Mara," and a lot less pressure on the pillow let him know Mara now held the pillow. He immediately gentled his intentions.

"In that case," Brad continued, the glee in his voice at being unleashed, audible through two inches of feather and ticking. "I've got to admit how a man of Cougar's puny attributes might feel uncomfortable when compared to other men."

Cougar reached around and caught Mara's wrist. When he pulled, she immediately gave ground. He jumped into the fray as soon as the path was clear, keeping his hand on her wrist. Her arm was so tense, he could feel tiny vibrations. "This from a man who needs a step stool to get knee-high to a grasshopper?"

"A step stool beats the heck out of a ten-rung ladder."

"You only wish it were the truth," Cougar rejoined. Mara tugged at her arm and he lowered his hand to the bright quilt, taking hers with his. A glance out of the corner of his eye revealed her discomfort. Did she think he would take offense?

"The same way you wish women gave you the looks they give me when I pass by?"

"Hell no!" He kept his eyes on Brad, but let his fingers stroke the soft skin of Mara's wrist. "Having women faint in horror when I pass isn't my idea of fun."

"Just goes to show you've been out in the territories too long when you mistake awe for horror."

"Just goes to show why you came out to the territories." Mara's arm jerked on the fourth pass. He tightened his grip but stopped stroking.

"I needed the rest from all those adoring women."

He put all the skepticism he could into his "Uh-huh. I'll bet you needed a rest. But it would be from all those outraged daddies bent on revenge for curling the hair on their daughter's heads." Beneath his index finger, he felt Mara's pulse jump. Did she think this was serious?

"Must be you misheard the rumors. It was their toes I curled, not their hair."

He glanced at Mara's face. The tension he could feel in her arm was clearly written in her expression. He glanced at Doc who was also watching Mara. He shook his head almost imperceptibly.

Doc cleared his throat. "Seeing as how we're venturing into impolite territory, I'll declare this round a draw." He stood, crossed the room, and kissed Dorothy. "Would you like some help with the dishes?"

"I would love some."

As soon as they left the room, breakfast plates in hand, Cougar tossed a taunt at Brad, but this time with a smile alongside. "Lucky break."

He wasn't surprised when the other man picked it up and tossed it right back with one of his own. "Lucky for you, you mean."

Cougar was about to rebut when Mara interrupted.

"You two are friends." She sounded surprised by the fact.

"You could say that," Brad agreed.

"He has his moments," Cougar offered grudgingly.

She huffed in response.

Cougar sipped his coffee, winced at its coldness, and then patted Mara consolingly on her knee. "Next time, you'll pick your allies better."

She pulled herself up with the dignity of a queen. "I have no idea what you mean."

"Sure you do." He grinned at her. "You meant to use Brad against me. A good strategy, but one you shouldn't use unless you're sure of his allegiance."

She crossed her arms over her chest. "Which is to you?"

"It's only fair. I saw him first." Feeling good, tempted by the way her gesture drew her gown tight across her nipples, he leaned forward and kissed her cheek. Her hastily expelled breath rushed by his cheek as he pulled back.

"The Reverend," she reminded him.

He touched the place where his lips had been. "That, Angel, was a consolation prize, and in no way could be misconstrued as anything else."

She didn't look convinced, but she didn't look ready to bolt either. He took that as a positive sign as he grabbed his makings off the bedstead.

"I hate to put an end to things, but I've got to be heading out," Brad interrupted.

"Baptism?" Cougar asked, shaking some tobacco onto a paper, while watching the way Mara's fingers replaced his over the spot he'd kissed.

Brad sighed, and shook his head. "Unfortunately, no. Old man Dillon passed on yesterday."

"Damn. I liked the old coot." He wet the paper, rolled the cigarette up tight, and twisted the ends.

"Just about everyone did. Ought to be quite a turnout for his funeral."

He put the cigarette between his lips, and as he struck the sulfur, asked, "You'll pass on my regrets and sympathy?"

Brad nodded, got up, and shook Cougar's hand. "Mabel will understand." He turned to Mara. "It was nice meeting you. I wish you the best in your marriage, and remember, if you get tired of this galoot, I'm around."

"Thank you."

She sounded entirely too relieved for Cougar's peace of mind. "She won't be tiring of anything."

He knew Brad wouldn't let the challenge pass. He took a drag, let the smoke soothe his rough edges and waited out the response.

"So you say but we all know your inflated opinion of your prowess."

"This from a man of God?" Smoke drifted with his question. "I could be grass-green and still have more to boast about than you."

Brad laughed, slapped him on the back, damned near knocking his smoke from his lips, and headed for the door. His hand was on the knob before he made his parting shot, "Unlike the Catholics, celibacy isn't a vow I'm forced to make."

"More's the pity," Cougar muttered as the door closed behind him. He took another drag, and turning, saw his wife sitting up in bed, blushing prettily. It took him a minute to figure out the source of that blush.

They were in a bedroom. She was his wife, and this was their wedding day. To make things even better, as Doc and Dorothy would be attending Dillon's funeral, they were alone with the whole day stretching before them—a big void crying out to be filled. He smiled around his cigarette. He could probably come up with a few things to do.

* * * * *

If anyone had told Mara she'd be spending her wedding day playing chess, she would have laughed in their face. She'd had plans for her wedding, big plans all of which involved a formal ceremony, a formal dress, and formal party afterwards. Everyone would be dressed up in their best clothes, properly polite and the closest she would have come to frivolity would have been tossing her bouquet. She would not have had nearly the fun she'd had today.

Who knew chess could be such an amusing battle of wits as well as intelligence? She hesitated, her fingers brushing the smooth wooden head of the exquisitely carved knight. Certainly not her.

"You could always move your queen to the left," Cougar offered the suggestion with the same helpful attitude with which he'd offered about twenty others.

"I can't believe you'd suggest anything so unscrupulous!" Mara exclaimed, pretending an outrage she didn't actually feel.

"Hey," Cougar threw up his hands in self-defense, looking as innocent as a lamb. "It was just a suggestion."

He wasn't fooling her for a minute. "Some suggestion. If I move my queen there, you'll have my king in check."

"I fail to see anything wrong with that."

She glared at him, trying to keep her lips from twitching. "Now, why doesn't that surprise me?"

"Maybe because I'm trying to win this game?"

She couldn't help it. She laughed out loud. The man was outrageous, pulling honesty out of thin air, just when it was guaranteed to tickle her funny bone.

"That could be it." She took his knight with her queen. "There. That ought to fix you," she said with a great deal of satisfaction. In three moves, she'd have him in checkmate.

"It does," he mourned. "It surely does."

His bishop flew across the board and wiped out her queen. "Check."

"Oh rats." She sat back against the pillows and surveyed the wreckage that had once been a carefully laid out attack. There had to be a way out of this. She caught her lip between her teeth as she worked on her options.

Cougar's finger coaxed her lip free. She'd long since given up jumping every time he touched her, just as she'd given up protesting. The man had been touching her pretty much incessantly for the last seven hours. Light, non-threatening, addictive touches that seemed as natural to him as laughing. Which had been another fragment of his personality she'd had to get used to. For such a dangerous looking man, with such a dangerous reputation, he was surprisingly fond of laughing.

She glared at him, seeing the sympathy in his eyes. "Don't say it," she warned.

"Say what?" The slight deepening of the crease beside his mouth alerted her to the smile he was suppressing.

"Whatever it is you're itching to say."

"Has anyone ever pointed out to you you're a poor loser?" he asked, cocking his head at her, the move causing his thick black hair to slide over his shoulder, throwing his high cheekbones and golden eyes into sharp relief.

Not for the first time, it struck her what an exotically handsome man Cougar was. She realized she was on the verge of staring and quickly replied, "No."

Curiosity replaced the sympathy in his eyes as he flicked the hair back. "Because you never lose?"

"Yes."

"Don't take offense, Angel, but your opponents must have been limited in their..."

"Intellect?" she supplied with a smile.

He shrugged. "In two moves, you'll be in checkmate. And I think I was leaning toward the term, 'ability'."

"Well, I only had one person to play with, so maybe I just got used to the way the game always went."

She moved her knight to block the check. Cougar took it with his rook.

"Who taught you to play?"

"I learned from a book." She moved her king, hoping to delay the inevitable.

Cougar paused, his hand hovering over his knight. "You taught yourself to play chess?"

"Don't sound so surprised. It's just a matter of learning the rules." She waved him on. "Who taught you?"

"Doc. And a damned wily player he is too, so don't get snookered into a game with him until you get more experience under your belt."

"I'll keep it in mind."

He placed his knight where he wanted it. "Checkmate."

She sighed, and studied the board. "Apparently so."

"Don't look so discouraged."

He stroked the curve of her cheek with his finger. She missed the warmth of his touch when he took his hand away. "As soon as you learn to pay a little more attention to your defense, we'll be evenly matched."

Her sigh escaped before she could catch it. "So you keep telling me."

"You are an impulsive little thing." He sounded very happy with the lack in her personality. She stared at him a good minute before she remembered what was making him so happy. "Oh darn."

"Uh-huh." His smile was pure anticipation and full of carnal intent. "It's time to pay up."

"You're not really going to hold me to that bet, are you?"

"To the letter," he said, removing the chessboard from between them. "As I recall, it was double or nothing, last count."

"But I didn't mean it!"

"Angel." He shook his head reprovably. "We shook on it."

"Only because you got me so mad, spouting all that nonsense about women being naturally less intelligent than men!"

He placed the chess set on the plank floor and cocked an eyebrow at her. "And who's the one on the losing end of a bet she wished she hadn't made?"

"I made that bet, as you darn well know, because I was sure I wouldn't lose." She straightened the sheet over her legs.

He smiled a wolfish smile that sent chills up her spine. "But you did lose and I am not about to let you welsh."

There seemed so much of him, leaning over her so quickly, she instinctively shrank back into the pillows propped behind her back.

"You, Mrs. McKinnely, owe me ten kisses."

Her response to that aura of power he emitted, annoyed her. She crossed her arms over her chest and put some steel into her spine. "I would rather have you do ten days of dishwashing."

"That's what comes of overconfidence." He brushed his lips across her forehead.

"That's one," she hastened to point out. She felt his smile against her hair.

"So it is." He kissed the end of her nose. "And that's two."

Her fists clenched at her side. The eight more to go loomed ominously in her mind. What if he went mad with lust before he collected all of the debt? Try as she might to stay calm, she couldn't control the shakiness of her breathing. He was so big and he could hurt her so much with so little effort. She closed her eyes and fought panic.

His third kiss landed on the back of her right hand. His fourth on the curve of her cheek. He pried open her fist to place the fifth in the hollow of her hand.

"That's five. Are you keeping count?" he asked, amusement lurking in his voice.

Her whispered "Yes," sounded smothered to her own ears. Lord knows what he made of it.

"Good." She felt his lips brush feather light across her left eyelid. "Count for me," he whispered.

She swallowed and managed a six. Another whisper of sensation, this time across her right eye. "Seven."

His finger skimmed her cheek and she jumped. "Steady," he coaxed as he snagged her chin in the curve of his thumb. His lips, warm and firm, touched hers. "Eight," she mumbled, doing her best not to increase the contact.

His laughter puffed against her mouth. He seemed to have none of her reluctance about touching as he pointed out, "It doesn't count until I take my lips away."

It felt strange, his mouth moving on hers as he spoke. Not unpleasant, not threatening, just strange.

"Oh."

He didn't say anything more, just pressed his lips to hers. Occasionally, he would move them differently, but mostly, he just left them connected to hers. She supposed she should feel threatened, but mostly, she just felt bored. "Are you done yet?"

She felt his lips purse and then spread in a smile before he moved a fraction away. "Go ahead."

"Eight."

The tension left her body with the word. Two more to go. Certainly nothing to get worked up about. Especially since the only thing she had to worry about was resisting the urge to yawn when he dragged it on too long.

"Put your hands on my shoulders."

She looked at him. There was nothing on his face to suggest he was up to anything. She stared him straight in the eye as she asked, "Is it necessary?"

He flicked her nose with his. "Yes."

What harm could it do? "Fine."

She placed her hands on his shoulders. The hard, broad curve of muscle forced her palms flat. She squeezed experimentally. There was no give. He was an incredibly strong man. Fear flared for a moment. She squashed it.

She'd picked this path for herself. Before God she'd made vows. He was her husband. She had no right to deny him anything. It said so in the Bible and in the law of the land. She closed her eyes, gave him her trust and tilted up her face.

Something warm and wet touched the corner of her mouth. *His tongue?* The resulting sensation jerked her back and curled her fingers into the flesh beneath them. Before she could decide whether she liked the streak of feeling or not, Cougar was asking, "How many?"

"Nine."

"One more to go." His drawl slid along her awareness. She kept her eyes closed and held her breath. She had no idea what he would do next, but if she had a choice between the boring kiss and the streaky kiss, she opted for the latter.

She felt him lean toward her. Her hands naturally slid down his back. His chest brushed hers as his breath touched her face. Her breath threatened to explode from her lungs, and still he held them so. She drew her fingers up his back in silent encouragement. Every fiber of her being strained to detect a sign of what he planned. Beyond a quiet "ah", he gave no indication.

Finally, when her nerves were stretched so tight, she was ready to scream, she felt that same moist attention to the other corner of her mouth. Only this time, it was more acute. She pulled Cougar closer, not wanting him to draw away before she understood the nature of the feeling.

He didn't. Instead, he did something more, something that drew out the pleasurable sensation. Something that made goose bumps chase down her arms and chest. Her "oh" of surprise mingled with his muffled exclamation as she jerked him closer in a reflexive response.

The tips of her breasts brushed his chest. The same sensation curling down from her mouth radiated outwards from their tips and a whole new set of goose bumps paraded across her skin.

Cougar pulled away. "How many?" he asked, his voice husky and deep.

"Ten."

The bed shifted as he got to his feet.

"Damn, that's a pretty sight."

Mara opened her eyes. She looked where he was looking, and saw the tents her nipples made against the white cotton of her nightgown.

"Oh God!" Why had she been cursed with such big nipples? She grabbed the sheet and pulled it over her head.

"It's all right, Mara." Through the sheet, she saw his shadowy form, standing by the bed. "I'm your husband."

"I have news for you, McKinnely. That does not make everything all right with me."

"A man could hope."

"And hell could freeze over," she rebutted. Because the sheet didn't seem thick enough to disguise them, she put her hands over the peaks of her breasts.

A narrow shadow stretched over her head. The sheet was snatched off her head and she was suddenly sitting exposed in the soft lamplight. It happened so fast, she could only blink at first, staring at Cougar whose gaze dropped to where her hands covered her breasts. His smile edged with something darker. He dragged the sheet down her body, exposing her nightgown and a good deal of thigh. Mara had to scramble to cover her knees and calves with her nightgown.

She moved too fast and her ribs protested. She had to stop with her left calf and foot still exposed. She leaned back against the headboard, holding her side, panting slightly.

Cougar's hand replaced hers just below her knee. His skin was dark against her white flesh, his hand massive compared to her small frame.

"Looks like Dorothy and Doc are staying in town for the night," he said, his calm drawl giving no indication that he saw the panic that raced through her with the statement.

It was their wedding night. They were alone. And her husband was standing by her bed with his hand on her leg. Mara took a deeper breath as the pain in her ribs eased. It helped ease the tension in her body.

Cougar smoothed her nightgown down over her ankles, restoring her modesty.

"I've got to go out and get the stock settled. Why don't you get some rest while I'm out?"

"I'm not tired."

He paused at the bedroom door. His left brow kicked up, and his lips twitched with a smile.

"You're going to be."

Chapter Nine

Cougar slipped quietly back into the bedroom. He was a married man. This was his wedding night, and his bride was passed out cold in the hard chair set up beside the bed, her head resting on the quilt. He stepped up beside her. Her hair glowed in the light from the oil lamp. Thick and wavy, it spread around her like a living thing. He touched his hand to the spot where her hair parted and he could see the three stitches Doc had neatly placed. Around the stitches, blood still matted in her hair.

He grazed the back of her cheek with the back of his hand. The soft, almost invisible hairs there tickled his knuckles. Her skin appeared the softest cream. He still wasn't sure why she'd married him, but she had and now she was his to protect and to care for. And right now, that included a bath.

"Put your arms around my neck," he whispered.

She blinked at him owlishly, caught between sleep and wakefulness. He slid one hand under her hips. The other behind her shoulders.

"I fell asleep?" she asked as he eased her forward.

"Yes."

"I'm not tired."

"Good." He lifted her into his arms, surprised again by how light she was.

"Wherever it is we're going, I can walk there."

"It's our wedding night."

She put a hand over her mouth, stifling a yawn. "So?"

"Every bride gets carried over the threshold."

She looked around the McKinnely living room. "I don't think this qualifies."

"I'm improvising," he answered, stepping around a footstool.

He could tell from the tension in her muscles that she was coming fully awake. He let her legs slide down his thighs as he reached the water closet door. He bent his legs so hers could touch the floor. He kept one hand on her shoulder as he opened the door.

Steam wafted out. Along with it came the scent of the rose-scented bath salts he'd put in the water. Mara froze under his hand, her eyes glued to the claw-foot tub Doc had special ordered for Dorothy. It was deep and big. And it was as full as Cougar could get it without drenching the floor. Looking at Mara and the depth of the tub, he might have overdone it.

"You prepared a bath for me?"

There was shock in the question. Amazement. And a longing that went way beyond deep. He'd thought she'd enjoy a bath for the simple reason that she was an intensely

feminine woman and all women liked baths, but now he wondered how long it had been since she'd had a real bath. The boarding house charged two bits for the luxury, and he knew Mara hadn't had a cent to spare.

"Yes."

She turned to face him. Her eyes were huge, as if she were seeing him for the first time and couldn't reconcile what she saw with what she knew.

"Thank you."

"My pleasure." Or at least it would be.

She was still staring at him.

"What?" he asked.

"My bath is getting cold."

She wanted him to leave. He hadn't intended to do that. The whole time he had been in the barn, he'd been fantasizing about getting his hands on her hot little body, but now, looking at her, the anticipation in her eyes, knowing this was something she'd longed for, he knew he would wait a little longer.

"I'll be right outside if you need me."

She was shutting the door in his face before he could get the last word out.

"I won't."

* * * * *

He gave her a half hour while he cooled his heels in the parlor. Every splash of water, every soft, pleased sigh had his cock aching, and impatience creeping over his good intentions. When the gentle splashes and soft murmurs dissolved to silence, and did not resume for ten minutes, he quietly opened the door.

Mara was lying against the back of the tub, eyes closed. Her skin was flushed a soft pink from the heat of the water that lapped at her shoulders. Her knees peeked up through the water at the middle. She had the prettiest knees.

He removed his shirt and stepped up behind her. He slid his hands over the slick flesh of her shoulders. Their rounded tops cupped neatly in his rougher palms. She jumped and her head whipped around. He held her in place with his hands as he knelt behind her.

"Enjoying your bath?" His chin brushed her head as he slid his hands down her arms and then back up. Her skin was soft and slick.

The flush flooded her chest and then spread up to her cheeks. He had to admire her gumption when she held her ground and retorted, "I was."

"Good." He reached over her shoulder and took the cloth and soap from the metal shelf. Keeping her bracketed in his arms, he worked a thick lather into the cloth.

"Scoot up."

"I already cleaned myself."

"And now it's my turn."

He put the soap back on the shelf and waited. She took three deep breaths. The last she held and then slowly released it as she inched her body upwards. She stopped with the tips of her breasts still covered.

"A little more." He really wanted to see those breasts.

"That's all there is."

It took him a second to realize she meant she was sitting as straight as she could. The chuckle surged out of the wave of lust beating at his control. "I keep forgetting you're just a little bit of a thing."

"Not everyone can be a giant."

"I can work around it."

She didn't seem comforted by the thought. She folded her arms across her chest under the water. "Lucky me."

He smiled and started rubbing the cloth across her shoulder, following it with his free hand down the curve of her arm until he got to her bent elbow. With insistent pressure, he worked her arm free and stretched it out above the water. Her arm felt so fragile in his hand, but beneath the supple skin he could feel the muscles were stiff with tension. She was scared stiff but trying not to show it. He slipped his fingers between hers, clenching and unclenching his hand, working at the tension in hers, easing the muscles, trying to relax her.

"You remember I told you I wouldn't hurt you?"

"Yes."

"I meant it." He placed her hand on the side of the tub.

"I know."

He paused with his hand on her opposite shoulder. "You do?"

"Everyone says you are a man of your word."

He ran his hands and the cloth over her left arm, raising it out of the water, sliding his fingers through hers, massaging and then placing her hand on the opposite side of the tub. Her hands clenched the side of the tub as a lifeline, betraying her tension. He leaned forward, sighing internally as the soft skin of her shoulders snuggled into the hard muscles of his chest. Her tremor was almost imperceptible. He slid his work-roughened hands over the backs of hers, sliding his fingers back and forth over hers, letting her get used to the feel of him. The scent of her skin and the soap rose with the steam from the water. The rim of the tub pressed into his chest as he ran his lips over the curve of her ear.

"You married me based on other people's say-so?"

"Yes," she stammered.

He slid his fingers up the underside of her arms. Her flesh was delicate and smooth beneath his. Damp and silky. Feminine and dainty. He retraced his path, drawing his fingers along the sensitive flesh until he reached the point where her arms met her chest. In the wake of his fingers, a trail of goose bumps popped up. "Risky."

He tickled the crease between her breast and her arm, and smiled as she jerked against him. He easily absorbed her start, his heavier frame providing her with a cushion against harm. Her nipples beaded tight and the goose bumps doubled in numbers.

Through the water, he could just make out her nipples as they thrust out. Using the backs of his nails, he trailed a path down her ribs until he got to her waist. She jerked as his chest hair rasped against her smooth skin, and tried to sink under the water.

"Steady," he soothed, opening his hands and catching her by the hips to pull her back up.

Under his palms, her hips flared enticingly. Against his chest, wet strands of her hair tangled with the darker, straighter strands of his. Her nervous breaths came at twice the rate of his, echoing in the quiet room.

He opened his hands all the way, letting his fingers meet across her hipbones. His thumbs touched just above the crease of her buttocks. Temptation surrounded him. He needed to be closer. Leaning forward, he eased his right arm down the inside of her thigh. She froze as his hand slid round the slight curve of her inner thigh until he got to what he sought and pulled the stopper from the tub. The plumbing gurgled as the water drained.

He held himself there, his forearm pressed against her pussy, his chest against her back, and his hand on her hip keeping her still. He watched as her nipples came into view. As the water dipped and the cooler air struck her flesh, they pebbled and lengthened. They were still the most incredible sight. His cock strained against his pants. She was such a delicious armful. He forced himself to wait until the water level reached her waist. He replaced the stopper.

"Stay put," he ordered, getting to his feet.

She neither looked at him nor moved. He liked her instinctive obedience. It fit in nicely with his need to take charge. It also excited him, wondering how far she would go with it.

He reluctantly moved his hand away from her skin. He stood and released the hot water from the holding tank, then he opened the hot water spigot. The tub was a lot slower to fill than it had been to empty. He removed his moccasins and buckskins as he waited.

"Scoot forward," he ordered when he was naked.

She risked a quick glance over her shoulder. Since she was eye level to his groin, and his cock was hard and aching for her, she reacted predictably. She gasped and scooted as close to the front of the tub as she could without burning herself.

He stepped in behind her. The water was cool but the disturbance he caused getting in sent more hot water mingling with the cool.

He put his hands on Mara's shoulders and pulled upward gently.

"Stand up." He steadied her as she shakily obeyed. This close, she was unable to prevent his cock from sliding along her slick skin as she did. He groaned as sparks of fire leapt from his cock to his balls. She flinched. He stopped her when she would have leaned away.

"No. That wasn't our agreement."

"But..." Her voice was a shaky thread of sound.

"My touch, Angel, anyway I want it."

Her head bowed slightly, exposing the vulnerable nape where her hair parted. She took a shuddering breath and leaned back until the tip of his cock nestled into the hollow of her back.

He pressed a kiss onto her nape. "Good girl," he whispered. He bent his knees, dragging his cock down the line of her spine, over the swell of her buttocks, slowing his descent as the crease of her ass cuddled his length. His breath hissed out of his lungs as he struggled against the need to press his shaft between those sweet curves. He soothed her distressed whimper at his hesitation with a murmured, "Nothing to worry about, Mara. I'm in control."

He dropped the rest of the way to his knees.

The view from here was almost as big a threat to his control as her flesh. Her buttocks shaped a perfect heart. He dipped his thumbs into the little dimples above each surprisingly plump cheek. He fought back the urge to nip the left one. This time, he was the one who took a shuddering breath.

He sat, bringing his knees high and wide, and then pulled her down. "Sit back now."

There was a long hesitation while she faltered, but then she gingerly knelt in the front of the tub.

"Put your hands on my knees and sit back."

He could feel the quiver in her hands as she obeyed. Little by little, she brought her body against his. As his cock touched the small of her back, she froze.

"Steady." He slid his hands over her shoulders and eased her back. Water sloshed as he brought his hands around her arms and tucked her in.

She shuddered and then held perfectly still. With his foot, he turned off the spigot.

"Your ribs hurting?"

He actually felt her weigh the lie, and then discard it for the truth. "No."

"Good."

He brought his hands up to cup her breasts. Like the rest of her, they were delicately made. He gentled his touch further as he traced the small pink areolas just

beneath the water level. Warmed by the bath, they were flattened out. He applied a bit more pressure to his caress. Stimulated by his fingers, they pulled taut again. Where the rest of her was so small, and he always felt he was overwhelming her, her nipples were more than large enough to take his touch. He grasped first one and then the other between his finger and thumb. He slowly slid his calluses along their length, drawing them out before letting them spring back. He did it again. And again. Against his thighs, he felt her hips flex. On the fourth pass, her breath caught in her throat. Her nipples were very sensitive. He smiled. Lucky him.

The next time he drew them out, he held tight to the tip, keeping them distended for a heartbeat. On the second beat, he did a quick pinch and release.

Her "oh" was a whispered revelation.

"Let's try that again." She didn't argue when he did. She didn't gasp either, but her hips wiggled against his cock and her back arched. He immediately let go of one nipple to steady her.

"Careful." He pressed his hand against her abdomen until her back was straight. "Don't hurt yourself."

The breast in his hand colored a bright red at the realization of what she'd done. "I'm sorry."

"I'm not." She didn't have anything to say to that.

Her head bent forward and a heavy swathe of wet hair fell across his hands. He pressed a kiss against her exposed nape. She shivered. He set his teeth on the cord joining her neck to her shoulder as he caught both her nipples again, pinching them lightly as he ran his teeth along the tautly stretched tendon. She stopped breathing altogether when he set his teeth into the curve of her shoulder. The slight pain had her nipples hardening under his fingers until he could roll them like plump little pillows.

"Lift up." He used his grip on her nipples to show her what he wanted. She did. He angled his hips until his cock nestled under the hot crack of her ass.

"Now slide down easy."

After a barely perceptible hesitation, she did, and his cock shot forward between her cheeks and toward her pussy. There was no resistance thanks to the bath water, only the slick caress of moist flesh. He dropped his head back as he glided between her labia.

He didn't bother to hide his groan. "Damn, that's good."

He let her get used to his feel and size. He pulled her nipples again, drawing them out from her body, watching as the flesh around them paled while the nipples darkened. He jiggled them lightly. His reward was another gasp and a shifting of her hips. He held her there on the edge of anticipation and bent his head until he could whisper in her ear, "Reach between your legs and spread your pussy lips around me."

"I don't understand."

Her gasp betrayed the lie, but he had no doubt he could get her past her hesitation.

He added a bit more pressure to her imprisoned nipples and jiggled them again, smiling as her fingers tightened to white-knuckled on the edge of the tub and her breathing broke to an uneven rhythm.

"I'm waiting."

Her hands dipped beneath the water. Her fingers were shy in spreading her labia, touching him as little as possible. He slid his hand under the water until he found her right hand. Once again he slipped his fingers between hers, soothing her tension with a brief massage. He brought her hand to his mouth. He kissed her palm before bringing that hand to her breast.

"Show me what you like," he ordered, before he left her to pleasure herself while he took over stroking his cock. He was so hard, he thought he'd burst, but he wasn't rushing this moment for anything. He spread his thighs a little wider so he could cup his cock in his hand. He stroked it from base to tip, letting the edge of his fingers brush her distended lips as he did so. She jerked her hips reflexively, sinking that incredible ass a little tighter to his groin.

He closed his eyes as fire shot through him. Tamping back the urgency, he glanced down. Her hand was quiet on her breast.

"Play with your nipples, Mara." He wanted to see those slender fingers working her nipples, giving herself pleasure.

The flush was back. "I'm not sure this is appropriate."

"This is what I want. Play with your nipples."

He inched his fingers between his cock and her cunt. He probed the entrance to her vagina. She was wet, not just with bath water but with her own slick cream, easing his passage as he explored her sweet folds. Little by little, he extended the reach of his exploration until he touched the hard extension of her clit. It was distended, and like her nipples, a pleasant handle for his thumb and forefinger. Very gently, he circled it with his fingertip. Her head fell back against his shoulder.

"Oh God."

"No," he corrected. "Cougar."

He circled it again. Her teeth sank into her lip and her fingers clenched convulsively on her nipple. Harder than he would have anticipated. Hard enough to drive the blood out of the pink flesh. He made a note of her preference.

"I'm going to teach you to pleasure me now," he whispered in her ear.

Another one of those freezes that could mean anything, followed by the slightest relaxation into acquiescence. She liked him telling her what to do.

He took her left hand in his and brought it beneath the water to his cock. He wrapped her fingers around the head. Her hand felt hot compared to the cooling water. It was all he could do not to come right there. He held her hand in place with his as he bent and traced the edge of her ear with his tongue. She shivered and pulled away, but a heartbeat later leaned back.

He circled her clit with the same deliberate care he used to retrace her ear. She shuddered and her grip on her nipple tightened. Hard enough it had to hurt, but she did not let go and did not back off. Instead, she twisted it the slightest bit, as if experimenting with her limits. She liked the edge of pain with her pleasure. His cock leapt with anticipation. He could definitely work with that.

"Whenever I do anything you like, I want you to stroke me like this." With his hand, he showed her how to pump his cock, paying particular attention to squeeze just behind the crown on the down stroke.

"If you do that, I'll know to do it again. Okay?" he breathed against her ear.

She shuddered, and to his delight, made her first tentative move.

"You're going to have to do better than that." He made sure to breathe each word into her ear. He punctuated the statement by kissing the side of her neck. She pumped him once hard, her small hand struggling to wrap around his width. When he didn't move immediately, she did it again.

This time he was the one who shivered and groaned.

"That's the way."

It had been a long, dry spell and her soft little hand sliding over the head of his cock while her hot pussy caressed and wept on the rest, had his balls pulling up tight.

He brought his hand back up to her breast, and with the other resumed his assault on her clit. Little by little, he coaxed the tiny protuberance out from its hood, teasing it to its full length, milking it in time with his fingers on her breast.

At first she froze, not moving at all, her entire being seemed to be focused on the sensation driving through her body. He forced his hands to follow the rules he'd laid out. To still.

Almost on a sob, she began to pump his cock, slowly at first, and then harder and faster as he applied pressure to her sensitive little nubbin. When she was pulled up tight against him, her head tossing from side to side, her breath rasping in her throat, he caught her by the hips and drove his cock hard along her cleft. She lost her grip and grabbed his arm to steady herself. He moved her away and jerked her back, the hot enticement of her slick pussy almost more than he could resist. He wanted to be in her, to feel her close around him again in that incredibly tight grasp. Instead he imagined it, knowing to do more would scare her, fucking himself to a rapid climax against her, feeling her clit drag along his length over and over until she jerked against him, her body grasping at his as she climaxed over him. Her orgasm drove his, and with one last thrust, he exploded. His chest slammed into her back as his body jerked forward with the power of his release. Over and over his body pumped into the water while in his mind, he sprayed the tight walls of her cunt with his seed. On the last pulse, he dropped his head to her shoulder and sucked in a rasping breath. When he felt his legs would hold him, he stood.

She knelt before him, shifting up onto her knees, her eyes big with confusion. He caught her cheek in his palm. Her gaze fell to his cock and her breath hitched in her

chest. He held out his other hand and helped her to her feet. She stood in the soft light, water streaming off her firm body, her nipples drawn to stiff peaks, a post-orgasmic flush on her chest, and he decided he must be crazy to go through with this. Damn! He wanted to make her come again, to hear her scream her pleasure. He just knew she could be a screamer.

He stepped out of the tub and snagged a towel. As he wrapped it around her, his knuckle brushed her nipple. Her torso jerked. Standing in the tub as she was, her head came to his shoulder. He caught her close, rubbing his hand against her breast, watching her pupils contract with the sensation.

"I could come again, just watching you like this," he told her.

His words shocked her, but intrigued her, too. He could see it in her eyes and the slight lift of her brows. "And if you want to know what it can feel like when all that hunger in your body explodes with satisfaction around me, you're going to have to make a decision."

"I don't understand." Her voice was shaky due to her uncertainty and the fact that he was still rasping the damp towel over her nipple.

He stopped and used the edge of the towel to tip her face up. "You're going to have to choose me, Angel."

"I married you."

"I want all of you. I don't want there to be any question of where you are and whose orders you follow. In your mind or anyone else's."

He pinched her nipple again for the simple reason that he loved the way her eyes darkened and her lips softened when he did. "I want your full commitment."

"Being married isn't enough?"

He released her nipple. "I'm a demanding man. I don't take 'no' well."

Her brow furrowed as she stared up at him. "I still don't understand."

"If you come to me, I'll never leave you hurting. I'll make this sweet body come so hard you'll turn inside out, screaming for me, but I'll take you too. Every way a man can take a woman. I won't let you tell me no along the way. You'll have to trust me and follow my orders."

Her hand clenched over his where he held the towel. Her respiration increased, but he couldn't tell whether she was aroused or scared. "You said you wouldn't hurt me."

"I won't, but I might scare the hell out of you with what I expect."

Her fingernails bit into the base of his thumbs. "And if I decide I can't live with that?"

"Then you stay here with Doc and Dorothy, and we live separate lives."

"You'll end the marriage?"

He'd never do that. "No. I promised you my protection and you'll have it, but we won't be husband and wife in any real sense of the word. There won't be children."

"Oh." Her lip slid between her teeth. He honestly couldn't tell what she was thinking. Maybe he shouldn't have been so blunt, but he wasn't a ladies' man, and he wanted her too badly to play courting games. "When I come back next week, I want an answer."

"You're leaving me?"

He pulled her close and kissed that tempting mouth, using the towel to draw her up on her toes so he could nudge her lips open with his tongue, dipping his inside to taste her. "I'm giving you room to decide," he clarified as he pulled back.

"And if I decide I want to be married to you?" she asked, her hands flattening against his bare chest.

He smoothed his thumb over her moist lips. "Then you get as much of me as you can take, for as long as you can take me."

Her breath shuddered out of her chest. "Is that an incentive?"

"That's what you need to decide." He stepped back. "Just be sure, because once you come to me, there'll be no going back. For either of us."

Chapter Ten

Mara sat in the wagon in Dorothy's front yard, staring at the endless expanse of grass before her. Cougar had promised to come for her in a week. A week had passed and he hadn't come, and now at the end of the second, she was restless and unsure. Waffling between yes and no, she was a nervous wreck, dreading and anticipating the day he'd return. To make matters worse, the Reverend had shown up the day after Cougar left with a new dress for her, and a decision to court her if she decided to end her marriage. She'd counted on Cougar coming to collect her to set things right, but then he hadn't, and she had a whole new set of choices to wrestle with.

"Are you sure you want to do this, honey?" Dorothy asked.

Mara settled herself a little deeper into the wagon seat. "Actually, no." She picked up the reins. "I'm not sure of anything right now except that I can't live like this any longer. A wife but not a wife. It's driving me crazy."

"At least let me go with you."

Mara shook her head. "You know you can't leave that poor little child in there. Her fever barely broke an hour ago."

Dorothy ran her hand wearily across her brow. "You're right about that, darn it." She sighed. "It's just that I don't want you haring across the territory chasing trouble."

Mara straightened in the seat. "Do you think he might hurt me?" She hadn't even considered that possibility when she'd arrived at her decision.

"Cougar?" Dorothy scoffed. "He may take a few layers of flesh off your hide with his tongue when he discovers you traveled all that way on your own, but he won't beat you."

Mara relaxed. "Then there's nothing to stop me, is there?"

"Nothing but thieves, Indians and general no-goods."

"Nothing's going to happen to me." Mara reassured the older woman for the hundredth time. "You said yourself that I can't miss the place. I just head due west for a half hour and turn right at the big wooden arch proclaiming the boundaries of the Tumbling M."

"I wish Horace were here."

Mara shrugged. "He wouldn't be able to stop me anymore than you can. I want this settled."

"He darned well could knock you unconscious and tie you to the bed," Dorothy retorted. "Anything but allow you to strike out on your own across this lawless land."

Mara softened her voice. "I'll be all right, Dorothy. I know you're worried, but I have to go."

"You could just wait for Cougar here. I'm sure there's a reason he hasn't come before now."

Mara clenched the reins a little tighter in her hands. She was well aware of that. One of those reasons could be because he was having second thoughts. The roan pranced and tossed his head in protest. The harness jingled. A breeze blew across the yard, bending the grass. The balmy summer weather of the last two weeks had deteriorated into the cool reality of a Wyoming Fall. Mara shivered and huddled a little deeper into one of Doc's borrowed coats. She took her time answering.

"I can't," she finally confessed. She shook her head. "Not anymore. My whole life I've been afraid of doing the wrong thing. I spent hours practicing to be the perfect little girl, the perfect daughter, and the perfect woman, and where did all that practicing get me? Except to the Pleasure Emporium?"

"And you think going to Cougar is the wrong thing?"

"I think going to him is the biggest risk I could ever take."

"So why do it?" Dorothy asked.

Mara forced her fingers to unclench on the reins. She shrugged and smiled wryly, "Because it's the biggest risk I'll ever take."

And because she trusted Cougar in an elemental way in which she couldn't make herself trust Brad.

Dorothy hesitated. "He's not an easy man, you know."

"I know."

"By the time Doc and I adopted him, he was already pretty set in his ways."

"How did you come to adopt him?"

"His mother and Clint's mother were sisters. When Cougar was thirteen his mom died, and then his father. Cougar came back here looking for Clint."

"And?"

"He was a wild thing, always expecting the worst, looking for a fight, not accepting any help from his family." Dorothy sighed and shrugged. "Clint's mom married up with a decent man, Doc's half-brother, but Cougar's dad was a wastrel. A handsome one, but a wastrel all the same."

"Clint's family wouldn't take him in?"

Dorothy grimaced. "Jared made the mistake of mentioning doing his Christian duty by Cougar. Cougar told him to go to hell and wouldn't speak to him again no matter how often he tried to fix things."

Mara could easily imagine Cougar, even as a boy, being too proud to be a charity case.

"How old was Cougar when you adopted him?"

"Thirteen, and almost as tall as he is now, but all gangly boy."

"So why did you do it?" She couldn't imagine anything scarier than Cougar out of control.

"Because no matter how much he was always expecting the worst, he was always giving the best and he needed someone to care."

"So Doc brought him home?"

"No. I did." Dorothy smiled and shook her head at the memory. "He was sitting in the alley behind the saloon eating scraps. He saw me watching him and he scowled at me." Dorothy avoided Mara's gaze for a second. "I'm ashamed to say I moved right along."

"I imagine even as a boy he could be intense."

Dorothy shook her head, anger creeping into her expression. "He was just a scared, hungry boy who was alone in the world. What else did he have but pride?" Dorothy's mouth tightened with disgust. Whether at herself or circumstance, Mara couldn't tell. "That occurred to me about three steps away from the alley," Dorothy continued.

"You went back?" Mara wasn't sure she would have.

"Yes. And I was just in time to see him feeding what little food he had to a mangy dog that was in as bad a shape as he was."

"Oh." She could see it, and despite herself was touched. "What happened then?"

"I marched up to him and asked him if he wanted to come to my house for supper."

"And he went?"

Dorothy smiled with remembered fondness. "He told me to go to hell just like he'd told everyone else."

That she could see. Cougar wouldn't take charity, but still part of her felt sorry for the orphaned boy forced to scavenge for food and a place to belong. "So how did you get him home?"

"I grabbed him by his ear, marched him to Doc's office, washed his mouth out with lye soap for every curse word he said along the way, and then took him home and fed him."

Mara eyed Dorothy with new respect. "I don't know how you had the courage."

"Courage didn't enter into it. I was mad and frustrated, and I tend not to think straight when I have my dander up. While he ate, I talked to him about what I remembered of his Mom, how sweet and gentle she was and how in her memory, I was making him my responsibility. I told him in the way of his mother's people, I was claiming him for my own and from that day on he was my son, like it or not."

"And he accepted that?"

Dorothy sent her a pitying glance. "Cougar's no different than anyone else for all he looks big and mean. He always wanted to belong, he just needed someone to sit up and take notice in a way he could understand."

Mara couldn't see Cougar needing anyone. He was a law unto himself, but maybe he'd been different as a boy. Her thoughts must have shown in her face because Dorothy said, "The boy never gave me a lick of trouble after that and has been the best son a woman could ask for, but you'd do well to remember this story when you get to his place."

"Why?"

"Because Cougar still has a tendency to bluff when he's unsure. And," she sighed, "he's naturally bossy."

You'll sleep in my bed, accept my touch, accept me into your body. This time, Mara's shiver had nothing to do with the cold.

"I know."

"And you still want him?"

Mara considered that for a moment. Did she want a man who gave orders as naturally as breathing? Did she want a man who had enough pride for two people and a tendency to snap and growl when thwarted? A man who was apparently as loyal as he could be deadly? Wind gusted around the corner of the cabin, whipping both women's skirts around their legs. Dorothy shielded her face with her hand while Mara tugged her straw bonnet a little lower over her eyes.

"What happened to the dog?"

"What?" Dorothy wiped dust from her eye.

"What happened to the dog Cougar shared his meal with?"

Dorothy stared at her a moment, uncomprehendingly, but then a smile slowly lit her face from within. Her voice was soft with understanding as she said, "Cougar brought it home, and it lived with us for the rest of its life."

Mara was willing to bet it never wanted for anything again. "Then yes, I want him."

"Women have always wanted Cougar," Dorothy said. "Either for his looks or his reputation, but I think it matters more to you who he is on the inside, and I'm glad of that. Cougar deserves a woman who wants him for what he is." She leaned forward and put her hand over Mara's. Her palm was firm and slightly rough, her grip as comforting as her gaze was anxious. "But honey, why do you have to go today?"

Mara bit her lip. She wished her bonnet had deep sides so she could use it to shield her expression. "Because I'm afraid," she whispered. "I'm so afraid of the way he draws me, I almost ran away three times this week."

Dorothy's fingers tightened over Mara's. She took a breath and released it slowly as her gaze rose to meet Mara's. "I know that feeling. Before I agreed to toss my safe, comfortable, pampered existence to the wind and marry Horace, I knew that fear well."

Mara searched her eyes. "And?"

Dorothy pulled the wool blanket a little higher over Mara's legs. She patted it smooth with brisk efficiency. "Sometimes a woman just has to take a chance."

"Exactly." And this was going to be the biggest chance of her life. She was afraid of being with a man. Cougar knew that. It was entirely possible he'd left her here because of that. She couldn't blame him if he had, but that didn't mean she was going to accept his decision without trying to show him that she could get past her fear.

Dorothy stepped back, drawing Mara's attention, one hand holding her hair from her face, the other planted on her hip. "You take care on that drive. Keep that rifle by your side at all times. Anybody rides up to you, you shoot first and ask questions later."

Mara was tempted to salute. She smiled instead. "Yes, Ma'am."

The wind gusted again. Dorothy clutched her skirts. "Just remember, if it doesn't work out, you've always got a home here with us."

Mara clutched her courage. "Thank you."

She slapped the reins gently on the obedient gelding's rump and headed West.

* * * * *

The sign was too big to miss.

It sat in the middle of a huge meadow, standing at least fifteen feet high, and it proclaimed Cougar's aspirations loud and clear. Mara halted the wagon beneath the huge sign. Looking straight up, she read the ornately carved words. Tumbling M. A Fool's Dream.

She shook her head and wondered if it were a sign from above, because she couldn't think of a more unlikely pair of dreamers than Cougar and herself. He for his determination to carve a future from this wilderness. She for her determination to carve happiness out of this marriage.

As she bounced up the rutted path, she rehearsed line after opening line to explain her presence. Cougar had said he wanted her, but she wasn't sure he hadn't changed his mind in the interim. If he did, however, she was going to jump on the nearest chair and slap him. It wasn't every day she worked up the courage to do something risky and if he killed her first try, she would never forgive him.

The wagon hit a deep hole. The jolt reverberated up her spine. Her cheeks sucked in on a quick breath, and as the wagon rounded a bend, she forgot to let it out. Her eyes glued to the structure before her, Mara pulled slowly back on the reins. The roan obligingly stopped, his head swinging down to lazily snatch at patches of grass.

This was Cougar's house? This, this...palace? She forced her slack jaw taut. She would not be intimidated by the size of Cougar's house. So it wasn't the comfy little cabin she'd been dreaming of. It was still Cougar's home, and had no real bearing on her plans to fit into his life, but it was a lie and she knew it.

The huge, two-story log home had been built by a man who meant to leave a mark. Clearly, Cougar meant this to be a central gathering place for influential people. A place

where important decisions would be made. The woman who graced this house would be expected to know all the social intricacies of well brought up society. She looked up at that great big house with all its expensive glass—glass!—windows and felt a burst of indecision. The woman who lived in this house would have to be perfect. She was a far cry from that. Which might explain why Cougar hadn't come back for her. With her background, it was entirely possible that he was having second thoughts.

Mara untied her bonnet and chewed her lip. She looked at the house again, and one by one, squashed the fears nipping at her from all directions. Whatever Cougar had or had not planned for her decision to be, it was her decision and she had made it. She set the brake and looped the reins around the pole. She was Cougar McKinnely's wife. She put her bonnet on the seat. They were both just going to have to deal with it.

She climbed down from the wagon. As her feet hit the ground, she straightened her spine. *I am a Kincaid. I can do this.* She headed for the porch steps and then paused as she realized no one here knew her. She was Cougar McKinnely's wife, but a stranger. She glanced at the wide wraparound porch and the ornate wooden door dead center. They may not even let her in.

A totally cowardly impulse had her considering turning tail and running. Disgust at the impulse carried her up the four steps to the porch and had her rapping on the door. When no one came to answer her third knock, she lifted the latch, and stepped inside. Two steps into the room, she stopped dead.

This was worse than she'd imagined.

The house was, quite simply, the most breathtaking creation she had ever seen. The floor plan swept away from the entry in two open wings with a staircase bisecting them and gracefully sweeping up to the second floor balcony. Everywhere she turned, there was the golden glow of oak. To the right was a large dinning area with two fieldstone fireplaces. To the left was what she supposed was the living area with additional fireplaces, but any space for sitting had to be carved out of piles and piles of wooden crates. Even that clutter couldn't hide the elegance of the room.

Taking in the velvet curtains and elegant paintings on the walls, Mara became acutely aware of her tattered dress and dusty appearance. She shook her skirt out unobtrusively and caught sight of the floor. Any dust that tumbled from her clothing was indistinguishable from the heavy coating of dirt marring the golden beauty.

Her eyes narrowed at the outrage. At least now she knew why Dorothy always got so tight-lipped when she mentioned Cougar's housekeeper. This place was a disgrace. Whatever Cougar was paying the woman, she decided as she spotted cobwebs hanging in a corner, it was too much.

"Hello. Is anybody home?"

There was no answer to her call, but as she moved deeper into the room, she thought she heard a noise from upstairs. She cocked her head and listened more closely. Yes, there it was again. Hopefully, that was the housekeeper and hopefully, she was hard at work.

Mara headed for the stairs. If not, she and the housekeeper were going to have words. Mara hated sloppy work and the laziness that created it. Clutching the banister tightly, she climbed the stairs. At the top, she followed the noise to the open door down the hall to the left, the bright red Oriental carpet under her feet muffling her footsteps.

There was no door to open. Nothing to block out the shock of what she was seeing. There was only unrelenting reality. That was her husband stretched out on the bed, his face a contortion of pain, but it wasn't pain he was feeling. Mara was sure of that, because there was some black-haired hussy sprawled upside down across his torso dining on his manhood as if it were a feast. One she wasn't about to relinquish, by the looks of things as she waved Mara away without even lifting her attention from her duties.

Pain, humiliation and shock struck Mara like blows. So fast, she couldn't separate one from the other. Nausea welled. She pushed it back. She was Mara Kincaid, that was her husband, and she'd be damned if she'd run like a whipped cur. She stiffened her spine, gnawed her cheek until it bled, and stood her ground. At least her indecision was over. She would not share her husband with anyone. Not for anything.

As she debated her choices, she heard it. Her name whispered on a ragged moan. A guttural utterance of need, confusion, and...pain?

She looked closer. Nothing had changed. The hussy was still attached to her husband like a leech, but the hussy wasn't who Mara was interested in. All she could see of Cougar was his shoulders and face above the woman's big hips, but those parts didn't look right. He was pale, very pale. That he was aroused, was prodigiously evident, but there was something about his face...

"Go away."

Mara glanced at the woman crouched above her husband, her mouth inches from the glistening head of his manhood.

"Since the man you're attached to is my husband, I believe that should be my line."

"As you can see," the woman proclaimed before pausing to leisurely lap Cougar's manhood from base to tip, chuckling triumphantly when his hips arched off the bed in search of more of the caresses she withheld. "*El Patron* has no need of a flat as a board wife like you when Nidia is here."

"You seem very sure of that."

The woman nipped his manhood, absorbing his start with her lips. "I know who you are and where you come from." The sneer in her voice bled into her expression. "He has no need of one such as you."

Amazing that a woman doing what this woman was doing had the nerve to look down on her.

"Seeing as you aren't his wife, your opinions don't count for much."

Beneath the woman, Cougar stirred. His head thrashed from side to side.

"Hush, *Patron*," the woman soothed. "Nidia is here to take care of your needs. Just hush and let me ease you."

Mara thought she was going to puke as the woman redoubled her efforts.

"If you would leave us, *Senora*," the woman paused in her frantic bobbing to sneer the title. "I believe *El Patron* would like a taste of Nidia's honey."

If anyone needed a taste of something, it was Nidia. Mara reached through the slit in her skirt and fondled the handle of her knife. Cougar had yet to acknowledge her presence in the room. That rankled. He couldn't help but see she was there. Not unless he was both blind and deaf.

Cougar tossed again, jostling the woman who lost her balance. What the move revealed had Mara's hand tightening on the hilt of her knife. His side was a mess of blood-soaked bandages.

She was on Nidia in a heartbeat.

"You bitch!" She grabbed Nidia by the hair and flung her off the bed, surprising them both with her strength. Nidia sprang to her feet. She rushed Mara, her eyes slitted to narrow openings. Mara was more than ready for her. She simultaneously whipped out her knife and side-stepped Nidia's headlong charge. As the other woman crashed onto the bed, Mara buried her knee in her back, grabbed her hair and hacked off every strand she could find. As she hacked a curl over Nidia's ear, Mara lost her balance. Nidia took advantage and scrambled out from underneath her.

Cougar groaned on the bed. Panting and furious, Mara jerked the knife in the door's direction. "Get out of my house."

Nidia didn't move or cower, though she did keep her eyes on the knife in Mara's hand as she tossed the remains of her hair.

"I will leave only when *El Patron* tells me to." Her hand slid over her full hip. "He brought me here for his pleasure. I'll not leave until he tells me he no longer finds me pleasing."

Mara immediately came up with a thousand ways to ensure Cougar never looked at this witch again, but when push came to shove, she knew she wasn't any real threat. Men kept mistresses. It was a fact of life.

"Suit yourself," she said coldly. "But if you stay, keep the hell out of my way and out of my sight or you won't like the consequences."

Nidia tossed her head again. "When the *patron* is better, he will call for me. I will be waiting."

"If he's alive tomorrow, you can take it up with him."

Nidia hesitated, but then adopted that stance that challenged so well. "*El Patron* is very strong. It will take more than a bear to kill him."

Hells bells, he'd been mauled by a bear? "Let's hope your faith will carry the day. In the interim, get me some hot water. Boiling hot," she added as Nidia balked.

"I do not take orders from you."

"You do if you want this comfortable life to continue, because if he dies," Mara snapped, approaching the bed, "I guarantee you're out on your ear."

Nidia left without another word. Hopefully, to return with hot water.

Cougar still lay as Nidia had left him. His manhood lay red and engorged against his stomach. Intimidating. Mara flicked a corner of the sheet over the threatening appendage. Pouring some cool water into the basin, she gathered up a cloth and started to soak the blood-caked mess of bandages off Cougar's chest. The instant the cloth touched his skin, Cougar grabbed her wrist and forced her hand lower.

"Mara." His voice was hoarse from fever and passion, but she heard the need. The plea. Startled, she looked up and realized his eyes were closed. There was no way he could know who touched him. Unless he had been dreaming about her all along. Mara ground her teeth as he pressed her hand against his erection. How dare Nidia take advantage of her memory this way! She shot a glare at the door, but any threat she thought to make died as Cougar snaked his free hand into her hair. The ease with which he dragged her up his body scared her silly.

He'd touched her before, but always with control. She pulled her hand free and braced it against his stomach. His dry, hot lips found hers, roughly prying them open for an exploration. She pushed away, but he held her where he wanted her with disheartening ease.

"Dammit," he groaned as she pushed again. "Don't tease me like this."

"Let me go!" she demanded as his fingers coiled around her wrist.

Cougar's eyes opened to slits. They glittered with a wildness that scared her.

"So this is how you want your revenge," he ground out. "Well, it won't wash, honey. If you play with fire, you're going to get burned."

It's the fever, Mara told herself. The fever manipulated by Nidia that was making him different. He twisted, taking her with him, and down became up. The knowledge that he wasn't himself didn't help her nerves one bit when she was on her back, her wrists anchored in one of his huge hands above her head.

"Let me go, Cougar," she ordered.

He paused and the look in his eyes was distinctly predatory. "No." His hair, tangled and damp with sweat, fell against her shoulder. His lips found her cheek as he drawled, "In bed, Angel, I give the orders."

His fingers tugged at her hair as he shifted and pushed up. The tugs of pain blended with her panting breaths.

He was straddling her torso now, his muscular thighs tucked against her ribs, his knees wedged into her armpits. His balls rocked against her stomach as he brought his hips forward until his penis towered above her mouth.

She turned her head away. His fingers on her chin were gentle, yet inescapable as he brought her face back.

He stroked his cock in one hand, working its engorged length downward with each pass of his hand as he asked, "Do you know how long I've been dreaming of your mouth, Mara? Of feeling it wrapped tight around me, sucking me? Your hot little tongue stroking the tip, driving me wild until I can't help but give you what you want?"

No. She hadn't and she didn't want to know now, but try as she might, she couldn't escape. Oh God, she had wanted so much more than this between them. The first sob caught her by surprise. The second shamed her with her inability to keep it back. The third hit the air, and Cougar with the snap of a blow.

In an instant, he was off her and by her side on the big bed. The mattress listed as he pulled her into his arms, against his chest, his hands stroking her back gently. "Don't cry, Angel," he crooned against the top of her head as if he hadn't been the source of her tears. "Don't cry. I've got you. You're safe now. I've got you." He nuzzled his mouth against her temple. "I've got you," he sighed one last time. His arms wrapped tighter around her, sheltering her in his strength.

Mara blinked, and slowly absorbed the fact that he was now intent on giving comfort. And because she was still feeling the aftershocks of fear, because she needed someone to hold her against the confusion her life had become, she turned her face into the solid strength of his shoulder and took it.

A few moments later, she heard footsteps on the floor downstairs. Nidia, no doubt. A door opened and closed. Cougar's arms loosened and he fell back. A quick check revealed he was sleeping again. Slipping free of his grip, Mara stood. Cougar lay where she'd left him, the white sheets casting his big muscled body in sharp relief. She placed her hand on his stomach below the bandages. He was burning up.

She slid her hand over the deep ridges of muscle covering his abdomen. They crisscrossed the flat plane. She ran her hand over the hills and valleys. Below his navel, they cut inward in a sharp vee. A line of dark hair spread out from the center of his stomach just above his hip bones. She stopped her explorations when she reached the sheet covering his hips. She tried to pinch his skin, but she couldn't. There wasn't an ounce of excess flesh on his massive frame. He was all hard bone and solid muscle. A scar puckered the skin above his left hipbone. It stretched and smoothed as it angled toward his stomach. She touched it gently, marveling that he'd survived such a wound.

There were other scars on his torso. A small circular one on his right shoulder. A long curved one covering his ribs on the left side. A wicked rough-edged one pitted his upper arm just below his right shoulder. If she had any lingering doubts that her husband was a warrior, they were dispelled by the evidence before her. He was a man in his prime, tested by life, alive because of his skill.

He moaned and she petted his stomach soothingly, her finger catching in his navel. His skin was sticky with dried sweat. He needed a bath. Medicine. Care. She needed help. Now.

She left the bedroom, calling for Nidia. There was no response. No one else came to see why she was screeching like a banshee. There was just the hollow echo of her voice in answer. Great.

She threw open the front door. She'd lost her home, her virtue, and nearly her sanity in the last few months. She'd be damned if she was going to lose her husband as well. To her right, she spotted some outbuildings. One of them had to be a barn and one had to be a bunkhouse. Two places she might find help. She hit the bunkhouse first. Not only was it filthy, but it was empty. The barn, in contrast, was neat as a pin, and boasted one cowhand sitting on a bale of hay mending a bridle. His left leg was splinted and propped out to the side.

He had the gall to be whistling. A bright happy tune as if there wasn't a care in the world. Mara grabbed up the pitchfork propped against the wall and advanced on him. He never heard her come up behind him. She shifted the pitchfork in her grip and poked him in the ass.

The whistling shrilled to a halt. He stood and spun around on his good leg, the bridle flaring out. She leaned back. The metal bit just missed her jaw.

"Dammit, woman. What in hell are you doing?" the man demanded. He had the same dark skin as Cougar, similar features but his eyes were black as sin and she wouldn't trust him as far as she could throw him.

She kept the pitchfork pointed at his stomach. "I believe that's my question."

He took a hopping step forward and she stabbed at his midsection. He paused and his head cocked slightly to the side as he studied her.

She motioned with the tines toward his hand. "Drop the bridle."

He slowly lowered it to the hay bale. "What are you doing down here whistling when Cougar's up at the house dying?" she demanded.

He shrugged, his hands open and away from his sides. "Mending a bridle." His dark eyes narrowed slightly as he asked a question of his own. "You mind putting the pitchfork down and telling me what makes you think Cougar's dying?"

"Yes, I mind." He didn't appear affected at all by her response unless she counted the gathering of muscles beneath the cotton of his blue shirt. She tightened her grip on the pitchfork. Too late.

In a smooth move that looked lazy and unthreatening, the cowboy yanked the weapon out of her hands. With the same apparent indolence, he caught her by the arm when the subsequent pain in her ribs threatened to send her to her knees. He lowered her to the bale of hay.

"Are you all right, Ma'am?"

He asked the question with utmost courtesy, but his grip on her arm was iron-tight.

Mara sagged in his grasp. What was she going to do? If nobody on this Godforsaken place lifted a hand to help her, Cougar would die. She glared at the cowboy. He stared back at her, his expression relaxed if she discounted the intensity in

his gaze as he waited for her to answer. It dawned on Mara that maybe he didn't know about Cougar.

"I'm fine."

His grip on her arm didn't relax. "Are you Cougar's new wife?"

"Yes."

He tipped his hat to her with his free hand. His smile was a practiced slide of his lips across his teeth that didn't touch his eyes, but was charming anyway. "I've heard a lot about you."

She'd just bet he had. "Don't believe everything you hear."

"I hear you're part angel, part hellcat and the sweetest thing Cougar's seen in a coon's age."

Defiance left her on a soft "Oh." *Cougar said things like that about her?*

"Now, tell me what's wrong with Cougar?" the man asked, his grip on her arm reminding her there were more important things to focus on than the fact that her husband had been bragging on her.

"Nidia said a bear attack."

He frowned. Again, it was only the slightest shift of expressions, but she caught it because she'd been staring at him so hard. "Nidia's been taking care of him?"

"Yes."

"Shit!"

Those had been her sentiments. Apparently, he was well acquainted with Nidia because there was resignation in his voice as he asked, "How bad is he?"

"I just got here a half hour ago. When I saw him, Nidia was..." She ducked her head. What Nidia had been doing wasn't something she wanted everyone to know. "When I saw him," she began again, "he was out of his head with fever. I haven't had a chance to examine him further."

The cowboy shifted his weight fully onto his good leg. Bits of hay drifted up to float through the sunbeams. He looked like he was going to say something, checked himself, and with another of those deceptively lazy movements, resettled his hat on his head.

"Damn. We need Doc."

At last. Reason. "Yes."

"I'll get him." He turned toward one of the stalls.

"Don't you be worrying, Ma'am," he called as he disappeared into the stall. "Cougar's too ornery to die from a few bear scratches."

No doubt, he meant to reassure her, but Mara had heard about Cougar's immortality one too many times already. She got to her feet, slapping at the straw on her skirt. "His reputation may be immortal, but I assure you the man can die as easily as the rest of us."

He glanced at her as he dragged the hand-tooled saddle off the rail it had been sitting on. "He's that bad?"

"Yes."

"You get back in the house and do what you can for Cougar. I'll ride like the demons of He...Hades." He grunted as he moved deeper into the stall. Maneuvering that saddle must be hell on his leg. "I'll be back with Doc before you know it," was muted as he worked.

"You can't ride with a broken leg."

"Not a problem," came the unconcerned response from inside the stall. She stood on tiptoe to see over the stall wall. She glimpsed a flash of brown as the saddle swung high and then there was only the sound of leather sliding across leather. The cowboy limped out of the stall leading a fine looking buckskin.

Mara met him halfway into the corridor created by the six stalls on either side. She grabbed the reins out of his hands. "I can't afford you falling off midway between here and Doc's."

He took the reins back. "I haven't tumbled off a horse since I was in knee-high to a grasshopper."

She grabbed the reins again, but this time he didn't let go. The buckskin tossed his head and nickered nervously at their tug of war. "Well, Mr. Whoever you are, today is not going to be the first time in a long time."

The man soothed the horse with a rub on his muzzle. His answer was slow and deceptively casual. "The name's Clint, Ma'am. And I've ridden horses while more busted up than this. Now, if you'd let go of those reins?"

"No." There was no way in hell she was doing that. "You'll have to take the wagon."

"Ride in a wagon?" Clint's lazy gaze flickered with what she would have sworn was horror. He didn't slacken his grip on the reins. His mouth set in a determined line that reminded Mara distinctly of Cougar. "I don't think so."

"You're the only hope I've got." A quick glance showed the pitchfork too far away to grab easily. More's the pity.

"And I won't be letting you down. Cougar's my cousin, our mothers were sisters. There's no way I'd let anything happen to him."

Relief slid through her. "Good. Then we can stop arguing."

"Not if you're still thinking I'm going to take the wagon."

"If you ride that horse with your leg all busted up just to prove how tough you are and then fall off, there'll be nobody left to notify Doc that I need him. Desperately."

As if she'd been speaking gibberish, Clint swung up onto his horse, awkwardly angling his splinted leg over the saddle. Leaning down, he flicked her cheek with his finger before prying the reins from her hands.

"Try not to worry, Mrs. McKinnely. I've been riding horses since before I could walk."

When Mara opened her mouth on another protest, Clint shook his head before letting his grin slide, showing his seriousness. "It's better I don't take the wagon. Not only can I travel faster on horseback, but if something should happen to me, you're going to need that wagon to move Cougar."

There really was no refuting that logic, but Mara had plenty of arguments set to try. Before she could trot one out, Clint kicked his horse into a gallop. She watched as he cleared the corral, dust kicking up in his wake. He was right about one thing. He could ride.

Chapter Eleven

Pain woke Cougar. The bed shook and his chest was on fire. He struggled to his side, grunting with the effort, to spot Mara hunched against his bed holding her knees, her body jerking as if she were sobbing. "What's wrong?"

Mara jerked around. "You're awake!"

"Yeah." He felt like something the cat had dragged in. Mara didn't look much better than he felt. Her skin was bleached white by the bright light filtering through the lace curtains, and her lips were nearly colorless. Her cheeks were dry. He propped himself higher up on his elbow. "Why are you crying?"

"I'm not." There might not be tears on her cheeks but he couldn't shake the feeling she'd been crying.

Pushing up off the floor, she got to her feet. Her movements were stiff and heavy.

"Then let me try again." Dammit! She looked worse than when he'd left her. His voice, raspy with disuse, got harsher as he rephrased, "What's wrong?"

She threw him a look that questioned his intelligence.

"You've been sick."

"And that had you crying?"

"I never cry."

"Okay. So what had you not crying?"

"I'm just tired." She grabbed up the flowered pitcher on the bedside table. "You must be thirsty."

He was, but he was more interested in why she was worn to a nub. Cougar frowned. The fog was beginning to clear from his brain. He remembered feeling poorly, running into the bear, crawling onto his horse and struggling into the house. He did not remember fetching Mara.

"How long have I been out of it?" he asked as she poured him a drink of water.

She handed him the cup. "Three days."

Three days? No wonder he felt as weak as a baby. He drank the water down. The tepid liquid poured like honey down his raw throat.

"Do you want more?" she asked.

"Thanks." He studied her face as she poured the next cup. The dark smudges beneath her eyes. The messy, careless braid that barely contained her hair. "You've been taking care of me?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"Doc and Dorothy didn't help out?"

There was a long pause as she put the pitcher carefully on the bed stand. "They couldn't."

He took the glass she handed him. His hand shook. Water sloshed in the glass. He took a breath and leaned back a bit to steady his grip. His side immediately protested. Damn. He wasn't used to being this weak.

"Must be a bad fever if it got Dorothy away from me."

"Very bad. People are sick everywhere."

The way she said that, her back to him, ramrod straight, gave him pause. There was one person who had been here when he left that he hoped like hell hadn't been here when Mara arrived. He just wasn't sure how to bring the subject up. He closed his eyes against the strain of keeping himself propped up. He opened them, took a drink of water and asked, "How bad is bad?"

"Doc said three people have died."

"Who?"

"Elijah Ware's wife and baby, and one drifter."

"Damn. Elijah must be in hell."

"He's not taking it well."

That, he imagined, was an understatement. Elijah had doted on his new family. He drained the last of the water. Mara held her hand out for the glass. He gave it to her. Their fingers brushed as she took it. Even half-dead, aching with the strain of holding this position, his cock perked up. It didn't help his control that her voice was a touch breathless as she asked, "Are you hungry?"

"No."

That luscious lip of hers slipped between her teeth as she grabbed up a cloth and dipped it into the basin. She wasn't happy with his lack of appetite. He wasn't happy with how tired she looked. It didn't look like either of them was going to get happy anytime soon. He touched the bandages on his ribs and looked around the room. His makings were nowhere in sight. Mara, however, still stood by the bed, her body half-turned from him as she fussed near the basin.

She stood there, wetting and wringing out the rag. There was more on her mind than filling his stomach.

"Something on your mind, Angel?"

She jumped, flashed him a startled look and then, as bland as all get out, said, "No."

He'd never seen a more obvious lie. He had a sneaking suspicion that Nidia had not left when he'd ordered her to. He hitched himself up. His hair fell forward. He tossed it back over his shoulder, frustration eating at him. He was going to have to attack this

suspicion head-on. He looked around again for his makings. He could use a cigarette while doing it. He didn't see his pouch anywhere. Obviously, a smoke wasn't going to happen either. He sighed to himself and accepted the reality. His luck was still running bad.

"Was anyone here when you got here, Mara?"

Her lips thinned to a flat line. Her grip tightened on the cloth, but her tone was purely conversational. "Your housekeeper."

"And?"

She cut him another quick glance. "And what?"

"What are you not telling me about Nidia?"

"What makes you think there's something to tell?"

"I know Nidia. And when last I saw you, you were melting in my arms, not bristling like a porcupine facing down a pack of dogs."

She dropped the cloth and faced him. Her hands fisted in her skirt. "Excuse me?"

"I don't need an excuse, just an answer."

"You assume there's something to tell."

"If there wasn't, you wouldn't be standing so stiff a breeze would snap you in two."

"It could be that I'm just nervous."

"Of what?"

"That you could be misinterpreting why I'm here."

She said that in the prissiest tone he'd ever heard from her. Her chin inched a notch higher when she said it, telling him better than words that here was a subject she cared about.

"You aren't here because you want our marriage?"

Her jaw dropped before she snapped her mouth closed. She struggled with herself, the cloth in her hands, and what she intended to say before finally settling on, "I'm not sure."

"About what?"

Again one of those strange looks. "About whether this can work."

"Doesn't have much choice but to work." Using the tall bedpost as a lever, Cougar pulled himself to an upright position. "We're married and your coming here put paid to the deal."

"I have a choice."

He pulled a pillow behind his spine and slowly leaned back against it. "We're married and staying that way."

It felt good to say it.

Apparently, it didn't sound as good to Mara. She tossed the rag she'd been mutilating into the bowl on the bedside table.

She folded her arms across her chest. "I can get an annulment."

That little bombshell dropped with a clunk on Cougar's ego. Mara could tell from his startled blink, and the way he stopped breathing. It was quite satisfying to get in the last word for a change. Never mind that she really hadn't decided to apply for the annulment. She had the upper hand for the moment and she intended to keep it.

Cougar's dark gold eyes narrowed. He suddenly looked as dangerous as his namesake. She should be afraid. Instead, a shiver of pure excitement snaked down her spine as he said in a carefully modulated drawl, "I assume you've checked this out with an attorney?"

"Brad took care of that for me."

His frown got deeper. Her shiver came harder, and she realized that she actually liked tempting the wildness in him.

"How long has Brad been taking care of legal matters for you?"

Mara clasped her hands in front of her and threw up her chin. She had absolutely no reason to feel guilty. "Since he offered to marry me if things don't work out with us."

The round of cursing that came from Cougar as he attempted to surge to his feet, made her reconsider. Maybe it *was* a bit reprehensible to consider a marriage proposal from one man while still married to another. Hurrying forward, Mara helped Cougar to settle back down on the bed. She paid no attention to the way he threw off her hands. She couldn't ignore, however, the fingers that clamped on her chin like a vise and yanked her face to within an inch of his.

Or his deep growl of "You're mine."

Only a fool would deny that possession at this particular moment, and Mara prided herself on her level-headedness, so she had no idea why the words popped out of her mouth.

"You don't own me."

"You're my wife. I own every hair on that pretty head."

She stepped out of his reach. "You own nothing I don't give you."

"Then come here and give it to me."

"No."

He threw the sheet off his legs. "If you make me come after you, I'll make you scream."

Some of her confidence leaked away as she stared at his bare legs with their thick muscles and light dusting of hair. His cock lay against his thigh, intimidating even at rest. The wide shaft thickened and stretched beneath her gaze. The mushroom-shaped head bobbed up and then dipped down as it engorged, the shaft slightly curving as if the bulbous head were too heavy for it to support. She didn't know how he ever expected to fit inside her. She couldn't take her eyes off his manhood as she reminded him, "You said you wouldn't hurt me."

He snaked his hand out and grabbed her arm. "So I did."

Cougar pulled until Mara was knee-to-knee with him. He kept one hand on the bedpost to maintain his balance. Her eyes were big when they met his. Full of questions and that defiance he so perversely loved. He shifted his hand to her wrists. His finger snared in the lace of the wide cuff of her dress. There was a small popping tear and Mara gasped in horror. "You tore my dress!"

He shrugged. He'd buy her a hundred more. "Just a little."

He didn't let go despite her efforts to see.

"It's new!" she cried as she twisted her arm. "Brad just bought it for me."

Something cold, hard and alien settled in the pit of Cougar's stomach. "What the hell do you mean, Brad bought you a dress?"

Mara flinched when he pinned her hand at his hip, bringing her face to within inches of his.

"Well, he saw the one Dorothy gave me wouldn't stay on, so apparently, he felt it was his Christian duty to provide one for me."

"Christian duty my ass," Cougar snapped. "No man," he bit out carefully, "buys clothing for a woman not his own, unless he intends something dishonorable."

"I hate to burst your bubble," Mara tossed her braid back over her shoulder, matching his glare with one of her own, "but the Reverend has already made his honorable intentions clear to Doc, Dorothy, and me."

Her defiance, as always, presented him with the dual temptation of squashing it or encouraging it. He asked almost politely, "Doc and Dorothy know about this?"

"Of course!"

Cougar's right eyebrow rose skeptically. "And they didn't have anything to say?"

He slid his grip up her arm, over her elbow and kept on going. Mara's throat worked as she attempted to answer. She definitely hadn't developed immunity since they'd been apart.

"We all agreed that something would have to be done about you first."

He just bet they had. He opened his hand and rounded the curve of her shoulder. "And what did you decide to do about me?"

Mara swallowed as his hand curled around the back of her neck. He lightened his touch. She was so damned delicate, he'd have to be careful with her in and out of bed.

"Doc thought we should wait until you graced us with your presence, and Dorothy thought I shouldn't settle for marriage without the fire."

Cougar played with her hair, sliding the soft strands through his fingers, creating little sensual shivers down her spine from the resulting tugs. Shivers he felt in the tips of his fingers. Shivers that went straight to his cock, which pulsed in eager response. "And what did you decide?"

Mara shifted beneath Cougar's touch. She couldn't think straight when he touched her. Where logic screamed "run", instinct coaxed 'stay'. And somehow, she had to find

a way to live between the two extremes. She looked at him. At his long, wild mane of hair falling over his heavily muscled shoulders, and his dark gold eyes burning with a primitive need to possess. Lord help her, taking risks wasn't easy.

She tugged tentatively at the wrist, attached to the hand, attached to the fingers that were sending shivers down her spine. The only response she received was a barely perceptible shake of Cougar's head. She bit her lip and then blurted out the outrageous truth. "I wanted to try the fire."

Pulling slowly on her neck, Cougar drew her lips within kissing distance. "Wise choice."

Before he pressed his mouth against hers, she asked, "Why?"

"Because I would have killed him if he'd touched you," he growled with flat sincerity. Her gasp was lost as his lips settled over hers in a hard, hot, possessive kiss that seemed to reach through all her defenses until it touched her soul. She drew back. Cougar's hand dropped from her hair to rest atop hers on the covers. The urge to possess faded from his gaze and was replaced by deep satisfaction. She leapt up from the bed as if distance could undo what had occurred.

"Suppose you tell the Reverend to go to Hell," Cougar said, dropping back against the headboard, looking darkly dangerous and in complete control.

"I most certainly will not. Especially after he went to all the trouble of getting me this dress."

"And especially after the way you encouraged him?" Cougar prompted perceptively.

"I did not encourage him!"

"That must be why you're ducking my gaze."

"Well, maybe I didn't discourage as hard as I should have." She'd been just a little too flattered for a moment that another good-looking man had expressed an interest in her after twenty-three years of not a one giving her a second glance.

Cougar leaned back on the bed, feeling the pain and weariness pull him back into the pillows. He felt like someone had dragged him through a knothole backwards. Stretching out his arm, he tucked a bright swathe of Mara's hair behind her ear. A glance ripe with resentment was his reward. He chuckled, and promptly wished he hadn't, when brilliant streaks of pain flashed through his torso. "If you want to engage in verbal warfare, Angel," he pointed out lazily, "you're going to have to drop the delightful habit of answering with immediate and total honesty. It gives your opponent easy access to all your weaknesses."

Bracing her hands on the back of the chair, Mara grimaced with disgust. "I know, I come up with the wittiest retorts but the minute I open my mouth, some perverse spirit replaces them with the unvarnished truth."

"I like it."

"You wouldn't be saying that if you were the one cursed with an honest nature." She arched her back and rolled her shoulders.

"Probably not." He noticed the stiff way she moved. "Come here."

Her response was to take two steps back.

"That wasn't a request."

Mara's head snapped up. The retort that leapt to her lips prodded his sense of humor. The smile he was trying to hide must have shown on his face because she bit back the retort and came to his side, obviously not willing to give him the satisfaction of a predictable response.

"Why do you have to be so provoking?" she asked.

He motioned for her to turn around and sit beside him. "Just my nature, I suspect. Scoot up here a bit."

Mara shook her head as she complied. Cougar braced his hands on her shoulders and lightly began massaging the tight muscles. Mara groaned as Cougar went to work. He immediately lightened his touch. He ran his thumbs up the muscles on either side of her spine, keeping the pressure steady and light as he worked the knots he could feel bunched under the skin.

She practically collapsed into his hands.

"Feel good?" he asked.

"Lord, yes!" she moaned.

Cougar immediately imagined her sighing with just that amount of ecstasy while he was inside her. His body reacted predictably. He glanced down and promptly swore. Now he had a whole new problem, because if his wife got a look at his straining cock while she was sitting so close, she'd start worrying and stiffening up. And he rather enjoyed having her trusting little body under his hands.

"Is something wrong?" she asked, glancing over her shoulder.

Cougar flicked the tip of her nose with his index finger. "Nope. I just moved wrong."

"Oh, I'm so sorry." She scooted forward, obviously intending to get up.

"Nothing to be sorry for," Cougar countered, restraining her with steady pressure on her shoulders. Lord, she was tiny. Her shoulders were barely the width of his hands. He thought of all she'd done for him this past week, the buckets she must have carried, and marveled that she'd managed it at all. He resumed his massage. "Thank you for taking care of me."

"I shouldn't be letting you do this. You're still in the sickbed." The way she melted into his hands belied her words.

Cougar ran his finger down the delicate line of her spine, stopping just above her hips. "And you're barely out of yours. How much help was Nidia to you anyway?"

With his hands on her body as they were, Cougar couldn't help but notice the way Mara tensed at the mention of his housekeeper's name.

"We had a brief conversation when I arrived. I didn't see her again until this morning."

"You mean she left you all alone to care for me?" It was worse than he'd thought.

"I didn't need her help."

More than likely, she'd just refused to accept it.

"And Clint?"

"Clint got the fever, too."

Cougar leaned back and closed his eyes. After a moment, he released his pent-up breath on a heavy sigh but he didn't let go of her shoulders. He had a feeling she'd flee if he did. Like she always did when she thought he was getting too close to something she didn't want him to know. "Are you ever going to forgive me for all this?"

"You couldn't help getting sick."

"My plan was for you to have an easy time of it."

"I'd be bored with easy."

She tried to shrug out from under his hands, but all he had to do to keep her still was to add a ridiculously small amount of strength to his grip. He brushed a long curl of hair out of his way and worked a knot in the center of her shoulder blade. He'd have to see to putting a guard on the place. No matter what mean and nasty tricks he taught her, Mara just wasn't built to defend herself against even the smallest of men.

"You plan on holding a grudge?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On what Nidia is to you," Mara turned within the grip of his hands to stare at him, hurt and challenge making up equal parts of her glare.

He'd been talking about her having to take care of him and she was focused on his fidelity. Whatever Mara had seen or heard regarding Nidia, it hadn't been good. "Shit."

"I'll thank you not to swear."

"I'll try to remember."

"Succeed."

"You thinking about giving me orders?" He might have put too much growl in his tone because instead of bristling and taking him down a peg like he'd expected, she seemed to collapse into herself, throwing up that wall of blankness he hated.

"No."

His hands slid down her upper arms. "A shame."

She cast him a surprised look. "You want me to fight with you?"

"If you feel the need."

Her eyes traveled from the top of his head to his toes tenting the bedspread. "I'm new to arguing."

And her tone implied she thought it would be suicide to argue with him.

"I can give you pointers if you need them."

Her thanks to his offer was dry.

He touched her cheek and gave her the truth she needed. "At one time, I toyed with the idea of making Nidia my mistress."

"Oh." One syllable, and a sighed one at that, was all the answer she gave him.

"I said at one time, but I never followed through and I told her to leave before we married and again after our marriage."

"She didn't leave."

"Obviously, and now I want to know what happened that's affecting us."

She tried to slide away.

Anchoring Mara to his side by capturing her wrist in his hand, Cougar ran his free one through his hair. The fact that not a tangle caught his fingers indicated how seriously Mara had taken his care. Damn! Something had to have happened, otherwise Mara wouldn't be sitting beside him, her eyes big with hurt, barely masked by pride.

"What aren't you telling me, Mara?"

"I saw you," she whispered hoarsely.

Cougar's grip on Mara's arm tightened by degrees as his mind raced from one possibility to another. None of them good. "What did you see?"

Mara stubbornly studied the wrinkles in the sheets. Cougar curled two fingers under her chin and forced her to meet his gaze. "I'm tired, as weak as a newborn baby, and my chest feels like Old Red danced a jig on it last night. I don't want to fight, and I don't want you lashing out at me every chance you get because you're nursing wounds I don't understand. Now, tell me, what did you see?"

Mara shook her head. Her lower lip slid between her teeth, which immediately set to work. "I can't."

"Then show me," Cougar insisted while gently removing her lip from her teeth's assault.

That instruction got him a look so full of horror, Cougar figured he had one possibility ruled out. "From that reaction, I'd say it'd be safe to say you didn't catch us kissing."

"No," Mara agreed. "I'd say that's a safe enough assumption."

"Then how about enlightening me?"

He met Mara's stare, matching her stubborn for stubborn until she sighed in defeat. "You're not going to give up until I tell you, are you?"

Cougar shook his head. "Not hardly. We've got enough to overcome without adding anymore bogey men to the pile."

Mara shoved her hair back from her face. "Well, I'm not going to look at you while I tell you," she stated emphatically.

"Fine," Cougar agreed. She could recite his misdeeds while standing on her head for all he cared, just as long as she got the telling done.

Mara didn't speak at first. She just stared at the far wall as if the striped wallpaper held the secrets of the world. Cougar woke up every morning looking at that wall. The only secret it held was a nail pop hidden in the midst of the third blue stripe left of the door.

Sliding carefully away from the edge of the bed, Cougar pulled steadily on Mara's arm, until she was forced to lie beside him. She was little, but she made the most of what she had, locking every muscle tight. Her big brown eyes turned on him until he had to confess, "I want to be conscious through the whole story," he admitted. "I'm ashamed to say, I couldn't maintain that position much longer without passing out."

"Do you know how galling I find it that even in your weakened condition, you can force me to do your bidding with just a flick of the wrist?" she asked.

"I have an idea."

"Then why do you do it?"

Because I can, didn't sound right, for all that it was the truth, so he shrugged, his right shoulder handling the stress easier than the left. "I just wanted to lie down, and since you have to be just as tired as I am, if not more, I thought you could join me."

"You could have just asked."

Cougar's response was a knowing look.

Mara sighed and dropped the subject. Truth be told, she was out on her feet, and she didn't know how much longer she was going to be able to stay awake.

"I got tired of waiting for you to remember you had a wife," she began. The softness of the pillow beckoned. Mara succumbed to the lure. Resting on her left side, her back to Cougar, she closed her eyes. His warmth crept out to surround her, his scent quick to follow.

"Dorothy pointed me in the right direction, and I headed out. When I got here the place was deserted. Or so I thought."

Cougar stroked her arm from shoulder to elbow and back again with the back of his finger. "Remind me when I get to feeling stronger to chew you out for coming here on your own."

Mara ignored his growl. "I heard a noise upstairs. I thought your housekeeper might be working there, but when I entered the room..."

The blush burned up from her toes.

"Yes?" he prompted.

Mara buried her face in the pillow. "You were naked. Nidia was straddling your chest and she was, she had..."

The words wouldn't come out. Mara grabbed the pillow, seeing Nidia again, feeling the shock, the horror. And the hurt. It still hurt that he'd had Nidia here while she waited.

"Hell!" The fingers on her arm stilled, their weight increasing as he absorbed some of her tension into himself.

"There's more," Mara warned, her voice as tight as her grip on her pillow.

"There would be." Cougar's agreement rumbled out against her back, his drawl strangely flat.

"She wasn't embarrassed or anything."

"Nidia wouldn't be." Again, that deep drawl reverberated against her spine, his fingers resumed their stroking on her arm, the pressure slightly more than before, coaxing her harder against him.

Mara's fingers writhed deeper into the pillow. She wanted him to say more, do more, anything to indicate he regretted killing off her hopes.

"She seemed to delight in having me watch you together."

"I think I get the picture." The rustle of the adjacent pillow and the slight tug on her hair when his head moved preceded his shift away. "I'm sorry."

"So was Nidia," Mara muttered, staring at the dust motes drifting through the sunbeams.

The pillowcase rustled again, and his rough "Care to explain?" blew tendrils of hair across her ear.

"Not really." She just wanted it all to go away.

His palm curved over her shoulder. "Give it a shot, anyway."

"Isn't it enough that you were with another woman?"

"No."

"You want it all."

He slid his hand down her arm, his fingers curving around her forearm until he reached her wrist. "Always."

He folded her arm across her stomach, his hand following so he cradled her back against his chest. His arm was a solid weight.

"I dragged her off you," she informed him, trying to work up to resentment at the way he was shaping her body to his comfort. Except it comforted her, too.

"Somehow, I can't see Nidia taking that calmly."

"No," Mara conceded. "She didn't take that at all well."

The bed lurched and the mattress dipped as he lunged up on his elbow. His grunt of pain punctuated his tug as he rolled her onto her back. His long black hair brushed her shoulder as he ran his eyes over her.

"Did Nidia hurt you?"

"Hardly."

The skepticism in his golden gaze hit her on the raw.

"I am capable of defending myself."

His hand opened on her stomach, pressing lightly as his gaze ran over her body. He obviously did not believe her.

"You should be asking what I did to her," she grumbled as he rubbed her stomach in small, soothing circles.

He seemed content she was in no imminent danger, though he still loomed over her. "What did you do to her?"

"I cut off her hair."

His eyes snapped to hers and his hand stilled. "You did what?"

"I cut off her hair."

"Well hell." Two words that told her nothing about how he felt about that, or about how he felt about Nidia. Herself. Their situation. Did he think she was a woman who shared?

"If you still want her, she's still beautiful."

Cougar cupped Mara's face in his palm. He looked straight into her eyes and his tone left no doubt that he meant what he said.

"I don't want her," he declared firmly. "I told her to leave months ago. The only reason she's still here is because I couldn't spare the time to kick her out."

Looking at Cougar as he loomed over her, the bright sunlight glinting off his copper skin, the well-honed muscles of his arm bulging as he supported himself above her, he was totally and completely male. An exotically handsome man any woman would fight for. She knew exactly why Nidia was still here.

"I made my choice months ago," he clarified in the wake of her silence.

Meaning her, but she didn't know why, couldn't understand why someone like him would look twice at someone like her. But deep down, beneath the rational understanding that he was just talking to put her at ease, part of her exulted at the thought of being desired above someone else.

"You don't have to say things like that."

"Like what?"

She turned her head away from his frown. She didn't want to see the lie when politeness forced him to speak it. "I'm not naïve."

"Glad to hear it." His hand slid up over her ribs. It might have been her imagination, but it seemed to linger on her left nipple, rubbing it lightly before sliding across her throat and curving around her neck. His thumb forced her chin back, but it was his words that had her eyes flying to his.

"I don't want another woman."

Mara blinked, opened her mouth and then snapped it shut.

"Are we square on that?" Cougar asked, his thumb pressing against her lower lip. He seemed fascinated with watching the way her lip responded to his manipulation.

"Quite square," she whispered as his taste infiltrated her mouth. Warm and salty.

"Good." He released his hold on her. She watched as he carefully eased down on the bed beside her. Even flat on his back, he was imposing.

"I need to get you some broth," she sighed on a yawn, "and I should check your wounds to make sure you didn't reopen them with all your tossing about. I won't even mention the mountain of laundry piled up downstairs."

"By all means," Cougar agreed, pulling her against him, settling her cheek on his shoulder. "Let's not mention it."

Her cheek fit his shoulder as if it was made to be there. Beneath her ear, she could hear his heartbeat. Steady and strong, just like the rest of him.

"As to the rest," he said, pulling her arm over his stomach and then tugging her thigh over his, "my wounds are fine and I'm not the least bit hungry. All I want to do is sleep."

She wanted to argue with him, but he was sliding his hand up her thigh under her skirt. His fingers brushed her knife sheath. He chuckled, dropped a kiss on the top of her head, and untied the bottom ties. He was slower on the upper ones, brushing the fleshy skin on the inside of her thigh over and over until she wanted to jerk into his touch. By the time the ties gave, she was gritting her teeth against a moan. A quick glance at Cougar's face showed he was aware of her tension. His smile was that wickedly dark one that made her pulse pound and her blush rise.

He let the ties remain where they lay, dangling against her leg, tickling her flesh. His fingers pinched the resilient muscle of her inner thigh. Her breath caught in her throat as he held her suspended on the edge of anticipation.

"When I'm feeling better, I'm going to put my mouth here."

She blinked, weighing the notion.

"I'll leave a mark."

Her body did not react like it was a threat. Every tired, exhausted nerve ending immediately imagined the feel of his mouth sucking on her sensitive flesh. Moisture gushed between her thighs. She closed her eyes. She was pathetic.

His chuckle was very masculine. Very satisfied. He pulled the sheath from her thigh. "But for now, I'll just settle for some sleep."

The knife and sheath landed on the bedside table with a soft thunk. His big hand curved around her hip. Within minutes, his breathing was deep and even.

When she was sure he was asleep, Mara studied his face, looking for answers, clues to what made him tick. She didn't find any. She sighed, closed her eyes. She was going to have to keep her wits about her if she was going to survive this marriage.

Chapter Twelve

Three days later, Cougar and Clint watched in aggrieved silence as Mara grabbed the doorknob and slammed out of the room. At the last possible second, she twitched the skirt of Dorothy's borrowed dress out of harm's way. The resounding crash of wood violently meeting wood shook the house. A small vase Cougar used as an ashtray teetered off the desk.

Clint collapsed into the chair beside Cougar's bed, a smile tugging at his lips. "Thought she'd get her skirt there for a minute."

Cougar shook his head in wry amusement. "I'm discovering my wife has a positive flair for courting the edge of disaster."

"Not quite the grateful, biddable wife you thought you were getting?"

"Not quite."

"You don't sound too upset."

"Probably because I'm not."

Cougar eyed Clint. "I know why she's mad at me, but what did you do to get on her bad side?"

Clint lounged in the chair, his injured leg stretched out before him, his crutches propped up against the side of the wing back chair. "I rode a horse," he drawled lazily.

Reaching into his shirt pocket, he pulled out his papers and tobacco pouch. With a lift of his eyebrow, he indicated the cigarette fixings.

Cougar frowned in response. "No, thank you. And you're not going to have one either."

Clint's left brow matched the right's elevated position. "Since when?"

"Since Mara found an etiquette book in the library."

"I'm not following."

"No one but a woman could."

Clint patiently waited him out.

"Apparently, it's not proper for men to smoke in the house with the exception of having one with an after-dinner brandy," Cougar clarified. It sounded even more stupid when he said it.

"You don't drink brandy," Clint pointed out.

"No shit."

"So because you don't drink brandy, you can't smoke?"

"Pretty much."

Clint pulled out a paper. "You ever consider just laying down the law?"

"Yeah."

Clint sprinkled tobacco on the paper and rolled it tight. "And?"

"You ever see a woman cry without shedding a tear?" Cougar asked.

Clint paused mid-lick on the edge of the paper. "Can't say that I have."

"Well, don't be passing judgment until you do."

Clint finished wetting the paper's edge. As he sealed it, he asked, "Still don't see why that means I can't have a smoke."

Cougar snatched the cigarette out of Clint's hand. "I'm not spending another meal choking down clear broth because she catches a whiff of smoke the next time she marches in here."

Clint choked on his laughter as he tucked his makings back into his pocket. "Is that how she's keeping you in line?"

Cougar shot a murderous glare at the closed door. "Not that she's owning up to," he grumbled. "But one meal, after enduring endless rounds of watered-down broth..."

"It's only been two days."

"And then," Cougar continued as if no interruption had occurred. "I get the most mouthwatering platter of roast beef and mashed potatoes." At the memory, saliva filled Cougar's mouth. One look at Clint's face stated emphatically that he was sharing the same, beautiful memory.

"Mara sure can cook," he sighed blissfully.

"Yeah," Cougar agreed. "Well, one lousy cigarette later, and I'm back to tasteless broth and dry bread."

"If I were you," Clint advised solemnly. "I'd bury every bit of tobacco on the place in a deep, dark hole."

Cougar glared at the bulge in the pocket of Clint's well-worn red shirt. "Starting with yours."

"Want one that badly, huh?"

Cougar ran his hand over his face as if to wipe away the urge. "Yeah."

Clint smiled at his cousin's dilemma. "Look at it this way. At least Mara didn't take it into her head that coffee wasn't good for an invalid."

In response, Cougar passed the cup on the bed stand to Clint. One look was all it took.

"Couldn't grow hair on the backside of Two-Shot Hank," Clint observed morosely, naming a man famous for the abundance of hair gracing his body. "Who'd have thought that someone who could cook like those fancy chefs in San Francisco would make coffee so weak, tea would be ashamed to call it kin?"

Cougar grunted and placed the cup on the floor by the bed. For a moment, the two men eyed each other in sympathetic communion.

"So smoking is responsible for Mara storming around here like a thunderstorm at full tilt?" Clint observed.

"That's one reason," Cougar admitted, "but it's not the reason she just slammed out of here."

Clint stopped twirling his hat and dropped it on his knee. His bent head hid his knowing smile. "Oh."

Cougar adjusted the pillow behind his back. "I just informed Mrs. High and Mighty that I was officially vacating the sickbed tomorrow."

"Why am I not surprised?"

"The woman's trying to make an invalid of me."

"I can see where she's overreacting," Clint agreed magnanimously. "After all, she nearly killed herself keeping you alive." He cocked his head to one side. "I don't see why she feels two days isn't long enough to recover from being mauled by a bear and a fever that's already killed three people."

"Don't start." Cougar shot his cousin a glare. If anyone could give Doc a run for his money in the meddling department, it was Clint. Beneath all that molasses-thick, lazy get-to-it-in-my-own-time attitude, lurked a stubborn bulldog of a temperament. "It's my body, and I damned well know when I'm ready to put it to use. Hell, I'm only talking about getting out of bed, not riding herd."

"You're saving that for the day after, I gather."

"Sometimes," Cougar grumbled, "having you for a cousin is worse than having a second conscience."

"Just don't want to see all your wife's good work undone." The smile disappeared from Clint's black eyes, leaving them dark and serious. "It was touch and go there for a while, cousin, with nothing standing between you and your maker but that tiny bit of female determination."

"So I gather."

"I hope you had the good sense to drop to your knees and kiss her feet when you woke up."

Clint was back to twirling his hat laconically around his finger, Cougar noticed. A sure sign he was thinking on something. Or plotting. For all his lazy appearance, a close observer would note that Clint was never still. He accomplished more at a walk than most accomplished at a run.

"Actually," Cougar admitted, "the very first thing I did was to accuse her of taking up with the Reverend."

Clint whistled long and low through his teeth. The hat looped awkwardly around his finger as he forgot to keep the rhythm. "I'm surprised she didn't send the room up in flames with her anger. She's a feisty little thing for all she looks like a porcelain angel. Took a pitchfork to me at our first meeting."

"Ah, yes. The infamous pitchfork incident. I've been meaning to talk to you about that. Just what in hell did you do to spark such a reaction?"

Clint chuckled. The tan Stetson with its snakeskin band resumed its slow, steady whirl. "I told you. I rode a horse."

"And how did riding a horse cause Mara to go reaching for the nearest pitchfork?"

Clint smoothed a crease from the brim of his hat. "The pitchfork actually came first."

"Am I going to have to pull teeth to get the story out of you?" Cougar asked with no real rancor. Sooner or later, Clint would get to the point.

Clint lifted his head, revealing his admiration. "You should have seen her, cous. She came flying into the barn, rapping out orders to beat the band. Looked ready to gut me for not having gone to get Doc sooner."

Clint's gaze when it met Cougar's was filled with the contradictory emotions of apology and fury. "You ought to whip that bitch Nidia."

"No point. She'd probably enjoy it. Go on with your story."

Clint shrugged. "There isn't much left to tell. She finally stopped jabbing that pitchfork at my gut and calling me every foul name in the book right about the time she realized I didn't know you were up at the house dying. That's when she started rapping out orders." Clint slanted Cougar a dark look. "You really should talk to her about defending herself. She got way too close, too fast. I was able to snatch it right out of her hands. It might not have been much in the way of protection, but it was all she had."

"She carries a wicked blade strapped to her thigh."

Clint arced his Stetson to his other hand, never missing a beat. "A knife's no good if you don't have the skill or the wherewithal to use it."

Cougar pulled up his knee and rested his arm across the top. "Oh, Mara has the wherewithal, all right. Killed Cecile with one before we got out of that hellhole, and she fended off Nidia's attack apparently with no problem."

The hat flopped to another jerky halt and Cougar's smile broadened to a chuckle as he watched comprehension dawn on his cousin's face.

"I wondered at Nidia's haircut. Did Mara...?"

"Yup."

"And you say she took out Cecile?"

"Yup."

"And she married up with you?"

"Yup."

Clint's shook his head. "Damn. You are one lucky son of a bitch."

Cougar rubbed at the bandages covering his chest. The hair Mara had shaved away was growing back with a vengeance that threatened to drive him crazy with itching. "Yes. I am."

Clint's stomach, never far from the subject of food, rumbled loudly. "And she can cook, too," he marveled. "I'm going to have to spend more time in nefarious whorehouses."

"If you're in the market for an easy woman," Cougar offered helpfully, "Nidia will be available soon."

"Soon?" Clint yelped, astounded. "Why the hell isn't she available now?" He dropped his hat back to his knee with a disgusted jerk. "You can't seriously prefer her over Mara. I mean, sure Mara's a little banged up right now, and Nidia is quite a bit more," Clint graphically cupped his hands three feet out in front of his chest. "But Mara is as delicate as a rose. As quick as she is to anger, I bet she'd be a wild blossom in your bed. All sweet and filled with fire."

The anger and possessiveness came out of nowhere, propelling him half out of the bed, the warning issuing from his throat before he was even aware of the intent. "That'll be enough."

Clint shut up immediately, the gaze he turned on Cougar speculative.

Clint dragged his hand down his face. For a moment, Cougar felt like he was looking in a mirror. "Hell, Cougar, I'm sorry," Clint apologized. "I meant no disrespect. But seriously, you don't prefer Nidia..."

"Of course not!"

"Then why in hell is she still here?"

The fact that there was no good way to answer must have shown on his face.

"Uh-oh..."

"Yeah." Cougar echoed the sentiment. "Uh-oh. As you pointed out, Mara is not built sturdy, and for all her denials, she's still weak as a kitten from nursing me. The only help for fifty miles is Nidia. Jackson is sending for his sister, Lorie, but since I've forbidden Mara to do anything more strenuous than cooking meals, I'm stuck with that she-cat until Lorie can get here."

Clint glanced out the window. "I think you'd better just send Nidia on her way and be done with it. Save yourself a lot of burnt meals and a lot of useless hassle."

Cougar traced the trajectory of Clint's stare. Pushing to his feet, he made his way awkwardly to the window, his wounds itching and burning with every step. The curses that marked his progress were nothing compared to those he spewed when he saw what was affording Clint such amusement. He hauled on the window but the damned thing was swollen shut. Naked but for the quilt he yanked off the bed and threw around his hips, he lurched out the door, scratching and swearing as he went. Swinging up on his crutches with graceful effort, Clint tagged along in his wake, laughing so hard, Cougar thought he'd choke.

* * * * *

Thwack!

Mara landed the rug beater on the large wool carpet with a satisfying amount of force, supplanting her husband's face over the most beautiful carpet she'd ever seen. Who on God's green earth did he think he was fooling? Concerned about her health, my foot. If she hadn't killed herself dragging him back from the edge of the grave, caring for a nearly recovered man wasn't going to drive her into one. Mara paused her fuming to drag one of the socks she was using as a glove across her brow. Though the weather was brisk, taking one's frustrations out on a rug worked up a sweat.

Her eyes narrowed in renewed aggravation as she recalled the "good morning" she'd received from Cougar two days ago. She'd opened her eyes to the pink dawn of a new day, and the belief that her husband was just as desirous of making their marriage work as she. She'd smiled at Cougar, and bid him good morning.

He'd kissed her and announced that Nidia was staying on because she was the only help available. *Did he think she was a fool?*

Well, Mara thought, swinging the wooden tool in a wide arc, Mr. High and Mighty McKinnely had a few surprises coming his way. Sooner than he might believe. Nidia was no longer in residence. She swung the beater again. And she wasn't coming back.

Cougar watched as Mara swung the beater. Clearly, she hadn't heard him approach.

"I thought I told you that housework was out until I deemed it okay." It took more effort than normal to achieve a growl. Making it down those stairs had taken most of the fight out of him. And the way Mara spun around to face him with that rug beater leveled at his head, made him wonder if he might be needing his strength back fast.

Mara lifted her chin and swung the beater at the rug. "You did."

Cougar ground his teeth. Hell, his hands backed down immediately when he turned this look on them, but his little wife, whom he could snap in two as quick as he could spit, just threw his authority back in his face. The woman needed a keeper. "Maybe you misunderstood, Angel. It wasn't a request."

Mara's eyes narrowed to slits. "I didn't misunderstand, but since Nidia is no longer around, that order is no longer relevant."

"What do you mean she's not around?"

"I sent her packing this morning," she informed him without a trace of guilt, nimbly sideswiping his grab for the rug beater. "Try that again and you won't be grabbing anything for a long while."

She was threatening him, Cougar realized on a note of pure shock. His primary inclination was to wrest that woven paddle from her hands and apply it to her backside, but common sense said he couldn't win this fight that way. He needed calm. He clenched his teeth hard enough that a muscle jumped in his jaw, but he managed a reasonable tone. "Be sensible, Mara. That rug is twice your weight. Your ribs aren't

healed, and one night of solid rest isn't going to restore all the sleep you lost caring for me."

Mara's voice was laced with just as much calm as his. "I appreciate your concern, but I am well aware of my body, and trust me, it lets me know the minute I push too far."

Cougar ran his hand through his hair in frustration. "You wouldn't recognize common sense if it jumped up and bit you."

Her hand came to her stomach, a sign he was beginning to recognize indicated that she was nervous, but nerves didn't keep her chin down or her from facing him. "Just because I don't agree doesn't mean I'm not sensible."

He eyed her hand and that chin. "Couldn't prove it by me."

"I don't need to prove it by you."

"Yes, you do since it's my job to take care of you."

She stared at him for a long time. The paddle in her hand dipped to the ground. The hand pressing her abdomen curled into a fist and dug in deeper. "I'm not a job."

He looked at the rug, the paddle in her hand and the anger on her face. He reached for the paddle. "Well, you're sure turning into a lot of work."

She yanked it free of his grip. "Then you needn't bother yourself anymore. From here on out, I'll make decisions for myself."

"As long as those decisions follow my orders, we'll be fine."

"If you feel the need to play the heavy-handed husband, why don't you hunt up Nidia and practice on her? I'm sure she'd love to fall into the role of wife," Mara suggested in a tone so sweet, it bordered on sarcasm.

"Why should I want Nidia when I've got you?"

Mara had no idea. Absolutely none. She spun around and delivered a blow to the rug that shook the tree and sent shockwaves of pain up her arms. She had no idea why a man like Cougar would want someone like her. The beater fell from her hands. She shook out the tingles. Her stomach churned as she turned to face him. Behind him, at a distance, stood Clint. Watching her. Them. Why was everything she did in front of an audience?

"I don't know, but you seem to have us confused in your mind."

"How so?"

"You seem to think I'm as lazy and useless as she is."

She bent down to pick up the beater, her intent to get out of there. He caught her arm with his hand, stopping her halfway to her goal. She straightened, but he didn't let her go. He should look ridiculous standing there in the red and brown quilt and nothing else. He didn't. He just looked incredibly handsome, incredibly sexy as he drawled, "I know exactly who you are."

His deep voice sent a shiver down her spine. His hand on her arm was warm. His eyes as they stared into hers, intent. Maybe he was trying to make her feel better. Maybe he was trying to intimidate her. Whatever he was trying to do, he needed to be clearer because she didn't know what he meant. Didn't know who he thought she was, and it was driving her nuts trying to figure out what he wanted from her. "Well, congratulations."

Her stomach rolled hard. She pressed her hand into her abdomen. His eyes followed the movement. He frowned.

"You don't have to prove yourself to me."

Well, maybe she had something to prove to herself. "I'll keep that in mind."

His fingers moved on her inner arm in a caress she felt to her toes. "See that you do."

His eyes narrowed as she jerked her arm free. Lord, he had gall. She grabbed up her beater and the last of her courage. "I'll do exactly as I please."

She turned on her heel and stalked toward the house. She'd finish the rugs later.

Cougar watched her stomp toward the house, his senses still reeling from her unwitting display as she'd bent over. Damned if she didn't have the prettiest breasts.

Clint sauntered up. "Very nice," he commented in a voice laced with amusement. He threw up his hands to ward off the blow Cougar was unaware of aiming.

"Don't be an idiot, man." Clint grunted as he steadied Cougar in the aftermath of all that momentum. "I wouldn't comment upon your wife's charms were I to see them. I was referring to the way you set your wife in her place. It's clear you've established who's boss."

Cougar shot Clint a sideways glance before holding out his hand. "Here, give me a hand getting down. I can't face that climb back inside without some rest."

"More than likely you just don't want to come up against the wrong side of your wife's tongue again," Clint grunted, as he bore the brunt of Cougar's weight as he sat down.

Cougar tilted his head back against the tree's rough trunk, feeling the bark grab at his hair. The wind was cold, so he pulled some of the quilt over his shoulder. A small smile touched his lips. "She could cut steel with it, couldn't she?"

"Yup," Clint agreed.

"It upsets her to argue."

"I noticed."

Cougar smiled. "She does it pretty well, though."

"And no doubt, living with you, she'll get even better."

"That's definitely something to look forward to."

"So, what are you going to do with her in the interim?"

"The interim?" Cougar watched Mara climb the steps to the porch, that cute ass swishing side to side.

"Yeah. Until she gets confident enough to kick your butt, what are you going to do with her?"

"I haven't decided."

Clint dropped down on the other side of the tree. "If it were me, I'd hold on to her tight, and give her mouth something to do besides cut me up."

Cougar shifted his shoulders into a more comfortable position. "And what would that be?"

From the other side of the tree, came a disgusted snort. "If you don't know that, then you deserve to be cut up in little pieces and served as slop to the hogs."

With a mind to his healing scabs, Cougar reached behind his head and freed a piece of hair from the greedy clutches of the tree. "Oh that. Well, due to physical reasons, I'm afraid that's out for a while, too."

This time, it was Clint's turn to swear. "Hell, Cougar! You don't have to bed a woman every time you kiss her. When a woman's as hot-spirited as Mara, you're not going to get her to jump her fences through force anyhow. You're going to have to ease her past the gate. Make her want it. That is, unless you don't care whether your wife wants you too?"

Oh, he wanted her to want him all right, Cougar thought. He just didn't know if it was possible to the degree he planned. Cougar grabbed a clump of dead grass. One by one he plucked out the individual blades. Clint had always been a ladies' man, even though folks said Cougar was the better looking. Still, asking for advice on the subject of women was a delicate thing. He didn't want to appear desperate. He slowly crushed the clump in a vicious grip. Shit! Who was he trying to kid? He was desperate.

"Suppose," he began quietly, "that there was a woman who'd been hurt very badly. An innocent that you later made into your wife. How would you go about getting her to relax?"

"First off," Clint retorted angrily, leaning around the tree, "I wouldn't keep my whore within two hundred miles of my wife!"

Cougar tossed the blob of dirt and grass as far as he could. The wind blew his hair across his face. "Yeah," he admitted. "I might have messed up there." He shrugged as Clint slid around to settle beside him. "I thought I was being practical. Choosing the lesser of two evils."

Clint opened his mouth to make another scathing retort and then slowly closed his teeth on the words. He shifted position so they were more side-to-side.

"Tell me, cous," Clint asked thoughtfully, "how much experience have you had winning a woman to your side?"

Cougar swore and knew damned well the tips of his ears were red. "Enough."

"Uh-huh." Clint drew up his knee, and resting his forearm on the top, began to twirl his Stetson. "How many does that make if we discount that twit Emily?"

Wishing he had the mobility to land his cousin on his ass, Cougar growled deep in his throat before answering.

"What was that?"

"None, dammit."

The hat lost its rhythm temporarily, before in that same conversational tone, Clint probed deeper. "Were you a virgin?"

Awkward as hell, and hating every clumsy jerk, Cougar struggled to get to his feet. "Not hardly."

Reaching up lazily, Clint dragged him back down. "Don't get your feathers in an uproar, man. I just want to know how much experience we're talking here."

For the first time in his life, Cougar regretted the single-mindedness that had rewarded him with his current level of success. If he'd just spent a little more time whoring rather than pulling an extra job, he wouldn't be sitting here now feeling inferior for the first time in his life. Pushing his palms in an upward path over his cheeks, he dragged his fingers through the thick mass of his hair. Clint was right. If he wanted the man's help, he had to know what he was working with. "There were a couple of widows, all of them just short-term. There wasn't any persuading. They knew of my reputation and weren't shy about getting a piece for themselves. And after we pulled in the bounty from that Spencer heiress..." he shrugged.

"Nothing like a dangerous reputation and money to make a man popular," Clint agreed, his smile flashing in his dark eyes a second before his lips took it up.

"You should know," Cougar countered wryly.

"I'll have you know the ladies want me for my beauty and not because we got rich collecting bounties."

"Uh-huh." Part of that might be true, but as plenty of outlaws had discovered, Clint could turn rattlesnake mean in the blink of an eye, that lazy smile still on his face as he put a bullet they never saw coming between their eyes. All it took was threatening something he cared about. And Clint was passionate about a lot of things. Women, children, small animals. Pretty much anything he decided was defenseless. Which apparently, right now included Cougar.

Cougar sighed and finished answering the question Clint had asked. He tossed the grass across the yard. "Well, I spent more time leaving the taint of my father behind and left the romancing to others."

And that was a damned pathetic thing for a twenty-nine year old man to be admitting about his life.

Clint flipped his hat to his free hand and thumped Cougar on the shoulder. "Don't sound so glum. It's fixable. Trust me, after a while, the thrill of the challenge wears off."

Even the pleasure begins to dim and then it just becomes plain..." he shrugged and stared over the rolling meadow surrounding the house, "plain."

Cougar reached over and knocked the hat from its spinning arc and twirled it himself before tossing it back to his now smiling cousin. "I thought the plan here was to develop a scheme to win over my wife, not to commiserate over your success with the weaker sex."

"Well, let me ask you something. Does Mara know you were the one at Cecile's?"

"No."

"You planning on telling her?"

"Not if I can get away with it."

"What if she remembers?"

"I'll deal with it then."

"And hope the remembering doesn't come for a long time?"

"Yeah," Cougar admitted, not liking himself much for the fact.

Clint sighed. "Can't say that I'd do it any differently."

"But in the meantime?"

Clint clapped his hat on his head, swung to his feet, balanced on his crutches, and reached down to give Cougar a hand up. "I would suggest you spend a whole ton of time convincing the woman she can't live without you."

It sounded simple enough.

Chapter Thirteen

It shouldn't have surprised him that Mara could complicate simple, but it did. Cougar lounged in the doorway to the kitchen, and watched Mara as she attacked the wet floor with almost religious zeal. The way the overlarge dress kept affording him glimpses of intriguing white skin, shadowed dark and golden by the lamps, kept him quiet longer than he normally would have been. He smiled as his wife blew hair off of her face and tugged the shoulder of the dress up one more time. He really did have to see about getting her some new clothes, but then again, these dresses afforded him such...pleasure, he noted as Mara's bodice gaped obligingly.

Her nipples were smooth and sleepy, pointing toward the ground. Large even in repose, he knew they could get larger. Would be getting much larger before the night was over.

Cougar scratched idly at his healing side, feeling the ridges of new scar tissue. The bandages had come off this morning, and the new skin was tight and irritated, driving him crazy as he worked. All of his nerves felt strung tight. He'd had about as much as he could stand of Mara's keep-him-at-a-distance-routine.

"Are you drying that floor or trying to rub a hole straight through it?" he asked conversationally. She jerked up so hard, she toppled back on her heels. Her hair fell in tendrils around her flushed face. Her expression became guarded.

Pulling the shoulder of her dress back up, she scooped up her drying cloths. "What are you doing in here?"

"I came to say 'hi'."

"I saw you an hour ago."

Not in any way he regarded as productive.

"So you did."

Cougar advanced into the room, and reached down to help Mara to her feet. She was as light as a feather. "I also thought a cup of coffee sounded good."

The arm under his hand trembled with tiny shivers. She pulled free of his grip and grabbed for one of the chairs stacked on the table. "I'll heat you some as soon as I finish this."

Reaching over her head, Cougar easily lifted the heavy chair she was wrestling off the table and placed it on the floor beside her. "Why don't you take a seat and let me see to this?" he countered.

He pulled the other chairs down before heading to the coffee grinder. He could feel her eyes on him as he poured the beans into the grinder and turned the handle. Up until

now, he'd been letting her keep her distance, set the rules, but that was changing. If she wasn't coming to him, he was definitely coming to her.

He dropped twice the amount of grounds into the pot as she normally did to freshen it. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her shudder and smiled. One of the benefits of his taking control back was going to be a decent cup of coffee.

"Want me to make enough for you, too?"

Mara managed a weak smile that, had she known it, looked rather sickly. "That would be nice."

From the pitcher by the sink, Cougar poured more water into the big blue enamel pot. "It's kind of late for washing floors, isn't it?"

Mara sighed. She rolled her shoulders as if just recognizing her fatigue now that she was sitting still. "There was more dirt than I expected," she admitted. "I meant to get to it this morning, but..." she let her shrug finish the sentence.

Cougar adjusted the pot on the burner, before coming over to settle in the chair opposite Mara. "You could plan every second of your day and stick with the schedule religiously, and you still wouldn't be able to keep up." When Mara opened her mouth to protest, Cougar shook his head. "You've done an excellent job taking care of it, and me. Hell, I have never been so pampered, but Mara, this house wasn't designed for one person to maintain."

Mara's guarded expression dropped into mutiny. "I won't have her here."

Cougar leaned back in his chair, and lifted his eyebrow at her. "I wasn't suggesting Nidia come back. Jackson's sister is due shortly. Would it be such a crime to save the heavy work until then?"

If he'd been planning on compromise saving the day, Mara's expression of horror would have ground it into the dust, let alone her gasped, "And have her see the place looking more like a pigsty than a home? What would she think of me?"

"She might think that being newly married, you'd ignored the housework for the more worthwhile pursuit of pleasing your husband," he pointed out dryly.

Mara blushed and looked vaguely distressed. Cougar wondered if she'd ever get over that reaction to the thought of him as her husband.

"Do you think she'll have heard about Cecile's?"

Well, that put him in his place. Cougar reached across the table and caught Mara's twisting hands in his own. They were cold to his touch, revealing more than that slight catch in her voice about how much this worried her. "Even if she has, I doubt she'll judge."

Cougar sighed as Mara looked more distressed than comforted. "Mara, Jackson assures me his sister is exactly like him, and trust me," he assured wryly, "no one appreciates the value of practicality more than Jackson."

Mara's fingers stilled. Her gaze seemed permanently attached to the nick in the table, left of her elbow.

"I don't want to shame you."

Cougar tucked his finger under Mara's chin. He forced her eyes to meet his. "How many times do I have to tell you, Angel? You didn't do anything wrong."

The eyes staring back at him were old in ways he couldn't fight. "We both know the truth of that is irrelevant." Her fingers clenched into fists. "No one cares if a man visits one of those places, but if a woman even glances in the door, she's branded for life."

"I don't see it that way."

"You're one person."

"I'm your husband."

Her smile was wry. "I guess if I never leave this house that will be enough."

He didn't know what to say to that. It was likely rumors would follow her for awhile. There weren't that many women in the territory, and a young unattached one showing up at Doc's days after Cecile and Aleric were killed by a new prostitute who'd since disappeared, had fueled the gossips but good. "So we won't go to town for a bit."

Her chin came up in that way that heated his blood and made him want to kiss her.

"I am not hiding on this ranch like a coward."

"Then we won't." Pushing back his chair, Cougar grabbed a couple of cups out of the cupboard with one hand. Snagging a towel with the other, he wrapped it around the handle of the boiling coffeepot and brought it to the table.

When he finished pouring, he returned the pot to the stove. Mara nursed her cup between her hands as he took his first sip. Leaning back in his chair, he closed his eyes in pure bliss at the first decent taste of coffee he'd had in nearly two weeks. "Damn, that's good," he sighed.

Mara eyed him skeptically before taking a cautious sip. The shudder that shook her body shook the table. Shaking his head at her lack of appreciation, Cougar passed her the sugar bowl. She took the spoon, added three large chunks to her coffee, managed one tentative sip and went back to playing with the cup.

He was going to have to get her a smaller pot so she could drink what she liked. In the meantime, he had plans that needed to be set in motion.

"It's a beautiful evening out there."

Mara glanced at the window and then back to him. "It's pretty cold though."

"Nothing a heavy coat wouldn't take care of," Cougar countered, taking a last sip of his coffee and leaving the table.

Mara's smile was small and a touch uncertain. "You mean to take a walk outside?"

Cougar lifted his heavy wool coat off the peg by the door. "I thought we both could. The smell of disinfectant is strong enough in here to knock a steer on its tail."

He waited by her chair, holding the coat out. She took a small breath before getting to her feet.

"I might have overdone it," she agreed as she slipped her arms into the sleeves. "I took one look at the dirt in here and dumped the whole bottle into the bucket."

The way she wrinkled her nose on the end of that sentence begged a kiss, which he gave her. Right on the end of her nose. He ignored her gasp and turned to get his other coat.

When he turned back, she was fumbling with the buttons on the coat, struggling because of the sleeves, which kept falling down over her fingers. Her expression wavered between exasperation with the buttons and uncertainty as to what he was up to.

She was right to be concerned with his plans, because after tonight, he'd be damned if she'd treat him with the sexless disregard a sister gave a brother. He was her husband, soon to be her lover. That knowledge would be uppermost in her mind from here on out.

"Here," he ordered, seeing how she struggled to button any buttons below her chin due to the drooping sleeves of the coat. "Let me do that."

With quick efficiency, he made short work of the fastenings, cocooning Mara from head to toe in the warm coat. Cougar plopped a wide-brimmed, floppy hat on her head as additional protection against the weather.

With her wrist, she shoved the hat back. "I don't think this is necessary."

He buttoned his coat at the middle. "I do."

She held her hands out to the side. "You'd better hope none of your hands are superstitious."

He pulled his black Stetson from the hook by the door.

"Why?" he asked as he held the door open for her. Fresh air, smelling crisply of fall, rushed in the door. Mara held her hands out to her side and made wooing noises.

"They could mistake me for the ghost of unwashed wranglers."

"Not much danger of that."

"Why not?"

"You don't smell right."

She stopped halfway to the door. "I smell?"

"Damned good too."

He prodded her the rest of the way out the door with a pat on the fanny. It was his turn to laugh at the way she scooted out. Pausing only long enough to pull the door shut, he followed her across the yard.

The night was beautiful. So sharp and clear, the stars seemed close enough to touch. Mara stopped by the barn, her gaze focused on the sky. "Do you have a book on the stars?"

Coming up beside her, Cougar looked at her expectant face. "I might have one."

"Would you mind if I read it?"

"You can read anything you want."

The full moon kissed Mara's delicate features with a flattering glint of pale light. He could see she felt awkward asking him for the book. He tilted her hat back further on her head with a slow motion. "You know, Mara. I'm not a poor man. You can have whatever you want. If there isn't a book in the library to suit your needs, order it."

"Thank you." Mara shoved her hands in her pockets and resumed walking.

Cougar watched in exasperation as Mara forged on ahead of him like a locomotive, her breaths chugging behind in frosty clouds. He didn't know if she thought the cost of a book would break him or if she was uncomfortable asking him for something, but he did know if he didn't have the book she wanted, she'd simply do without.

"Mara," he called. When she turned, he crooked his finger at her. Her chin immediately came up. He bit back his smile. She was a touchy little thing. Predictable too, as she stood there, not moving or saying a word.

"I could come get you," he mused.

She folded her hands over her stomach. "You could..." *For all the good it would do you*, was implied.

He settled his weight into his moccasins and pretended to consider the matter. "Of course, if I do, I'll have to punish you."

She crossed her arms over her chest. The effect was somewhat ruined by the bulky coat. "For what?"

"For being wayward."

Her hands dropped to her sides. "You're not serious?"

No, he wasn't, but he could tell she wasn't sure. "It's a man's responsibility to control his wife and keep her on the straight and narrow."

"I've never heard of such a thing."

"Preachers harp on it every Sunday."

"You go to church?" If he'd said he could fly, she couldn't have sounded more skeptical.

"Right regular, too. Dorothy insists."

The end of the coat sleeves flapped halfway to her knees as she put her hands on her hips through the material. "And you go?"

"I put a ton of stock in being accepted. I'm not about to throw it away by not attending church regularly."

Because she seemed to soften at the being accepted part, he crooked his finger at her again. "Or by letting my wife stray from the path."

Her spine snapped straighter than a spinster's at an orgy. He tipped his Stetson down to hide his amusement.

"I take it from your posture that you're not planning on obedience."

"I don't think so."

"Now that's a shame."

"Not in my opinion."

He took a step in her direction. "It was right there in the wedding promise."

She took a step back, seemed to catch herself, and planted her feet solidly on the ground. "What was?"

"The word obey." His strides were much longer than hers. His next put him within touching distance. This close, he could see her soft mouth beneath the shadow cast by her hat brim, and the puffs of breath that betrayed her nervousness.

"You planning on renegeing?"

Her hand came to her abdomen as if it hurt, but her words were sure. "If you think that I'm coming running whenever you crook your finger, yes."

He put his hands on his hips. "And you're prepared to accept the consequences?"

That chin came up two notches, telegraphing her answer before the "yes" left her mouth.

On a "So be it", he swooped in, tucked a hand under her knees and scooped her up into his arms. Her small scream died as she wiggled and wormed. Before she got the notion fully formed to hit him, they were at their destination. Keeping his arm behind her shoulders, he let her feet slide down until they landed on the crate resting against the side of the barn.

As soon as she felt the crate beneath her, she came up sputtering, shoving the hat off her face and wrestling her hands free of the coat.

Cougar caught both hands in his. He spread them wide, forcing her to lean forward, and then he looped them around his neck. He shrugged the bunched sleeve off his neck.

"What are you doing?" she squeaked, stretching up on her toes to keep her balance.

He pulled the hat from her head, revealing the apprehension in her wide eyes. "Isn't it obvious?"

"No." Exasperation laced that short syllable.

"Why, Angel, I'm about to take the price of your disobedience out of your hide."

"You are?"

"Yup." Cougar nodded as he unbuttoned their coats. Holding Mara still with his hands on her hips, he stepped forward until his chest very gently eased against hers. As she wore no undergarments, he had no trouble feeling the prod of her nipples through his shirt. His eyes closed on the pleasure. "Ahh. That feels heavenly."

"It does?"

That high-pitched query brought Cougar's eyes open. The hand holding the hat slowly inched up her spine, keeping Mara's chest pressed to his while his free hand tucked her hair behind her ear.

"Yes, it does." He nipped the lobe of her ear. Mara's eyes flew wide.

"Steady," Cougar murmured. If she got any stiffer in his arms, she'd shatter. "Nothing serious is going to happen. We're just going to indulge in a little kissing."

Mara fixed her gaze on the pulse beating in the hollow of Cougar's throat. "Couldn't we just shake hands?"

Pressing pillow soft kisses down the exposed curve of her neck, Cougar shook his head. He loved the way she smelled. That intrinsically feminine scent under everything that belonged only to her. He inhaled deeply before pulling back a fraction. "Nope. No handshakes. No polite words. No brotherly hugs. Just your mouth on mine. Now."

There was a slight—very slight—hesitation during which he wondered if she'd back down, but just when he was sure he'd have to be the one to make the contact, her torso stretched against his, pushing her firm little nipples into his chest and that mouth—that delectable, full lipped, sweeter than honey mouth—aligned with his.

His groan was instinctive.

Her smile was triumphant. He knew from the way her lips stretched wide against his that she liked knowing she could drag that noise out of him. He liked it too. He liked it even better when he dragged it out of her.

He slid his hand up beneath her hair, tilting her head a fraction more to the right. He slid his tongue along the seal of her lips, taking her gasp into his mouth and her shudder into his being. "Keep your mouth open."

Her "Why?" caressed the inside of his lips.

"For my tongue."

This time she groaned, but her mouth stayed open, though her breath came in fragmented spurts. And he hadn't even gotten going. Hells bells, she was going to be fun to have for a wife.

He met no resistance as he slowly slid his tongue between her lips. Instead, she held absolutely still. He might have mistaken her lack of movement for fear except her nails were cutting into the back of his neck, pulling him closer, and her eyes were wide open, staring into his, the pupils large and black. With every fiber of her being, she was waiting for his next move.

He didn't want to disappoint her. He flicked the inside of her upper lip with his tongue, just to the right of the cute little arc. She flinched away but when she pressed back, it was harder. He did it again.

When her tongue came out to test the flesh he was teasing, he stroked it with his. Sliding up and down the moist little visitor, he coaxed another moan out of her. With a hand on her hip, he pulled her completely into his arms. He anchored her head into the palm of his hand and slanted his mouth completely over hers.

Gentleness fled as her taste flooded his senses. Her tongue followed his back into his mouth. No longer a passive participant, she became the aggressor, demanding he prolong the kiss when he would have broken it off. Her response spiked his need. She

was tiny, potent, and burned brighter than a star in his arms. God above, he wanted her, and if he didn't want to scare her off permanently, he needed to break this off now.

He pulled his mouth from hers. His breath mingled with hers as he murmured, "That wasn't so bad, was it?"

She stared at him in dazed confusion. Feathering two kisses across her eyes to close them, he put his hands on her shoulders and directed her around. "Turn around now and I'll show you some constellations."

Ten minutes. Cougar shook his head in amazement. Ten minutes was all it took for Mara to drain his mind of every particle of information it contained about the stars. He glanced down at the top of her head where it rested against his uninjured left side.

"You're making me feel as guilty as he...heck for not pursuing the subject," he declared. He made a mental note to order some additional books for his library.

"You don't have to watch your language around me," Mara said quietly.

Cougar turned Mara to face him. Standing on the crate, her lips were almost even with his. When she tilted her head, her hair swung thick and loose, framing her ethereal features in a dark cloud.

"Yes, I do."

She frowned at him. "Why do you have to be so nice?"

"I wasn't aware that I was." He'd been described as a bastard, a mean son of a bitch, and a pain in the ass, but no one had ever slapped the handle of nice on him before.

Her frown deepened. "You know you are, and it's not fair."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because why?"

"Because I have a confession to make, and it would be so much easier if you were nasty."

Now nasty he could easily work up to. He slid his hand around her waist. "What's your confession?"

"I wasn't quite honest when I told you about everything. When I came here to see if I wanted to continue our marriage."

"Oh?"

A wind blew up, and snaked a shiver down Mara's spine. Cougar pressed her closer.

"No," Mara admitted. The hands she placed on his shoulders had the slightest tremor. "As much as I enjoyed Brad courting me, I didn't enjoy his kisses."

"Son of a bitch!" Cougar stepped back so fast, Mara nearly toppled off her perch. He caught her with one hand. As soon as she regained her balance, he took his hand away.

"You mean you actually let him kiss you?" Rage rolled over him. She was his, goddammit! Her kisses, all of them, belonged to him.

Her right hand extended in his direction before dropping to her side.

"Yes. On the cheek." It was a bare hiss of sound.

He cursed again. She flinched. He struggled to stomp down the anger that beat at him. He took three even breaths, held the last and managed to find his voice. It came out more of a growl than a drawl but he managed to ask, "Just how far have you and the good Reverend taken this courtship?"

"I'm not a whore."

That sad, proud little whisper wouldn't put a dent in his anger, Cougar swore. Any woman who stepped out on her husband had best expect to lose a few layers of hide. If not more. Though a kiss on the cheek was not the huge crime she was making it out to be. Knowing Brad, he'd felt sorry for her and meant it to comfort.

Mara tossed up her chin and folded her hands across her chest. "Just because you found me at Cecile's, I am not a whore."

She stood there daring him, actually daring him to tear a piece off her when she should be sobbing and begging his forgiveness. And he probably could have stayed mad at her if she'd cried, but that Devil take the hindmost defiance of hers always snuck past his guard. There was just so little of her to back up the challenges she tossed out.

Cougar sighed heavily before saying, "You shouldn't lead with your chin like that. It just dares a man to say stupid things like every whore was once a virgin."

Clearly, Mara had never even considered that. For a moment, she just stood there frozen. Only her big eyes betrayed any movement by blinking rapidly.

Cougar got the impression she was crying, though Lord knows why he thought that. There wasn't a drop of moisture in sight.

"Then there is no way I can prove I'm not a whore," she said.

"No. There isn't."

Mara stared over Cougar's right shoulder at the barn wall. "It never occurred to me that you would think that way." There was the light of accusation in her voice. "I never would have come had I suspected. No wonder you didn't want to send Nidia away."

"Oh Hell!" Cougar swore, slapping the hat he was holding against his thigh. How the hell was a man supposed to hold onto his side of an argument when his woman looked at him like that? "I don't think you're a whore, and I didn't send Nidia away for the exact reasons I told you. I don't want her. I never wanted her."

"You don't have to lie."

"I never lie." He might hedge the truth a time or two, but an outright lie was not a sin he indulged in.

"She was very clear about her job duties."

"I bet she was."

Her chin came up and her gaze shifted further to the left. He slid his finger along the slide of that chin and pulled. He managed to pull her face around, but not her gaze. He sighed. "Look at me."

"I don't want to."

"Tough."

As he expected, that brought her gaze flying to his, resentment tightening her lips.

"You can't order me around."

"Yes, I can, and what's more, you like it."

She sucked in a fast breath. He cut off her retort, with the truth. "At least when we're private."

Her mouth rounded in shock before sliding shut on a tiny desperate, "I don't."

"You do." Of that he was sure. "You get hotter than campfire when I give you private orders."

Tight lines of shock faded into hollows of despair. As if some horrible flaw had been revealed. "I bet you never talked to Emily like this."

"No." He hadn't talked to Emily at all. Not in any real sense. "I also didn't kiss her like I do you, or moan when she touched me. And I certainly never, ever left a sick horse to someone else's care just so I could take her walking in the moonlight."

The disbelieving snort with which Mara interrupted him flicked him on the raw. He stepped forward again, crowding her against the building. "The only woman I've wanted in the last year is you." Her eyes popped wide and that defiance she led with dropped to good old-fashioned caution as he added, "And that's to the point of obsession."

Mara swallowed hard. "Obsession?"

"Yeah." He let his chest relax into hers. "Obsession. As in, I get hard at the mere possibility that I might see you. As in, I keep speculating over and over at night how hot and tight you're going to be around my cock when I finally take you, until there's no hope for sleep."

The bald statements raised twin flags of color in Mara's cheeks. "Oh."

"Is that all you can say?" Cougar growled, catching her elbow before she could fall off the crate as she leaned sideways. "Oh?"

"What would you like me to say?" Mara asked, trying to shake off his grip. "It never occurred to me that you would want me."

Instead of letting go, Cougar used his leverage to pull Mara close enough that he could feel the heat of her body, enjoy her scent. Damn, she was potent. "How could you doubt it?"

"Have you looked in the mirror?"

"What has that got to do with anything?"

"Any woman would want you."

"I'm only concerned with you."

"Why?"

He cupped her cheek in his hand. "We're married. It's my duty to make you happy."

Her whole expression snapped closed. "Oh."

He would never understand her. "Why did you come, Mara?"

She looked like he'd broken her favorite toy, but she answered him.

"I came because I feel safe with you, and even though you think of me as a duty, when Brad kissed me that one time, all I could think of was how much I wished it was you."

It was his turn to blink. He hadn't expected such honesty.

She snatched her hat out of his hand. "Now, I'm cold and would like to go inside."

She pushed him aside and headed for the house, her pride around her like a shield. Cougar watched her go, his smile broadening with each step. So his wife thought he only thought of her in terms of a duty? How could she be so far off the mark? He settled his hat back on his head and strolled in her wake. He'd hurt her and he had to fix that, but the reason she was hurt, well, correcting that mistake was going to make tonight one hell of a good time.

* * * * *

Fifteen minutes later, Cougar let himself into the kitchen. The entire house was quiet. Only one lamp flickered on the table, causing Cougar to smile at the small consideration. The woman was too nice for her own good.

He hung his coat up on the peg before dousing the light. He'd built this house. Navigating through the dark proved no problem. When he reached the correct door, he turned the handle only to discover it locked. He heard a startled gasp, and knew Mara was within. He shook his head at her efforts and pulled the key out of his pocket.

Mara sat straight up in the bed at the sound of a key turning in the lock. Moonlight streaming in through the window gave plenty of light to see the doorknob turning. So much for locking the door. She pulled the quilt up under her chin as the door swung inward and went for a bluff.

"What are you doing in here?" she demanded.

Cougar leaned against the doorjamb in that nonchalant pose Mara was fast becoming familiar with. "I was looking for my wife."

He had no right to look so damned masculine leaning in the doorway, moonlight slanting off his high cheekbones and jet black hair as it fell over one shoulder, teasing her with what would never truly be hers.

"Why?" she asked.

Cougar slid the first button of his shirt from its hole. His right brow cocked in gentle mockery. "Because it's time to go to bed."

Two more buttons slid free before Mara found her voice and then it wasn't much. Just a squeaky breath of sound that betrayed her nervousness. "I think I misled you down by the barn," she began, the words picking up momentum as Cougar's shirt dropped in his wake, and he moved to her side.

The fly of his hip loving denims was about a foot from her face if she cared to turn her eyes to the left. She kept them firmly straight ahead. "I really don't think we know each other well enough to... I mean, I don't think the time is right..."

His pants hit the floor. "Oh my God!" was an instinctive betrayal of her shock. How could she have forgotten?

Even in her peripheral vision, his cock was huge. The thick shaft hung between his legs, stretching down his thigh, too large and heavy to remain upright without support. Certainly too large to fit in her body.

"You flatter me." The modesty in his words was as false as his laughter was genuine.

Mara gave up all hope of subduing her panic when Cougar sat down beside her on the bed and pulled her into his side. With her head anchored in the hollow of his shoulder, she could hear the thundering echo of her heart, and tasted the metallic taint of fear in her mouth. He was her husband, she told herself. It was his right to take her. It wasn't her right to protest, but she found herself doing it anyway.

"I know you can do this," she whispered before clearing her throat and trying again. "I know it's your right."

"Shh..." he pulled her down beside him. She went because she didn't have a choice.

Before she hit the mattress, she was shaking her head. "I can't shush, because I need to tell you something."

"Mara," Cougar began, but she cut him off.

"I'm sorry I led you on outside. I can't do this. I'm scared. Scared to death to be your wife."

Cougar reared up over her on one elbow. His hair fell forward, brushing her cheek in what was becoming a familiar caress. From this angle his chest was incredibly broad and the delineation of muscle was clear, leaving her in no doubt of his strength. Hating herself for her weakness, she closed her eyes tightly and forgot about breathing altogether.

He didn't say a word. He just kept staring at her and with each passing second, the silence got more oppressive. She caught her lower lip between her teeth and bit down to

keep from blurting out anything more. She wouldn't beg, no matter what, she wouldn't beg. Just when she thought she would scream from the tension clawing her apart, he spoke.

"Open your eyes, Mara."

Mara shook her head. "I can't. I promise not to fight, but please don't ask me to do that."

"I'm not as ornery as you think," he said. He smoothed his finger across her lips, pulling the lower one free of her teeth. "I just thought it was time we started getting used to each other. Maybe letting our marriage take on some normal routines."

"Like sex?" If her tone was a touch sarcastic, he had no one but himself to blame. A man didn't climb naked into bed just to sleep.

Air hissed out between Cougar's tightly clenched teeth.

"Not sex," Mara corrected hastily.

"Eventually," Cougar admitted. "But right now, I thought we'd try things like sleeping together."

"Naked?" The arch of her brow left him in no doubt of her skepticism.

Cougar shrugged. "I always sleep this way."

Mara's cheeks burned as she kept her gaze locked on his. "I don't."

Cougar's smile was almost tender, slipping under her defenses. "You do now."

Mara gasped as she realized the hand that had been stroking her cheek was now unashamedly undoing the tiny buttons down the front of Dorothy's borrowed nightgown. "Stop that."

Not only did he ignore her order, he took full advantage of her supine position.

"Admit it," Cougar laughed as she threatened to strike his wounded side. "You're embarrassed as hell, but you're not afraid."

Mara glared at him as the button over her belly button sprang free despite her best efforts to keep it fastened. "What difference does that make?" she grunted as she lunged to save the next button. She should have saved her energy because Cougar paid her no mind. Instead, his hands skimmed up under the loose cotton to her shoulders before sweeping down her back and bringing the material with them. Twisting up the excess material in one hand, he very effectively trapped Mara's arms in the heavy folds.

"All the difference in the world," Cougar replied, his eyes heating to molten gold as his attention focused on her nipples stretched by the cold air to long points. If she could have, she would have covered them with her hands.

"Lord, you're beautiful," he complimented huskily.

He sounded like he meant it, and that hurt, because she knew it couldn't possibly be true.

He lightly circled the left peak. "Do you think these beauties are up to satisfying me?"

"I don't know," Mara squeaked out, deathly afraid she knew what was coming, but on some level, wanting it. Wanting to be beautiful for once. Just once. To someone.

"I think it's time we found out."

She searched Cougar's face for some sign of hesitation, but all she could find was a near violent passion that gave birth to a pathetic hope. As if someone like him, someone so uncompromisingly masculine, could find something to admire in her. She'd be a fool to let down her guard now, but she was going to. She knew she was going to because she'd waited forever for this moment. Her sob of dismay at the surge of pleasure that shook her when Cougar delicately tested the resiliency of one nipple brought his eyes up to hers. The heat there had her hands twisting to get free.

"There's nothing to be afraid of," Cougar reassured her. "I'll stop if you want me to, but," he cut off her immediate protest, "if I promise to touch nothing but here," he circled both breasts in a skating figure eight of his finger, "would you let me?"

She'd let him do anything he wanted tonight. She was that pathetic.

Mara slid her lower lip between her teeth, took a breath, and came to a decision. She could live in fear forever or she could trust Cougar and see where this would lead. "Can I touch you, too?"

His whole body froze a heartbeat before he answered, "Yes."

Mara's teeth sank deeper into her lip as she met his heavy-lidded stare. "Good."

His smile was a sexy lift of one corner. "Very good."

"Thank you."

She thought he'd go immediately for her chest, but instead, he stroked her hair, her cheek, her neck, following the sweep of her collarbone out to the shoulder.

"Relax," he ordered when he reached her elbow.

"I don't think I can," Mara managed between short panting breaths.

"I'm just planning on loving your breasts, Angel. Nothing scary about that."

Somehow, the blunt statement was so much more intimate than the touch of his finger. But not his mouth, she realized on a start of surprise as his lips brushed each peak in turn. Nothing was more intimate than the touch of his mouth. His mouth was like a living brand on her sensitive flesh. Her whole upper body recoiled deeper into the mattress. To no avail, she discovered, because Cougar merely followed her down. And then she was pushing up, wanting more. A tiny moan escaped her control. His lips on her breasts felt so good. So very, very good.

Before the moan trailed off, he let that lightly flicking tongue sink against the other nipple. Very slowly, he drew it from base to tip, topping off the excursion with a quick lap at journey's end.

Sparks of pure feeling shot through her chest to pool between her legs. If she could have moved her arms, she would have pulled him harder against her. Made him stop teasing her with those light touches. Since her arms weren't free, all she could do was shake and arch her back higher. He chuckled and then he dragged the edge of his teeth

over one sensitive point. She almost screamed out loud as the sensation shot like fire through her being. She didn't know anyone could make her feel like this. She didn't even know she was capable of such pure feeling.

Cougar leaned back and stared at the peak he'd made so hard and red.

"Better than apple pie."

She didn't believe it was possible, but a bubble of laughter squeezed past her lips. "I find that hard to believe."

"Oh, you can believe it," Cougar purred, his half-smile purely predatory. He pinched her right nipple. Again, that flare of excitement rushed through her body. The ache in her pussy intensified. His smile spread to the other side of his mouth, still predatory, and still as sexy as hell. He pinched her left nipple. Harder, holding it longer, until her legs scissored under the quilt and she couldn't help but lift toward his hand.

"These are my favorite sweets."

Mara slitted her eyes ever so slightly to see Cougar's dark head bent to her chest. She could just make out the deep pink of his tongue as it stroked over her nipple in another random sampling. Shock made her jump when she saw Cougar watching her, watching him. Immediately, she closed her eyes up so tight, she saw red streaks behind the lids.

"I don't mind if you watch."

Mara couldn't believe he could sound so calm when his mouth was on her breast and they were both naked. "I mind."

"A pity." On a grunted, "Hold tight", he flipped them over, leaving her draped across his chest. It took her a minute to orient.

"Sit up," he ordered, his hands lightly stroking over her back and down the flare of her hips.

"Why?"

"Because I told you to."

She loved it when he talked to her like that. She probably shouldn't, but she did. It made her all weak and shivery, but if she sat up, there'd be no shadows. He'd see everything. Everything there wasn't. Sitting up was not an option.

As if he could read her mind, Cougar trailed his free hand down her spine until it found the crease of her buttocks. His fingers dipped between.

Mortified, Mara shot upright, too concerned with dislodging those exploring digits to worry about her lack of curves. With a total lack of grace, she struggled to wrap the sheet around her lower body and straddle his belly at the same time.

The edge of laughter made his smile no less appealing as he said, reaching for her breasts, "I do like a woman who knows when to listen."

Mara slapped his hands aside when they would have claimed their spoils. Before covering her breasts with her hands, she warned, "I'm not very big."

Cougar hummed a response that could have meant anything before he settled his hands over Mara's. When she would have pulled hers free, he shook his head.

"No. Leave them there." She looked down. Despite her efforts, her nipples managed to peek out from behind the barrier of her fingers. Resting a fingertip on the end of each, Cougar shook his head when Mara would have pulled her hands away.

"Very nice," he murmured huskily, dropping his hands to her thighs. He stared so long she began to worry. Was he comparing her to other women he'd known? Did he find the size of her nipples—nipples that kept pulling up tighter under his gaze—absurd? She was on the point of asking when Cougar slid his hands up her thighs and around her back. Pressing her forward, he groaned as her hands dropped away to catch her weight.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Oh God. He was disappointed. Outside of her nipples, there wasn't much to her breasts.

A little more pressure on Mara's spine forced her down on her elbows. Just because she couldn't see, didn't mean she couldn't feel. His skin was burning hot where the ridges on his abdomen pressed into her stomach. The hair on his chest tickled her ribs, and his breath, his breath was a moist caress on her chest. He smelled of earth, and leather and the faintest hint of tobacco. She wanted to rub on him like a cat. Instead, she crouched there, wanting to die from the embarrassment of one-sided desire.

At the first touch of Cougar's mouth on her breast, Mara jumped. His fingers rubbed gently up and down her spine, tracing the ladder of her ribs while he pressed the softest kisses all around her areola. Though Cougar whispered for her to relax, she found it impossible. A low, keening cry of ecstasy escaped when he finally, finally took her whole breast into the hot, moist cavern of his mouth.

And then he began to suck. Another cry welled from her throat as each pulse of suction sent jolting waves of pleasure to her pussy. At her third involuntary outburst, Cougar backed off to nuzzle his way over the pale surface. "Steady," he soothed. "It's just your husband and you're giving him tremendous pleasure."

"I can't," she confessed in an unsteady whisper.

"Can't what?"

Oh God, why did he make her say these things. "Stay quiet."

"Who wants you to?"

"You do."

"Not hardly."

"But you said steady."

"I thought you were uncomfortable with my mouth on your breast."

"Oh."

He sipped at her right nipple. "But you're not?"

She wondered if he could feel her blush. She shook her head, "No."

"Good." His hand splayed across her back, pulling her into his mouth. He suckled her strongly, each tug drawing the tension coiled in her stomach tighter and tighter. Her nails dug into the sheets. Her toes curled into her feet. He released her nipple with a soft pop. She remembered to breathe.

"I didn't think a grown man would want to do that," she gasped.

Cougar laughed, each soft expulsion buffeting her nipple, which immediately pulled up tighter. "Trust me, Angel. Any man fortunate to be where I am right now would be drooling with the need to do this."

Mara bit her lip to hold back the indelicate question, but it popped out anyway. "You don't think I'm scrawny?"

"I think you're perfect."

"Really?"

He paused, his lips halfway to her breast. His black hair flowed in dark contrast against the white sheets as he stared at her, his right brow arched.

She wished she'd bitten her tongue rather than reveal her insecurity.

The hard lines of his face softened in a way she couldn't define, and his fingers cupped her cheek. "Really."

Something in the way he said it made her believe, so when he placed his hands on her shoulders, pressed and ordered her to lean back, she did.

The sheet had slipped and her throbbing pussy came into contact with his hard stomach. The heat and pressure had her squirming. The flesh between her legs swelled and pulsed out more moisture. She tried to rear up but her legs were spread too far.

"What's wrong?"

She would not, absolutely would not answer his question. He reached up and slowly, ever so slowly, began to milk her breasts, starting out lightly, and increasing the pressure until her pelvis jerked on his stomach. With every jerk, her breath hissed and she became wetter, slid easier.

His fingers spread on either side of her ribs as he held her in place. She wanted to melt with embarrassment, melt with pleasure. Just plain melt, period. She threw back her head. Her hair cascaded down to tumble over his thighs. Her groan of frustration was no cover for his growl of pleasure.

"Do that again."

She carefully turned her head and saw her hair wrapped around his cock in a silken embrace. As her head turned, strands slid up his cock, tugging and sliding as they went. Even stretched as she was, she could see it jerk with pleasure. She turned her head the other way and he jerked again. His fingers tightened almost convulsively on her nipples before he drew a breath that pushed his abdomen up into her greedy pussy.

"Damn, Angel, I don't know what's better. The feel of your hot pussy petting my stomach or your hair petting my cock."

"You don't mind that I'm getting you...wet."

His laugh sent a particularly sharp thrill of sensation driving through her clit.

"No."

She would not ask him why. Instead, she dropped her head back and lashed his cock with her hair.

"Ah, shit."

He released her breast. She was so sensitized to his touch, the soft brush of his forearm as he reached around her, had her shuddering. And that too felt good. There was a tug on her scalp and then a release. Beneath her, Cougar stretched taut, his stomach bowing into her groin, lifting her off the bed until she sat suspended by her tender pussy on the rock-hard muscle of his abdomen. His hand on her right breast began the milking motion on her again, this time encompassing the turgid nipple. He ended on a pinch that coincided with his tug on her hair. The resulting firestorm of sensation had her shuddering from head to toe.

The next time he let her loose, she glanced over her shoulder and saw his cock tangled in her hair, and his fist. Slow and easy, he slid his hand along the huge shaft, driving it through the thick silk of her hair. Holding it still and high for a moment, letting her see the droplet of fluid that collected on the end before sliding back through his hand and rising to cover the tip only, to repeat the motion again.

She couldn't take her eyes from the sight. The next time he drove through the silken fist of her curls, the bead of moisture on the top was larger, rounder. It looked impossibly delicate balanced there. It looked as if it were waiting. For her. She licked her lips. Her eyes locked on the sight. Her pussy throbbed with the thought, the possibility, of tasting him.

His hand slid up her back, still meshed in her hair until it cupped her head. He pulled her forward. Her swollen clit scraped across the slash of coarse hair sprinkling his lower abdomen as he dragged her mouth within a breadth of his. Her whimper burst across his lips.

"You can taste me later," he promised before he melded his mouth to hers, his easy manner belied by the urgency with which his mouth mated with hers, his tongue driving deep in a parody of what she knew he wanted.

He slowly, reluctantly, dragged his mouth from hers. "I'm not going to last too much longer here, Angel."

"You're not?"

He ran his finger down her back, barely touching her flesh. His smile was wolfish as he took in her shiver. "And neither are you."

"You want to make love to me."

His fingers dipped into the hollow of her back. "I'm already making love to you."

"I mean really make love to me."

His hand opened over her back and her right buttock was encompassed in the heat of his palm, the sheer size of him overpowering and yet somehow enticing.

His brow kicked up. "You don't want me to?"

"No."

His fingers dipped between her legs into the cream she couldn't contain. "Your body says differently." She bit her lips as he gathered that liquid and spread it forward.

"I know."

"But?" his well-lubricated finger slid whisper-soft around her clit, barely touching, teasing hidden nerve endings into leaping excitement.

"I don't know if I can do that," she gasped.

"Why?"

He tapped her clit once, twice, three times. The first stole her breath. The second had her gasping and the third brought her grinding down on his hand.

"Because I don't want to remember..." Another tap. Another gasp. And then she managed to finish, "...him...here with you."

He paused for a long moment. "But if I tell you to?" Again that gliding pressure that had her pussy clenching and her excitement pouring uncontrollably from her vagina.

"I'll try?"

He caught her clit between his thumb and forefinger. "Not good enough." He stroked the sensitive flesh up and down. "If I want to bury my cock in this tight little pussy, are you going to welcome me?"

She couldn't think when he did that, couldn't do anything but feel the sharp bite of pleasure that kept building higher and higher but never seemed to let her go.

"Answer me." The order was accompanied with a pinch, and another stroke on her sensitive flesh.

"Yes," swelled from a deep, secret part of her, one that gloried in his no-holds-barred possession. His response was a deeply drawled "Good," and another drag on her clit.

This time, she did squirm, the moisture leaking from her pussy easing her slide across his stomach, facilitating his positioning of her body.

When she felt the broad head of his cock push against her thigh, she froze, and then pulled to the side.

"Hold still."

She didn't have any choice as his hand locked her hip to him. Her eyes flew to his, the protest on her lips fading as she met his gaze. There was no softness there. Just the same driving need surging through her, reflected in his eyes. Only in his, there wasn't the fear she felt. The uncertainty she couldn't help. The fragmented memories she didn't want.

"You made me a promise," he reminded her.

She swallowed. "I know."

"I'm your husband."

"Yes."

"Then scoot back. Welcome me."

With her eyes locked to his, she came up on her knees, moved back the inch she'd moved away, and accepted the weight of his cock against her buttocks.

His hand behind her head pulled her forward for his kiss as his other reached between them. His fingers slid over her pussy, gathering the liquid he found there and drawing it back until he could coat her anus with it. She jumped at the dark hunger that spread as his finger circled the sensitive opening, again and again. She couldn't help arching into his hand, opening her mouth wider, wanting more of his touch, of him.

"You like that?" he asked into her mouth. It was a rhetorical question, as he didn't wait for an answer before bringing his formidable cock to bear against the tiny clenched opening.

"Steady," he ordered, while he levered himself up against the headboard.

As he shifted forward, his cock shoved hard against her. Frissons of desire shot out from her anus. Her muscles twitched, and for a brief moment, she wished it were possible. Wished she could take him there. Give herself into his keeping the way she never had to anyone else.

Then he was sitting before her, drawing her up on her knees, not breaking contact, keeping his cock wedged between her buttocks in a steady, immovable pressure.

Locking his eyes to Mara's, he slowly eased his tongue over his lips. "Give me your breasts."

With a helpless sob, she responded to the softly purred order, bracing her hands on his shoulders and offering her breast to his mouth. As he took her nipple into his mouth, he maneuvered his cock between her cheeks. It pressed against her, a powerful threat. And a potent lure.

At first, his lips were gentle. Soft. tender. It wasn't what she wanted. She wanted his teeth and that strong suction that flared through her body like lightning. When he gave it to her, she screamed. Her body bucked on his cock, bearing down and releasing in time with his mouth as she rode the dual sensations of pleasure and pain in a relentless tide of need.

"That's it, Angel. Push back. Welcome me."

She didn't know what he was talking about. She just knew she was burning, empty, and she needed something. His hand dipped between her thighs and found her clit. The snap of his fingers was a tiny culmination that had her pussy clenching and her ass grabbing at his cock.

"Shit. You're burning me alive," he groaned.

She was glad. His cock pushed harder at her ass while his fingers worked her clit, pulling, tugging and sliding until she was mindlessly sobbing. Working her body on his cock, pushing into his hands, desperate for the relief he wouldn't give.

"Come on, Mara," he whispered in her ear. "Give it to me. Give me that tight little ass."

He nipped her nipple while pulling on her clit.

"Open, baby. Just a little. Just the tiniest bit, and I'll come for you. Don't you want that?" he whispered, spreading the juices running down her thighs up around his cock and her anus. "Don't you want to feel my seed spurting into your ass? Filling you?"

God, she could almost feel it. It was wrong, dirty, and she wanted it so badly, she could taste it. She nodded.

"Then let go, Angel."

He leaned forward and took her nipple in his mouth. With his tongue, he pressed it against the roof of his mouth before raking it with his teeth. The hand on her clit took up the same rhythm, the same roughness. He released her breast.

She opened her eyes to find him watching her. He braced both hands on her hips. Both thumbs came to rest on her clit. His hands pushed down. His callused thumbs dipped. Swirled. Dragged. It was too much. She couldn't contain the explosion that threatened.

"Give me your ass," he ordered as her breath caught. There was the slightest of giving, parting and then a sharp pain and an even more delicious pleasure. He was in her! She clenched around him, cupping the tip, struggling to understand what was happening as her nerve endings went wild in anticipation. He scraped his nail across her clit and there was no more anticipation, just a headlong toss into the center of the storm as her body convulsed in a searing explosion. Her pussy grasped at air while her ass ground down upon the head of his cock.

"Easy, Angel," Cougar gasped, his fist around his cock preventing her from driving him deeper as spurt after spurt of hot come bathed her dark channel, each splash sparking another spiraling, mindless release of sensation. Cougar's growl of "mine" just one more echo in the maelstrom of passion sucking her under.

Chapter Fourteen

Morning, Mara discovered, came very early on a working ranch. Dawn was just pinkening the eastern sky with a lazy yawn of color, and she was bustling around the kitchen, throwing together a huge breakfast for the two men seated at the table drinking coffee and discussing the morning's plan.

Smothering another yawn with the back of her forearm, Mara popped the biscuits in the oven and put three huge steaks in a heavy cast iron frying pan to cook. She struggled to maneuver another, equally huge pan off the rack attached to the wall above the stove. It hit the stovetop with a God-awful clatter. Under her breath, Mara uttered one of Cougar's favorite oaths.

"Need any help?" Cougar asked.

"No," Mara snapped. Forgetting the flour coating her hands, she unobtrusively pulled her dress away from her bosom. All her discomforts this morning could be laid squarely at her husband's feet. She was bone weary from the meager two hours sleep Cougar had allowed her. Heck, she was so tired, even that mud called coffee sounded good. She couldn't cook a decent breakfast because every time she moved, her dress chafed her irritated nipples. Nipples tender from her husband's insatiable greed. And to top off everything, he lounged in his chair, looking as comfortable and as rested as if he'd come off a two week sleep.

Mara slammed an egg into the hot skillet so hard the yolk broke. Another swear word and a burnt finger later, and she heard the talk behind her cease. There was a scrape of a chair leg, and Clint departed the house with a comment about getting breakfast in the bunkhouse.

As the screen door slammed, Cougar smiled and shoved back his own chair. The set of Mara's shoulders just dared him to set one foot in her direction. He wasn't one to turn away from a dare.

Another yolk broke under the onslaught of Mara's bad temper. "I won't hold breakfast for him if he comes back," she grouched.

"It won't be the first time he's done without," Cougar replied evenly while rummaging around in a cupboard.

"I'm sorry."

"For what?" Cougar walked up beside her. Her back was poker straight and her gaze locked on a grease spot on the stove.

Mara brushed her eyes with the back of her uninjured hand. "For being so grumpy."

"I can handle it." Cougar removed the skillet from the heat.

He snagged his finger in the front of Mara's dress. The neck gaped obligingly, revealing her tender nipples. "I'm hungry."

Proving the depth of their memory, her nipples immediately perked to wanton attention. Mara groaned and brought her hands up as if to cover the sight. Cougar caught her eye and shook his head. He drew her over to one of the chairs by the table and sat her down. Perching his hip on the table, he pulled her finger up for inspection. It wasn't bad. He applied some ointment, vividly aware of her nipples straining toward him.

It was all he could do to doctor her finger. He wanted those nipples in his mouth. He wanted to finish what he'd started last night. As soon as her finger was tended, he pulled her to her feet to stand between his thighs. Her quick glance down brought a blush to her cheeks. He pulled her dress away from her chest, intrigued by the path the blush took, starting at her breasts and traveling upward. Mara had time for one horrified squeak before he pulled the dress down, trapping her arms at her sides and exposing her breasts.

"That does it," she growled, eyes narrowed. "Tomorrow, you are taking me into town so I can get some decent clothing."

"Don't bother on my account." Cougar studied her breasts intently. He was immensely flattered that her body responded at all this morning, considering the state of her beautiful chest.

"I think I owe you an apology," he said quietly, touching one angry red nipple lightly with his fingertip. His finger dipped to trace the whisker burn surrounding the swollen end. "I didn't realize I had been so demanding."

Her breath hitched, raising those nipples as if to beg his mouth before she gasped, "I didn't mind." She closed her eyes. "I mean..." she stammered. "At first, it was terribly embarrassing, but later it wasn't, I mean it's your right. I married you..."

"Shh," Cougar hushed. "I'm trying to apologize." Slipping his hands around her fragile ribcage, he brought her right nipple to his lips where he butterflied tender kisses of regret. When he administered the same apology to the other, he was shocked to find Mara's fingers clenched in his hair.

"Oh God," she moaned in what sounded distinctly like an order. "Do it right!"

He was happy to oblige. He couldn't think of anything he'd like better right now than to taste her. To have her against his tongue again. His mouth opened over her breast. Mara cried out. The hands that had been pulling Cougar closer, now pushed him away. Mara threw her head back on a sob.

Feathering his fingers up and down the sides of her rib cage, Cougar paused. "What's wrong, Angel?"

"Is it awful for me to be this way? Is this why you left me at Doc's?" she asked, her voice tight as if she feared his response.

"God, no," Cougar husked, lashing each nipple once with his tongue, while keeping Mara from leaping off the chair with the weight of his hands. "This is beautiful."

"Then why?"

"I told you why." He nibbled all around her nipple, evading her efforts to get him to do more, laving the crinkled skin at the base of her nipple before dancing his tongue away.

His hair tangled with her breasts. He impatiently grabbed it and moved it out of his way. His morning beard brushed her breast. She flinched.

"I'm hurting you," he realized. He thought he had been so careful, barely touching the skin, and her hands had been pulling him closer as they were now, but he was hurting her.

"It doesn't matter," Mara said fiercely, her head thrown back so her nipple could prod his mouth. "Don't stop."

"Shh," Cougar soothed. "Let me see what I can do."

Mara's only response was another one of those groans that made him rock-hard in an astounding rush. He lifted her out of the chair and swapped places, sitting her on his lap so her back was to him. He dipped his fingers into the jar of salve and then spread the healing balm to both hands before smoothing it in concentric circles around Mara's swollen breasts. Her head fell back against his shoulder, her hair spilling over his chest as she arched into his caress.

Her hips twisted and her bottom squirmed on the hard ridge of Cougar's thigh. She sobbed harder and harder as she came so close to achieving what she so desperately needed. Her back was arched almost double, as if she was trying to escape, but always she swayed with the smooth milking glide of his fingers. Her fingers sank as deeply into the muscles of his forearms as her teeth sank into her lower lip. Her entire body was flushed a rosy red. She was totally lost in the feelings, and she was his.

With every surge of her hips, she drove his cock along the crease of her ass. He couldn't help remembering last night, and how tight she'd been around him as he'd entered her that tiny bit. How she'd clenched and spasmed as he'd shot his seed into her dark channel. He wanted it again. If he couldn't take her conventionally for fear of her remembering, he wanted her this way.

He tucked his chin so his words brushed her ear. "Do you remember last night?"

She paused. The blush creeping up her cheek spoke volumes.

"Do you remember how tight you gripped me? How good it hurt when I came inside you that little bit?"

Her lower lip sucked between her teeth. She nodded.

"Can you still feel my seed inside you?"

Her eyes closed and there was an infinitesimal hesitation. He imagined her checking, searching herself for evidence of his seed. His cock throbbed painfully. She shook her head, "No."

"We can't have that," he drawled, drawing her skirt up. When it cleared her thighs, he asked, "Do you want me to fill you again?"

Her eyes popped open. The sideways look she sent him was hungry, and a bit desperate, but she didn't answer.

"I want it," he answered, watching her expression carefully. "I want to bare that incredible ass of yours. I want to look at it, touch it, and then I'm going to take it."

He ran his tongue around the rim of her ear, absorbing her shudder into his body. "And you're going to give it to me. Now." As if his order were a magic release, she relaxed against him. To test the waters, he asked, "Aren't you?"

His tone made the question purely rhetorical

Her response was an immediate, guttural "Yes."

"Good." He pushed her forward. "Now, stand up."

She did. Slowly, reluctantly. He wondered if it was because she dreaded what was coming or if she didn't want to lose contact with his cock.

"Untie your drawers."

Her hands inched under her skirt, bunching the material up to her knees. He imagined them skimming her hips, brushing her flat belly as she untied the drawstring.

"That's enough."

She froze.

"Now, step back." He didn't imagine the shiver that took her as he gave his order.

Her knees hitting his told her when to stop.

He slid his hands up her thighs.

"Bend over and put your hands on the seat of that chair."

With his hands on her thighs, he could both feel and see her shiver. No doubt about it. Mara liked a man ordering her about in bed.

She moved the chair in front of her and bent over. He lifted her skirt over her back, exposing the pleasingly full globes of her ass. This close, there was no missing the sweet perfume of her arousal. It blended with the scent of her skin, making him grit his teeth against the urge to fuck her senseless right now. No preliminaries. Just his cock plowing deep until she couldn't conceive of anyone else taking her. Anywhere.

Her drawers were damp with her cream. He pressed them into the crease of her buttocks, sliding his finger down so they clung to her labia. He smoothed and tucked until the thin cotton delineated every crease and fold of her pussy. "Very pretty."

His drawl wasn't as even as he wanted, but then again, he wasn't as calm as he wanted. He'd never had a woman quiver in sexual anticipation when he gave an order. It played hell with his control. That she was innocent of all he could do, of the power her trust gave him, was just additional incentive.

He reached up and hooked his fingers in the loose waistband of her drawers. They slid easily down her waist, caught on her hips, and then glided unimpeded to the floor.

"Step out of them."

She tried, but the moccasins he'd given her caught on the legs.

“Hold still.”

He slid his knife free of its sheath and cut her free. Beyond a start when the cool metal grazed her calf, she held still, only the erratic rhythm of her breathing indicating she was aware of what he was doing.

With his foot, he nudged her feet slightly apart so her pussy lined up in front of his face. As he watched, another pulse of cream leaked free, gathering in the soft hairs protecting her secrets. He remembered how delicate her shaved pussy had been at Cecile’s. How the pale skin had been the softest of caresses against his cock. Between the red brown hairs, he could make out the glistening pink of her inner lips. He slid his finger through the thick juices there and burrowed until he found the protected nubbin of her clit. He stroked it gently, smiling when her breathing stopped altogether and she froze, her entire being focused on that spot where his finger touched.

Beneath the pad of his index finger, the little knot of nerves swelled. Her hips began to move against him, dislodging his finger. He smacked her ass in reprimand. She jerked and her pussy immediately pulsed more juices. God! She was going to burn him up.

“Hold still,” he ordered, re-centering his finger.

The muscles in her slender thighs clenched as she did her best to resist moving in time to his finger. When she was shaking and whimpering, but still holding still, he withdrew his finger. Her gasp was pure dismay.

“Steady.”

He wasn’t done with her by a long shot. He unbuttoned his pants, groaning in relief when his cock sprang into the air. His groan brought her attention around. Her eyes widened when she saw his fully erect cock. He might have thought her nervous, but her pussy spasmed as she turned away and more cream coated her thighs.

He slid out of the chair, to his knees, leaning forward to lap at the inner curve of her leg, taking her taste into his mouth, savoring it as it spread across his tongue. Using long, leisurely laps, he worked his way up to the soft pad of flesh below the crease of her thigh. He swirled his tongue over the nectar there, gathering it into his mouth before he caught her flesh and sucked hard. She jerked and her knees buckled as he marked her. He caught her ass on his palms and pushed her back up.

“Stay put,” he ordered, releasing her thigh.

Her “sorry” was a shaky expulsion of sound. He smacked her ass again as a reward for her efforts. She jerked. He smacked her other cheek and she quickly brought her ass back to position. The thigh he’d just cleaned, shone wetly with new juices. He touched the mark he’d put on her, feeling a deep satisfaction at the visible evidence that she was his, before he curved his fingers into her slit and spread her natural lubrication back to her ass. He deliberately spread her reddened buttocks, watching her pink rosebud twitch as he lubricated the opening with her juices. He did it again and again until her anus gleamed as deliciously as her pussy. He couldn’t resist a taste. As soon as his tongue touched the puckered opening, she squealed and pulled away.

He grabbed her hips and dragged her back. "You don't ever pull away when I touch you. No matter how I touch you, you accept my touch. Do you understand?"

He waited until she got herself back together. He didn't move or speak. If she didn't want this, she was going to have to make her decision now. He'd never been a gentle lover and with her, his feelings were purely primitive. He wanted to mark her with his mouth and his seed. To take her every way there was to keep her permanently filled with his come so no other male would come near her. He needed her complete acceptance and submission, and he was not going to be able to settle for anything less.

She settled her weight back onto her feet. With a delicate adjustment, she angled her ass back, her spine slightly arched in a purely feminine offering. He leaned forward. This time, when he put his mouth to her flesh, she held her position. As he lapped at the tender portal, she moaned and tension in her muscles increased. Her muscles twitched with the need to move. He slid a finger down to her clit and stroked while burrowing his tongue into the tight ring of her anus. It loosened infinitesimally.

He sat back up on the chair. He reached behind him and scooped a handful of salve. He put two lubricated fingers against the opening his tongue had loosened.

"Push back."

Again that pause and then the shudder of compliance. With soft pulses, she pushed against his fingers. He rubbed her clit harder and on the next pulse, thrust forward. She took his fingers to the first knuckle, the soft inner tissue dragging against the digits as he spread them. His left hand opened to cup her mound and keep her in place.

"Oh God!" she moaned. Her hips bucked along his palm, her juices spilling over his wrist. He worked his fingers deeper into her ass until she took them all the way in.

"That's how you're going to take my cock someday," he whispered. "Hard and deep with no games."

He pulled back, tested the tension in her muscles before pressing a third finger against the tight ring. He curled the index finger of his other hand until it scraped her distended clitoris.

"C'mon, Angel. Take my fingers. Show me how much you want my cock fucking that tight ass."

Her taut muscles bunched, her pussy quivered and her ass winked before she took a breath and pushed back hard against his hand, taking all three fingers into her greased channel. She came immediately, her scream ripping through the room, her inner muscles clamping down on his fingers, her pussy drenching his hand. He held her up with his left hand while driving his fingers into her spasming channel. When her climax mellowed to sporadic twitches, he removed his fingers from her ass, dipped them in the salve and spread the lubricant over his hard cock. He was so aroused, the touch of his own hand had come leaking from the tip.

He placed his hands on her hips. She flinched at his touch but didn't tense. Her well greased little hole was red and swollen as he carefully aligned his cock and drew her down onto his lap.

Her head dropped back against his shoulder as she sat suspended over his cock.

"I can't wait to bury my cock in your ass," he whispered. "Can't wait to tunnel it deep in that tight little channel. Can't wait to hear you scream my name as you come apart around me."

He pulled her hips down. "Take me, Angel. Give me your ass now."

Her head twisted on his shoulder, her hair whipping against his face as she bore down on him. He kissed her neck, her shoulder, anything he could reach as her muscles parted under the assault and the head of his cock burst into her heat. She cried out and shuddered as he stretched her to the limit with that first inch, holding herself perfectly still, as if afraid to move.

"Steady," he murmured, holding her hips against his as he tumbled them both forward. She caught herself on her hands and knees. His cock popped free as he pushed her shoulders to the floor and came down over her. His moan echoed hers.

He spanked her ass twice for the simple reason that it tempted him. She moaned and pushed her heated flesh against his hand. He followed the curve of her spine until he reached the nape of her neck. With steady pressure, he forced her cheek to the floor.

She lay like a suppliant before him. Open and vulnerable, her cheek cushioned on her folded arms. Her buttocks flexed as he placed his cock against her opening. With steady pressure, he forged back into her ass. Her fingers dug into the wood floor as the outer ring popped open and then snapped closed just behind the glans.

She whimpered and held still as her inner muscles flexed around him as if trying to milk him of his seed.

He leaned over her back, bracing one hand beside her shoulder, the other cupping her stomach, once again absorbing her shudders into his larger frame. "Okay?" he asked, kissing her shoulder.

Her nod was soft against his cheek. He moved his hand from her stomach and pulled both her hair and his away so he could see her face. "Good. Then I want you to just lie there and relax." He kissed the corner of her delectable mouth. "I want you to just enjoy the feel of my cock fucking your ass. Don't tighten up, don't resist, just let it happen."

He pulled out to the tip before sliding back in a little deeper. "God, you're tight. So tight, I'm not going to last long."

He pulled out again, shoving back harder, forging deeper. He stopped when she gasped. "Does it hurt?"

She nodded against her arms.

"Do you want me to stop?"

She shook her head, "No."

He slid his fingers down her back, over the curve of her buttocks, to where his cock invaded her body. The fragile skin was stretched taut. "Damn, Angel, you need to relax."

He dipped his fingers down to her pussy, gathering the juices spilling from her and brought them back to her ass, spreading them around her anus, massaging the delicate skin, holding himself still through sheer force of will while he worked on getting her to relax.

He pulled her up on her knees, staying joined, claiming a little bit more of her ass as her back pressed against his chest. He took her hand and brought it between her legs until she cupped his balls.

He leaned down and whispered in her ear as he showed her how he liked to be stroked.

"Can you feel how full they are? How much I want you?"

She nodded again on his next thrust, her hips wiggling slightly as he pushed his balls against her hand before sliding back into her ass.

"Do you want my seed, Angel?" he asked against her ear, his voice rough with the need riding him. "Do you want me to fuck this tight little ass hard and deep until I fill it full?"

Her "Yes," was another of those whimpers of need that had his cock swelling inside her, stretching her further.

"Even if it hurts?"

"Yes."

"Do you like the way it hurts? The way it feels?"

"Yes."

"Do you want me to fuck your ass, Angel?"

"Please." That breathless little moan rocked his control.

"Then bend over and offer it to me."

She leaned forward slowly, her gasps as he followed her down causing him to pause and his cock to slip free. Her moan was an immediate protest.

"Shh. I'll give it back." He slid his hand up her spine as she sank her shoulders to the floor, his fingertips riding the knobs of her vertebrae until he reached her neck. He opened his hand, holding her there as he pressed with small jabs into her, at first asking and then demanding that her body surrender to his.

"Push back, Mara. Take me in."

She did. He leaned against her harder. Her muscles gave and then he popped through the tight ring to the intense heat within. Her cry echoed in the room. His moan was equally as loud. He sank his fingers into the fleshy globes of her buttocks. He held her still as he fucked her with shallow jabs intended to get her used to the feel of his cock in her. To the demands he was making. With every thrust, she parted a little more. Allowed him a little deeper. Gaspd a little harder. Damn, she'd burn him alive. He brought his hand around to massage her clit while he worked his cock in and out of her channel. She held him hard within her, protesting with groans and clenching muscles when he would withdraw, relaxing and opening for him when he forged back in. She

was taking half of him now. Not as easily as he would like, but eagerly, accepting his guidance, reaching for the pleasure he offered.

Every muscle in his body protested as he held back, not giving her what they both wanted. He wanted her to come first. He wanted to feel her pussy gush over his hand, to feel her ass clamp like a vise around his cock. He wanted to be able to shove his fingers into her spasming pussy and feel his own cock jerk and pulse as it filled her ass with the seed threatening to explode from his balls. More than he wanted it, he needed it. She was his and he wanted to fuck her so long and hard, fill her so full, she never, ever forgot it.

His strokes took on a desperate edge, and he knew he was being too rough for someone new to this, but he couldn't hold back. He pounded her ass, his hand clamped around the base of his cock keeping him from driving too deeply. He fucked her until she screamed and collapsed beneath him, her body jerking as her orgasm overtook her. He shoved his fingers into her writhing pussy and let his own release take him, feeling his cock swell and jerk through the thin membrane, coming so hard, her name was ripped from his throat.

Chapter Fifteen

That night, as Mara returned to the table from removing the last of the supper dishes, Cougar pulled her down onto his lap. Mara struggled but Cougar was having none of it.

"Keep me company," he said around a mouthful of apple pie.

She glanced up at him. "You can't eat pie by yourself?" Beneath his hand, he could feel her ribs.

"Nope." He cut off another piece of pie and brought it to her lips. "Open up."

"I already ate."

"A little more won't hurt."

Her lips parted, but only to say, "I'll explode."

"I doubt it." She sighed and reached for the fork. He shook his head. Her gaze flew to his as he pressed the pie against her lips. "Just open your mouth."

She did. He slid the pie in. Watching her mouth close around the tines, he slowly pulled the fork out. Her lips slid the full length. Blood rushed to his cock and breath fled his lungs. Damn. She had a great mouth. He waited until she'd chewed and swallowed—barely—before bringing her chest to his, his mouth to hers. Her lips fluttered softly against his as she desperately swallowed again. He sucked her lower lip between his teeth, holding it the way that always made her shudder, and felt the shiver take her. Then he said, "Open."

She did. Helplessly. Embarrassedly. His tongue swept inside. She tasted like wild woman and sweet apples. He kissed her until she had no breath left, no will left, then pulled back, loving the way her lips clung to his, her body softened into his, and her hips slid against him.

"My two favorite flavors," he murmured against those soft lips, kissing them one more time before leaning back so he could see her expression. "Mara and apple pie."

She blushed and buried her face into his chest. Laughing, he cut off a piece of pie for himself, hugging her as he chewed.

He did enjoy her. He managed to get two more bites down her before she begged off, claiming to be full. Her stomach under his fingers was hard, so he relented. He did not relent in letting her up. He liked the way she felt in his arms. The way this felt, the two of them together at the end of the day, so he held her on his lap, snuggled up tight against him, and finished the pie.

It wasn't long before tiredness began to sway her in the direction of his shoulder. By the time Cougar was two-thirds through his second piece of pie, Mara was cuddled against him, lazily drifting off to sleep.

The chill in the room worsened, and by the time Cougar finished the pie, the fire was definitely in need of replenishing. Carefully carrying Mara to the velvet upholstered sofa she had insisted be put in the parlor, Cougar lay her down. Working quietly so as not to wake her, he fed the fire, did the supper dishes, and doused the lamps before returning to stand by his wife. She slept on her side with her hands tucked under her chin and her lashes feathering her cheeks. Shadows from the fire flowed across her face, emphasizing and de-emphasizing the delicate bone structure.

Shrugging out of his shirt, Cougar sat on the floor beside Mara, his fingers pushing a wayward strand of hair back behind her ear. "Wake up, Mara."

Sleepy and trusting, her eyes opened and stared into his.

"I fell asleep?"

"Yeah. You fell asleep."

Still caught between dreams and reality, Mara shifted to her back before reaching up and cupping the hand caressing her hair. "I'm sorry."

"There's no need to be," Cougar whispered. Mara's tongue eased out to moisten her lips, and Cougar bent his head to touch it with his before it could return to the sanctuary of her mouth.

Mara closed her eyes and waited.

So trusting, Cougar thought, so damned trusting of me not to hurt her. He was going to push that trust to the limit tonight, because tonight they were going to make love. He brought his thumb up to rest against the damp surface of her lips. Because he couldn't help himself, Cougar slid his thumb between Mara's lips, keeping them parted for the invasion of his tongue. Leaning forward, he mated his mouth to hers. Little gasping breaths passed from her mouth to his. She was afraid when they were like this, front to front. He knew it, but she was interested, too. Cougar kept it slow. At first, he only let his tongue trace the shape of her mouth. Every time he felt her body jerk, he paid particular attention to the spot.

"Open for me," he ordered.

Cougar loved the way Mara obeyed mindlessly. Diving into the moist portal, he thrust and explored to his heart's content. He found every drop of honey she hoarded in every secret corner, and when Mara grew bold enough to meet his foray with her own, Cougar rewarded her by bathing her tongue in sensation. His heart thundered in his chest as he pulled away.

He wasn't fooling himself that her blood raced to match his. Not yet anyway. There was expectancy about her though. As if she was waiting for something to happen. If he approached this right, she wouldn't think of anything besides him. "I'm going to make love to you tonight."

She sighed, and relaxed into his chest, obviously not taking his meaning. "Okay."

He cupped her cheek in his hand. "The normal way, Mara."

Tension crept into her pliant body. "Couldn't we just do it like before?"

He shook his head. "I'm willing to bet you're too sore to take me again that way."

Her blush and unconscious shifting confirmed his suspicions. "Isn't there something else—"

He slid his thumb over her lips, cutting off her suggestion. "I want my wife, Mara."

"What if I struggle?"

"I'll deal with it."

"What if I go crazy?"

"You won't."

"What if I can't respond?"

Ah, now they were at the crux of her worries. "It's my job to see that you do."

He caught her hands in his, stretching them up until they rested by her head. Lowering his torso, he placed his mouth on hers, aligning their lips precisely so that each ridge found a mate to cuddle. With tiny increments of motion, he persuaded the slightest of breaks to occur in the tight seal she unwittingly maintained. With the utmost care, Cougar slid the tip of his tongue through the crack. When her lips parted further and an increase in her respiration could be detected, Cougar pulled back.

"Very nice," he approved the way Mara's mouth gleamed from the wetness of his. "Very nice indeed."

Mara ran her tongue over her lips. "I taste like you," she said wonderingly.

A jolt of pure lust tore through him. "Good."

She looked down his body.

"You're naked."

"Not quite. Is it a problem?"

Mara's fingers flexed under his palms. "I'm not sure."

Cougar shifted both of her hands to one of his. Reaching behind her head, he released her glorious hair from its respectable knot.

"Which is it? Yes or no. I'm a man of large appetites and right now, I'm very hungry."

He felt the quiver that shook Mara's body from his chest to his toes. "Damn you," she hissed. "You do it on purpose."

Cougar didn't deny it. He met the helpless anger in her gaze with honesty. "Do you know what it does to me when you respond to me like that?" He cupped his hand behind her neck, and arched her mouth to his. When he parted his lips from hers, his voice was raw with his need. "It tears me up, humbles me, and sends me out of my mind."

Mara stiffened beneath him. "You're not going to stop tonight, are you?"

"No."

"No matter what?" she asked.

"No matter what."

Her breath shuddered in her chest and her face leached a pale white.

Cougar snorted in exasperation. "What would be the point of waiting? Look at you." He motioned to her face. "Two minutes ago, you were crazy for me. Your breasts are still peaking for my touch, but now you're terrified out of your wits. Do you think that's going to get any better with time?"

"Yes."

Cougar shook his head, keeping her from leaving by holding onto her hands. "The longer we wait, the worse it will become."

Mara tugged at her hands. "If you'd give me time..."

"I told you from the beginning, time wasn't part of the deal."

She turned her face from him, staring at the fire. He could see the battle she waged with herself. He could order her to submit, but that wasn't what he wanted. He wanted her to come to him. He wanted this proof of her trust.

He waited two minutes before she turned her head back to him. Her eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. Her breath hung in her throat as she reached for the front of her dress. With fingers that trembled imperceptibly, she undid the buttons on the bodice of her dress. "Are you still hungry?" The shakiness of her voice belied the hard determination in her eyes.

"Ravenous," Cougar answered solemnly, knowing how hard this was for her. Reaching up, he stopped the dress from shimmying off her slender shoulders. "But for right now, why don't you kiss me?"

The lips that touched his were aggressive but cold. Oh, so cold. Holding Mara's head still, Cougar gentled her with butterfly touches of his mouth on hers. Suddenly, her breath escaped in a harsh expulsion that Cougar drew into his mouth along with the tears that had pooled at the corners of her lips.

"I'm so afraid," Mara confessed in a fragile whisper. "So deathly afraid."

"I know." He stroked a tear from her cheek. It wasn't a rational fear, but he knew it was real to her.

Her lip slid between her teeth. He pulled it free with his thumb. Her breath shuddered over his skin. Her gaze skirted his. Mara's chest pulled tight against his as she took another breath and held it. He counted to three before she blurted out, "Can we just get it over with then? Can we just do it?"

Cougar smoothed the tangle of hair back from her face as he sat up. A few strands twisted around his hand, tangling with his fingers. "Yes. We can just do it."

Taking a quilted throw off the back of the chair, Cougar shook it out. It flared in a colorful sprawl over the plank floor before the fireplace. Taking Mara's clammy hand in his, he pulled her over and down until they were lying on the center of the broken star pattern. When she immediately rolled onto her back and spread her legs, he was

unprepared for the rush of tenderness that surged through him. He stroked his fingers down her face. "Open your eyes, Mara."

"Do I have to?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

He smiled at her frown. "Because I want to talk."

"It'll go faster if we skip conversation."

Her eyes were still closed. "I can work and talk at the same time."

That had her cracking an eyelid. "Work? This is work?"

He shrugged. "You've pretty much taken all the fun out of it."

Her other eyelid cracked open. "You're not serious."

"I'm always serious."

Her gaze collided with his, bounced off, and then came back to focus just to the left of his nose. "Compared to whom?"

"Asa MacIntyre."

"Who?"

"He married up with my neighbor, Elizabeth Coyote, a year or so back."

"What does he have to do with anything?"

"Compared to Asa, I'm as serious as a damned judge."

"Oh." A long pause and then, "You sound as if you like him."

"He has a way of growing on you and Elizabeth finds him tolerable."

Her eyes opened all the way now. "You like Elizabeth?"

"Yeah. I like her."

If her frown was anything to go by, she wasn't too happy to hear that. "It's impolite to speak of another woman while in bed with your wife."

"This something you picked up in that etiquette book?"

Her gaze shifted from his. "Maybe."

"Or would you just be making this up as you go along?" She shrugged, the quilt bunched under her shoulder.

"What if I am?"

He leaned over her to tug the crease flat. "Then I'd want to know your reason."

A log popped in the fireplace. Mara jumped, her chest colliding with his forearm. Her muscles immediately pulled tight again.

So much for distraction. One accidental touch and they were back at square one.

"Was there a fire in the fireplace that night, Mara?" he asked quietly.

"Wha—" she gasped.

He cupped her face in his hand and forced her to look at him. "That night at Cecile's. Was there a fire?"

"Yes. No." She frowned. "I'm not sure."

"What do you remember?"

"Darkness. A man's voice." She frowned. "Maybe more than one. Oh God!" She grabbed his wrist, panicked. "What if there was more than one?"

He resisted her tugging and held her still. "Then there was. It doesn't matter."

"Of course it matters!"

"Why?" The question did what his muscles couldn't. It got her attention. Her hand froze on his wrist. Her eyes locked to his.

"Why?"

"Yes. What difference does it make if one or twenty men had you?"

"How can you ask that?"

"Because it doesn't matter."

Her eyes shut tight. "It matters."

"Not to me."

Her fingers bunched in the loose quilt. "It matters to me."

"Because you think a man forcing himself on you somehow makes you dirty?"

She jerked herself free of his hand. He was left staring at her profile. The violence of the move sent strands of her auburn hair flying across his forearm.

"I am dirty. Filthy." It was a flat statement of fact.

"When there's nothing you can do to stop something, Mara, you do what you must to survive."

"And that makes it all right?"

"It makes it what you had to do. It takes courage to survive."

"If I had any real courage, I would have killed myself."

Son of a bitch! His hands fisted in the loose strands of hair as he fought the rage. The guilt.

Somehow, he kept his voice even. Calm. "It doesn't take guts to die, Mara."

Her lips pulled thin before she whispered, "Then why couldn't I pull the trigger?"

He never knew a whisper so soft could tear his heart out. He couldn't believe that she'd even considered trying. "Because nothing's happened that's worth dying over."

She said nothing. Just stared at the fire, as isolated from him as if she were behind a barred door. Isolating herself in a way that scared him.

"Dammit! Look at me." When she still didn't turn her head, he grabbed her chin and forced her gaze to his.

"You will not kill yourself."

"You can't order that." Her chin jerked in the clamp of his fingers.

"Like hell I can't." He stilled the movement by simply tightening his grip. "You're my wife. I can do whatever the hell I please."

"There are limits as to what even you can control."

The rage came out of nowhere, tearing the growl from his throat. "You won't defy me in this."

"It's my life." Her continued mutiny stirred the black rage into a cold knot of resolve.

"No, it's not. It's mine. You gave it to me the day you left Doc's and came here."

She stared at him, defiance in every line of her body.

He shook her chin, leaning into her chest, uncaring if he was too heavy, wanting nothing more than to crush her will in this.

"I don't care if a hundred men ride onto this ranch tomorrow and have their way with you," he continued. "You're mine and you will not, *will not* take yourself away from me. For any reason."

She stared at him while his breath came in harsh rasps. Seconds passed and she didn't respond. Didn't move, just stared at him with those big eyes as she weighed his words. Then, one by one, her muscles relaxed until she lay soft and compliant under him. Very slowly, as if she were afraid of startling him, she reached up and pushed his hair away from his eyes. Then with that same cautious movement, her eyes locked to his, she closed her fingers around his wrist. Her strokes to the tense inner muscles were soothing. Almost apologetic.

"I won't leave you, Cougar."

Only a small portion of the cold knot in his gut relaxed. It still took extreme force of will to gentle his grip, to pull away from her so she could breathe. "I know."

One thing he was good at, it was holding onto what was his.

"Do you know how arrogant that sounds?" she asked, experimenting with freeing her chin.

He let her go to spread his hand over her throat and then to slide it to her collarbone. "It's only arrogant if I can't follow through."

And he would follow through. He wouldn't let anything take her away from him, especially a misplaced sense of shame.

He spread his hand across her upper chest. Her heart beat against his palm as he measured the span of her shoulders. He was able to touch one of her shoulders with his pinkie and one with his thumb. *Damn. She was built so small. How had she ever managed to take him?*

"And you always follow through?" she asked, breaking into his thoughts.

"Yes." He eased the dress over her shoulder. To his surprise, she lifted up when he tugged.

"And you're still going to follow through tonight?"

"Yes."

Her chin came up. "Good."

He pulled the other sleeve down, watching as it slid over the delicate curve of her shoulder. "Why good?"

He was surprised when she didn't stop him as he bared her breasts. Right up until she gave him her reason. "Because I'm tired of being afraid."

That was so like Mara, he felt the last of his panic slip away. As long as she kept leading with her chin, he had nothing to worry about.

Chapter Sixteen

Leading with her chin got Mara down to bare assed naked, but when he came over her, her bare flesh melting into his and his cock brushing against the soft curls of her pussy, she froze, her fears stifling her good intentions.

He held her still with his hands, his softly murmured “Steady”, seeming to calm her.

“It’s not going to happen all at once,” he elaborated as she took long, deep breaths.

“But you promised we could get it over with.”

He ignored the dismay he heard in her voice.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“To what?”

“I’ve decided I want to play a bit.”

“With what?”

It was a measure of her fear that she uttered such a stupid question.

“You.”

“Oh.”

Clearly, she didn’t know how to take that. What to expect. But he did and as soon as he told her, she’d relax, falling into his orders like they were part of her. She was just on edge because he hadn’t prepared her. He was on edge because he was so hungry for her pussy, he was afraid he’d come at her like a green kid, ruining everything. He knew exactly how to take the edge off both of them.

He touched her mouth with his fingertip. “Are you willing to try something different tonight?”

She licked her lip, thrown off balance by being offered a choice. He followed the path of that tempting little tongue with his eyes. When it retreated into her mouth, his finger was close behind.

“Close you lips around my finger,” he ordered softly, watching her carefully. Some of the tension left her muscles as she obeyed. He slid his finger slowly in and out of her mouth, over her lips, over her tongue.

On the fourth pass, he ordered, “Suck it.”

She did, instinctively swirling her tongue over the pad of his finger as he pumped it in and out of her mouth, her eyes as they met his, wide with questions he was willing to answer. He shifted until he was on his hands and knees. He reluctantly pulled his finger free of her mouth, smoothing her saliva over her full lips on the retreat.

He held her gaze as he walked his hands up her body, coming over her, dragging his cock over her soft belly and softer breasts until it hovered beneath her chin. He saw the understanding dawn in her eyes as he shifted that little bit necessary for his cock to tap her lips. He held it there as her breath fanned over the sensitive head in searing little gasps, waiting for her to gather her control before saying, "I'm going to fuck your mouth now, Angel. All you have to do is part your lips and do just what you did to my finger. Nothing scarier than that."

She glanced at his cock, her eyes crossing with the strain of seeing that close, and then her lips parted the barest of measures.

"But first," he qualified, "I want you to kiss it. Nice and gentle on the tip."

Her gaze flicked to his before she gently did as he ordered, the feel of her lips on his flesh agonizing. A bead of pre-come leaked past his control, spreading against her lips. She paused in one of those hesitations he was coming to recognize.

He pushed against her lips. "Go ahead, Angel. Taste me."

Her tongue came out slowly to touch him, gathered his essence, and then retreated. Damn, she was something with her eyes all sleepy and considering as she took his come into her mouth. His cock jerked and leaked again as her cheeks and lips flexed around his seed. Her eyes closed slightly and her muscles relaxed. She brought her hands up to touch his shaft, almost undermining the shreds of his control with tiny, delicate flutters.

Her fingers stole the next bead of come and transferred it to her mouth, her eyes drifting closed as she sucked her finger clean. The groan erupted from his toes. He collapsed on his elbows, barely able to remember to keep from crushing her.

"Do you like it, Mara?" he asked on a harsh gasp, fighting his need to come with every fiber of his being. "Do you like the way I taste? The way I can't control myself around you?"

She did, Mara decided. Especially the last. She absolutely loved that he wanted her so much, that he found whatever she did arousing. That just by being herself, she stole some of his control.

She swallowed the last of his come, the salty flavor diluted by saliva until it was only a memory, but his cock, that huge cock still rested in front of her lips, fully loaded. Ready to give her whatever she wanted. Above her, his body arched, taut with tension and the desire for her mouth. But she wanted it, too. She wanted to give this to him, to be the one to please him, to forever erase from his memory the women he'd had before. Women like Nidia. Experienced women. Women who did this with ease.

She opened her mouth and arched her neck, capturing the thick head between her lips. She misjudged his size. His big body jerked above her, his cock scraped hard on her teeth, and his curse tore through the room. He'd said all she had to do was to lie there, but there was obviously more to it than that. She wanted to creep away and hide.

His hand came behind her neck when she would have dropped back, supporting her when she would have quit. "It's okay, Angel," he whispered from above her in that

dark drawl that went straight to her pussy. "Just let your lips cover your teeth and relax. I'll do all the rest. Just relax."

She did, letting him support her neck, opening her mouth for the shallow thrust of his cock, finding that it went smoother if she let her head fall back a little more.

"That's it," he whispered, feeding her another inch. "That's the way. Just a little at a time."

Her mouth stretched to accommodate his width, his cock filling her to the point that her jaws ached, but she kept her lips over her teeth, and strained to catch glimpses of his expression as he steadily increased the depth and power of his thrusts.

"Ah damn. That's a pretty sight."

He was watching her, she realized. Watching her take his cock into her mouth, enjoying the view as much as the sensation. The knowledge set off explosions of need in her belly. She stretched her jaws a little wider and bobbed her head to take a little more.

"Steady," he whispered when she gagged. "There's no rush. You'll learn to take all of me eventually."

She wanted him now. She tried again, meeting the same humiliating limitation. Before she could try a third time, he pulled his cock from her mouth. She curled on her side, embarrassed and wanting to find a hole to crawl into. She couldn't even give him what Nidia did.

His big hand wrapped in her hair and brought her face around. Her body had no choice but to follow until she was on her side facing him. She kept her eyes closed, unwilling to see his disappointment until she got herself under control.

Even that small comfort was denied her as he tugged on her hair. The small darts of pain flickered from her scalp to her womanhood, tempting her pussy with the enticing possibilities.

"Look at me." The softness of his drawl belied the expectation of obedience couched in the command.

She toyed with the idea of keeping her eyes closed, but a sharp slap on her ass had her pussy humming and her eyes flying open.

He held her gaze while he slapped her again. His expression knowing as she gasped first in stinging pain and then in stinging pleasure, the two sensations coming so close together, she couldn't separate them.

He touched her lips with his finger. "You don't need to be embarrassed, Angel. All you have to do is tell me what you need." He slid his finger across her lower lip. His drawl became low and husky. "I'll always give you anything you need."

He may want to give it, but she didn't know how to ask for it. She could only stare at him while he slid his finger over her lip, her pussy aching, and her courage down around her knees.

"Do you want to take more?" he asked, pulling her lip down, bending his head so he could slide his tongue over the moist pink lining.

She closed her eyes as she caught his tongue between her lips. She sucked it hard before letting him go to whisper back, "Yes."

"But you're worried about doing it right?"

She nodded.

He kissed her hard. "Would you believe me if I said you couldn't do it wrong?"

"No."

"I didn't think so."

He replaced his hand with the tip of his cock, rubbing it over her lips, a pleased smile crinkling the corner of his eyes as she lapped and nibbled the engorged head.

"Do you like my cock in your mouth?" His voice broke on the question, letting her know he wasn't as in control as he wanted her to believe. She sucked the flesh just under the flared head. His eyes closed briefly. When they opened, they burned into hers with surging desire.

"Are you willing to do what I tell you, no matter what?"

She bit her lip. "No matter what" covered a large area. He didn't say a word, just stared at her with those dark golden eyes, leaving the decision up to her. Between them, his cock lay, hard and red, pulsing with need against her lips. In her mind, she saw Nidia straddling him, saw his pleasure-racked body twisting on the sheets, desperate for more, powerless to resist her mouth. Oh yes, she wanted to learn how to give him that. Feeling like she was stepping off some invisible ledge, she closed her eyes, swallowed past the apprehension closing her throat and said, "Yes."

His tug on her hair had her eyes opening.

"Not good enough."

"I don't understand."

"You want to learn how to swallow my cock?"

She understood then what he wanted. No games. No hiding. Still, it wasn't easy with her modesty standing in her way.

"Please, Cougar," she whispered. "Please show me how to—" Lord, even the thought had her ricocheting between fear and anticipation. She took a steadying breath. "Teach me to swallow your cock."

Approval flared in his eyes before he surged to his feet. He held out his hand. She took it. He pulled her up along his body, his breath hissing through his teeth as her breasts brushed his cock and then her belly followed. "Good girl," he murmured before slanting his mouth over hers.

He claimed her mouth like a wild man, his hunger belying his calm demeanor. When she would have pulled back for a breath, he pulled her tighter, thrust his tongue deeper, pushing her limits just that much further. He kept himself pressed tightly against her, so close she could feel every throb of his cock, every beat of his heart.

He stepped her backward to the couch. He tossed two pillows on one end before pushing her down. The velvet surface abraded her sensitive labia as he stood before her, his cock bobbing with this movement, his heavy balls swaying beneath.

She glanced up at him, unsure what to do.

"Kiss it like before."

She did, her lips lingering longer than they needed to, experimenting with the resilient texture before he pulled away, tapping her cheek in light reprimand with his fingers. "I said kiss it, not fuck it."

The smile in his eyes told her he really didn't mind.

His fingers lingered on her cheek, sliding back until he cupped her face in his palm. "Are you sure about this? You're jumping from 'getting acquainted' to 'down and dirty' with no in-between."

"I'm sure."

And she was. When he instructed her to lie on her back on the couch, her shoulders balanced on the arm with her head dangling off the end, she didn't hesitate. He wouldn't let any harm come to her.

He came around the end. She understood then why he'd wanted this position. By bending his knees, he could bring his cock level with her mouth.

"Open your mouth."

She did, stretching as wide as possible so the head of his cock could slide in smoothly. He paused, letting her grow accustomed to his size. She let her lips relax around him first, then tightening her grip, until she held him as tightly as she dared without biting him.

His fingers slid through her hair, wrapping into the thick strands, anchoring her against him. As if she could possibly go anywhere. She was helpless beneath him. The knowledge had her whole body dissolving into a puddle of melting anticipation.

She watched his face as he fucked her mouth with shallow strokes. He was intent, his lips and cheeks tight. He was enjoying what they were doing, but he wasn't wild. He wasn't the way she wanted.

He looked down and caught her watching him.

He pushed his cock a little deeper, forcing her jaws wider. She struggled to accommodate his thickness.

"You are going to have to trust me and do as I say," he told her in a harsh parody of his normal drawl. His voice stolen by desire. For her. "If you don't, I'll have to punish you."

She jerked, incandescent sparks of anticipation skittering through her blood at the thought. His cock hit the back of her throat. She gagged, only she couldn't pull back, couldn't get away.

"Steady," he murmured, pulling back the slightest of distances.

She sucked in three deep breaths through her nose before he pushed forward again. As soon as he hit her throat, she choked and instinctively fought. He held her head still with his hands and uttered one word, "Swallow."

It took a second for her panicked brain to process the command. She stared at him in disbelief. He retreated, let her catch her breath and then pushed forward again, his command of "Swallow" coinciding with his cock's striking the back of her throat. She did, feeling the broad head pop through her body's resistance, pushing into her spasming throat. He held himself there for a second and then retreated.

His voice was harsh and tight as he ordered her to breathe. She managed one breath and he was pushing past her resistance again, going deeper than before, moaning as she choked around his width, the muscles of her throat rippling up and down his length.

"Damn. I'm not going to last."

She concentrated on breathing as he fucked her with a few shallow strokes. His thumbs bracketed her cheeks, tracing the bulge of his cock within as he said, "I'm going to come this time. You're not going to be able to breathe when I do, so you need to take a deep breath and hold it when I fuck you."

Panic flared. She never thought he'd come in her mouth. He'd drown her. He pulled out until his cock rested on the shelf of her teeth. He touched her cheek again. "You can do this, Angel. Just do as I say and trust me."

She closed her eyes and nodded.

He didn't move. She waited until she couldn't stand it anymore and then opened her eyes. He was staring down at her. "I want your eyes open and on mine the whole time."

She didn't know if she could do that. Before she could say so, he was sliding his cock back into her mouth, relentlessly claiming what he wanted, what she'd given him. His strokes were bold now. No longer accommodating her inexperience. Harder, faster, deeper, he drove his cock in until he hit the back of her throat. She gagged and then remembered to swallow. His cock head broke through and then retreated so fast, she couldn't catch her breath. Then he was back, offering no quarter as he drove in deeper than before.

"Take it," he encouraged. "Every inch you can, baby."

He pulled back, let her take a breath, and then worked his way back in. He held himself there, deep in her throat and shifted his grip from her hair to her straining nipples. He rolled them between his fingers as he retreated, pinched them hard as he pushed back in, his expression as hard and tight as his grip. His gaze clouded over as the pleasure took him. She redoubled her efforts to take him, to stroke him with her tongue whenever she could.

This time when he pulled back, he asked, "Are you ready?"

She honestly did not know. Her panic must have shown in her eyes because his gaze softened. "You can do this, Angel. Just take a deep breath, swallow and trust me to take care of you."

She locked her gaze with his, relaxed her throat and gave herself over to him. He pressed deep into the depths of her mouth, past her throat, and kept on coming. His fingers clamped on her nipples mercilessly. Her back arched, thrusting herself up into his hands, causing her to take him as deeply as possible, her scream of pleasure vibrating around his pulsing cock. Time and time again she swallowed, her gaze clinging to his as he jerked and swore above her, his climax stealing his usual control and leaving him vulnerable to her. His pleasure hers to control. His joy hers to give. His soul hers to see.

He withdrew before she ran out of air, his cock still spurting his seed across her tongue. She gathered it in her mouth as she drew deep breaths through her nose. He tasted of salt and mystery. Of life and hope. She swallowed his seed, his strength. His knees gave out and he collapsed across her, his weight braced on his forearms, his cock sliding free of her lips as he dragged huge gulps of air into his lungs.

She wrapped her arms around him, held him close, and waited.

Cougar gathered his shattered control. Beneath him, Mara lay still, her breathing occasionally broken by a shudder. He was afraid to look. Afraid to see the horror in her eyes. He'd lost control. Something that had never happened before.

"Cougar?"

The small voice came from beneath him, slightly raspy. No wonder considering how hard he'd been pounding his cock down her throat.

"Yeah?"

He pulled himself up, so he could see her.

Her hair was a wild tangle around her face. Her lips were red and swollen, her eyes misty and...hungry?

Oh God, she was hungry. He pushed himself up and came around the couch to slide in beside her. When he ran out of room, he just lifted her over him.

"Did I do it right? Was it okay?"

Okay? Damn, she'd sucked the life out of him. He caught a handful of hair in his hands and dragged her mouth to his. He was getting hard again just thinking about it. "You were perfect," he bit off against her lips. "No one's ever taken me like that. That completely."

As if she'd die if he held any part of himself back.

He ran his hand down her back, wanting her to know that same kind of pleasure. She shuddered beneath his touch. He parted her thighs, easing her knees to either side of his hips. "Scoot up here." She got as far as his chest before she ran out of height.

He laughed, put his hands on her hips and lifted her over his shoulders until her little pussy hovered over his mouth.

Her scent teased him. Her swollen, eager folds practically begged for his attention. His mouth watered as he caught sight of her clit, peeking out from its protective folds.

She twisted in his grasp, obviously embarrassed by the position. He soothed her with a murmur and then released his grip until she supported herself on her knees above his face.

"Damn, you're pretty, Angel."

"So you keep telling me," she choked out.

"About time you started believing me then."

He parted her folds with a finger, sliding along her cleft, tracing patterns on the smooth flesh as she froze above him.

"What are you doing?"

"Waiting for you to give me what I want."

"What do you want?"

The horror in her voice told him she had an inkling of his intentions. "I want you to sit that pretty little pussy on my face and show me what you like."

Her answer was a reedy "I can't."

"But you will."

"I'm all wet," she whispered as if he didn't have a bird's eye view of the situation.

"Deliciously so," he agreed.

Still, she hesitated.

"Are you denying me?"

"No. But you can't possibly want —"

"Not only do I want, I'm starving for you."

Her "Oh," was barely audible.

He smacked her ass with his open hand. Above him, her pussy clenched and then more juices spread over her thigh. Because she liked it so much, he did it again, adding a "Give me your pussy," for good measure.

She obeyed immediately, her cream spreading across his face as he lapped at her, working from the inside out for the simple reason he wanted to. She tasted of the sweetest, earthiest spice. She tasted of dreams fulfilled. She tasted like heaven.

He caught her clit in his mouth, sucking lightly at first and then building the pressure until she screamed and jerked against him. Her climax caught them both by surprise.

He held her clit in his mouth, lapping it lightly as he let her come down. When she collapsed above him, pliable in his arms, he went back to lapping up her cream, wanting it all. Her trust was a gift he didn't take lightly. When he got to her outer lips, her soft curls hampered his path. He touched the hair consideringly, teased her clit with his tongue, and then came to a decision.

He pulled her up, kissed her lips and told her to hold his place. He knew she watched him as he headed for the water closet, but he didn't answer the question he could feel beating at him. She'd understand soon enough.

He came back with his shaving gear and his straight razor. She took one look and hit the back of the couch. He smiled and motioned her forward.

She shook her head. "I don't think so."

He cocked a brow at her, put the soap and brush on the floor, and said, "I know so, now scoot forward."

She eyed the straight razor as he dragged it across the strop. "What do you think you're going to do with that?"

"I'm going to shave your pussy."

She grabbed a pillow in front of her and dropped all pretense of obedience. "No."

He put the razor down. "No?" he queried softly. He took two steps to the settee. "You're telling me no?"

He caught her arm as she made to fly past him. After that, it was simple to turn her over his knee.

"We had an agreement," he drawled conversationally as if the plump cheeks of her ass weren't tempting him as they jiggled with her struggles. "My touch. Anyway I want it."

He brought his palm down on her right cheek. She jerked and screamed. He brought it down on her left one before she'd recovered from the first. There was more screech than howl in her cry, letting him know he wasn't really hurting her. As she jerked on his lap, her stomach rubbed against his aching cock. One of these days, he was going to spank her until they both came, but not today. He delivered four more hard slaps to her ass, before he asked her, "Are you ready to give me what I want?"

She wiggled on his lap, her pinkened ass tempting him into one more slap. Her moan of satisfaction was immediate.

"Well?" he prompted.

"Can't I do it myself?"

He blanched at the thought. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm damned good with a knife and you're not."

"How hard can it be?"

He cupped his hand protectively over her tender pussy. "Hard enough you're not going to be trying it."

"Why does it have to be done at all?"

That was easy to answer. "Because I don't want anything between you and my mouth."

"Oh."

He drew her up by her shoulders, her face red with embarrassment. Her chest was flushed with excitement. Her nipples stood proud and hard on her breasts. Damn, she was beautiful. He put a finger dead center of each breast and pushed her back until she

plopped on the couch. He scooted her to the end where he'd stacked the pillows. This time, instead of her head dangling over the edge, he draped her legs.

She covered her face with her hands. "I can't believe I'm letting you do this."

"You'll be letting a hell of a lot more than this." He dipped the brush in the water on the side of the stand and then rubbed the boar's head bristles on the soap, whipping up a lather. The scent of bay rum filled the room. He pushed her right thigh wider and whisked the lather across her pubic area, pausing to linger on her clit as he moved side to side. Her hips jerked, ruining his aim. He filled the brush, and did it again, stroking her flesh over and over until she was tossing on the couch, moaning with the need for more. When she was on the edge, needing just one more flick on her clit to come, he put the brush away. She opened her eyes in time to see him angle the razor.

"Oh my God!"

He shook his head at her and sighed, "Cougar."

She started to struggle back. He stopped her just by putting the lethally sharp blade near her pussy. She froze.

"Do you know what you're doing?" she gasped, her lips barely moving.

"Trust me, Angel, when it comes to a knife in my hands, you have nothing to worry about. Now hold still."

He placed the blade at the base of her pubic bone. "Are you sure?" was a high squeak as he began to drag the blade up in short, even strokes.

He wiped the blade clean with a towel, caught her eye and said, "I'm sure." As he bent back to his task, he added, "But if you ask me again, I'm going to have to punish you."

It was a good thing he'd paused after that pronouncement because the purely involuntary, violently eager jerk of her hips would have had him nicking her for sure.

He pulled his hand back. His "that was a close one" had her freezing all over again. He smiled and removed another strip of hair. She was a handful, but a damned fun one.

Things got a little more complicated as he got to the outer lips. He pinched the slippery inner lips between his fingers as he stroked the outer ones. She moaned and her hands clenched at the soft fabric of the couch.

"Don't come," he warned her just before he pinched her clit between his fingers to protect it.

By the time he finished shaving her pussy, she was dripping in sweat and gasping with need. He wasn't much better, his cock was dribbling a steady stream of ejaculate, and if he didn't bury it in her soon, he was going to come on the floor.

He put the razor and the soap under the couch. With the towel, he wiped her clean.

"Now you can come," he told her, taking her clit in his mouth, and sucking hard as he thrust a finger into her tight cunt. She burst against him, screaming, drumming her heels on his back, yanking at his hair. He held on tight, riding her climax to the end,

lapping at the juices gushing from her cunt, wincing as she yanked particularly hard, smiling in satisfaction when she screamed again. He'd just known she'd be a screamer.

When she lay quietly beneath him, limp, he pulled her hips further over the edge. She cracked her eyes, too drained to care what he did.

"Now, Angel, let's make you mine."

He probed her cleft gently, settling his cock into the opening of her vagina, fighting for the control to take her gently. To let her adjust to his size as she slowly, reluctantly, parted for him. As wet as she was, she was still incredibly tight.

Her body tensed as he pushed the head of his cock past the ring of muscle into the heat beyond. "Relax. Just a little at a time until you have it all."

She whimpered and her muscles clenched against his intrusion.

He looked down. "Open your eyes, Mara."

When she did, the fear in them almost broke his heart. "It's just me, Angel," he whispered, dropping his forehead to hers, cupping her cheek in his palm. "Just Cougar. You trust me never to hurt you."

She bit her lip and nodded.

He nudged a little deeper, holding her gaze, using little pulses that he timed to her panting breaths. Her muscles first clenched in resistance, pulling her whole body tight, but eventually she began to relax. Deepening his thrusts, he worked a quarter of his length into her sheath.

"See, Angel. You can take me."

A bit of wonder replaced the fear as she wiggled against him. "You're in me."

"Yeah." He couldn't prevent pushing harder as she wiggled again. Her gasp pulled him up short of the thrust his body craved. "Am I hurting you?"

She appeared to think about it. "Just a little."

"How little?"

"I don't understand."

"A little you need me to stop, or a little I can go on?"

She tested his presence with a pulse of her hips. He stretched her too far for her to squeeze him with her inner muscles, but that was just as well. He was about two strokes short of coming. Being inside Mara was about as close to heaven as he was ever going to get.

"You can go on."

The way she said that, so prissy, shook a smile out of his agony.

"Good."

He pushed deeper, feeling her flesh drag along his cock as she took him one inch at a time. He pulled back and surged in again, keeping his hand on her cheek, making sure she kept her gaze locked on his. With every inch he gained, a measure of fear

slipped from her eyes, until, finally, he was seated to the hilt and her cinnamon-brown eyes were full of wonder.

"Okay?" he asked as his balls rocked against her buttocks.

"Oh my."

"Oh my good, or oh my bad?" *Damn, it had better be good.*

Her lip sucked between her teeth. He pulled out and forged back in, her pussy grasping him with incredible tightness, the friction an agony of hot pleasure that speared outward from his cock.

"Good," she sighed, her nails digging into his forearms and her eyes closing as he withdrew.

Jesus. He wasn't going to last one minute more if she kept sighing like that.

He took his hand from her cheek and placed it on her pubic mound. He applied pressure to her abdomen while his thumb rubbed her clit. As she moaned and rubbed back, he drove his cock into her pussy, releasing his hold on his control as she began to arch against him. Her cries built to a scream that echoed off the walls as he came in her, the hot spurt of his seed ripping a cry from his own throat as she climaxed around him, milking him dry, taking every drop he had to give until there was nothing left. Nothing held back, just the two of them burning up together.

The crackle of the dying fire was the only sound in the dark room.

"Is Cougar your real name?"

"Yes."

"That's it. Just yes?"

"Curious cat. What will you give me to go on?"

Bodies shifted, lips brushed, fingers explored.

"A mountain lion screamed the entire two days my mother labored with me. Dad was from Kentucky. They're a suspicious lot. When he thought Mom was going to die, he took it as a sign and thought to protect his family from the spirits by giving me their name."

"What's your middle name?"

"If you tell another soul, I'll —"

"Yes?"

"I'll never be hungry again."

"I'm sworn to silence!"

"Witch. It's..."

"I'm sorry. I didn't hear that."

"It's Horatio."

"Horatio?"

"You can stop laughing now."

"That tickles!"

"Hmm."

"Why Horatio?"

"My Mom was newly Christian at the time and she was so scandalized by the heathen name my father chose that she named me after the most upright person she could think of in the hopes of counteracting my father's decision."

"Dare I ask?"

"Five-foot-four at the best. So slight, a breeze would blow him away. Thick glasses, always squinting, and a handkerchief permanently glued to a runny nose."

"Let me guess."

"Yup. The town minister. A paragon of everything a boy spends hours on his knees praying he won't grow up to be."

"You poor baby."

"Yeah. I'm definitely in need of sympathy."

"Here?"

"Ump-hmm. And there. And there."

"What about here?"

"Oh damn! Especially there!"

"Wake up, Mara."

"Not again. I'm too tired."

"So am I, but it's time to get reacquainted with our bed."

"I don't want to."

"That's fine with me if you don't mind Clint strolling in on us in about two hours."

"Oh heavens! I forgot about him!"

"Hmm. Up you go."

"Do you think he heard us? Me?"

"I'm sure he had the good taste to stuff socks in his ears."

"I'm never coming downstairs again!"

"Angel, first you have to get up the stairs."

"I can't. I'm too stiff."

"What will you give me if I carry you?"

"An apple pie?"

"You're learning."

* * * * *

"Mara not coming down this morning?" Clint asked.

Bleary eyed, Cougar smiled at his cousin over the rim of his coffee cup. "If Mara is to be believed, she won't be gracing the ground floor with her presence ever again."

Clint smiled knowingly. "Couldn't make it upstairs, huh?"

"Nope."

Clint eyed the unappetizing lumps congealing on his plate. They were supposed to be scrambled eggs. "Think she means it?"

Cougar chuckled, remembering Mara's burning face and adamant refusal. "Yup."

Clint pushed the plate to the middle of the table and tried to fill the void in his stomach with another cup of thick coffee. "Do you suppose if I ever so circumspectly mentioned that I didn't hear any moaning and screaming when I stopped over last night, would it make a difference?"

Following Clint's example, Cougar shoved his own uneaten breakfast out from under his nose. "I suspect if the subject ever comes up, I'll never see my wife again."

Clint looked heartbroken.

"Cheer up," Cougar said. "Eventually, she'll have to come downstairs to use the water closet."

"In that case, I'll get a move on putting up the rest of that fence, though I think you're inviting disaster to start closing off the range."

Cougar shrugged. "People around here can bitch all they want. If I'm going to improve my stock, I've got to be able to control the breeding. Sooner or later, the rest of the cattlemen will come to the same realization. They just don't like change."

"You've got to admit, miles and miles of wooden fence is a bit shocking on the eyes."

"Hardly miles and miles," Cougar countered, grabbing his hat off the peg by the door. "Wood is expensive."

Clint followed him out the door, grabbing his own hat. "Speaking of fences, how much more can you afford?"

"Not much." Reaching the barn, he stepped inside the humid interior and began scooping some oats for the horses. He shot Clint a knowing glance. "Getting tired of hammering nails?"

"You might say that."

"Well, hang in there. One of these days, someone's going to come up with a cheaper, more effective method of fencing."

"I don't see why they have to come up with one at all," Clint muttered, tossing some hay to the prized mare that was recovering from the same bear attack that had injured Cougar. The bear Cougar had subsequently killed. "There's plenty of land for everyone."

"The West is getting smaller every day."

"Yeah," Clint agreed sadly. "And isn't that a shame."

Chapter Seventeen

Mara scrubbed at the persistent streak on the window. No doubt she'd be hearing from Cougar about the windows being spotless tonight. He'd spent the last week pleasantly exhausting her at night and ordering her to rest in the morning. Everyday, as soon as he rode out, she went about her business the way he went about his. The first evening he'd come back, he'd come through the door like a thundercloud. Apparently, every ranch hand down to the fourteen-year-old barn help had reported every move she'd made through the day. Supper had grown cold while he'd recited a litany of all she'd done against his orders, and then all the ways this could negatively affect her health. She shook her head. As if she were made of cotton fluff and the first strong wind would blow her away.

The second day he'd come home, he'd spotted the crates she'd pried open and hit the roof. The man was not a yeller, but he was not above using his size and presence to intimidate. Unfortunately for him, she didn't agree with his assessment. If her bodice hadn't gaped as she'd hunched her shoulders on a neutral "I don't know," she might still be listening to him carp. The third day, he'd caught her emptying the washtub. He'd opened his mouth to lecture her, took one look at the sodden front of her dress and dragged her into the house where he'd taken her roughly against the wall. The fourth day, he'd come through the door with an air of resignation, looked at the new crates she'd opened, shook his head, scooped her up and carried her to bed. Yesterday, he'd merely walked through the door, caught her around the waist, and back stepped her to the sofa.

She was beginning to get the impression that Cougar took her to bed so often because it was the only place he felt that she obeyed.

And she did obey him there. She just loved how he handled her body, the dark orders he issued into her ear, and the way she could trust him to make it good for her. She knew if he asked for permission, she'd be frozen in indecision, but the no-nonsense way he took charge freed her from her modesty. He was her husband. He gave the orders. She obeyed. It worked out perfectly. She scratched at a speck on the sill and grinned at her reflection. At least in the bedroom.

* * * * *

The sound of a harness jangling came to the left of the house. She pulled the curtain back in time to see a woman pulling up in a fancy carriage. A beautifully put together, proper from her head to her toes stranger. One who was obviously very pregnant.

Around the corner behind her came a big man racing in on a big black horse. Dust spewed when the horse sat back on its hindquarters as the rider pulled up ten feet away from the woman. There was nothing in the woman's expression to show that she was expecting him or glad to see him.

The man gave Mara pause. He had an air about him. A dangerous quality very reminiscent of Cougar, except she didn't know this man and the way he cradled the rifle across his saddle and the frown on his face would put the fear of God into anyone.

She brushed at the front of her borrowed dress and patted her thigh, the bulge of the knife reassuring against her hand. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door.

A harsh "Goddammit" as she stepped onto the porch sent her heart to her throat and her gaze searching for the source.

The big man was striding away from the hitching post where he'd tied his horse, and was bearing down on the small, pregnant woman who was reaching into the back of the buggy. He grabbed the woman's arm. They exchanged words. His scowl deepened as he listened to what she said. When she paused to take a breath, he muttered a "To hell with it," that carried clearly, and swept her up in his arms.

His face, as he approached the house, was tight and hard. His scowl, scary. Downright dangerous. Mara stepped onto the porch, closing the door behind her. Having this man in her house would be like being caged with a wild animal.

He looked up as his boot hit the bottom step of the porch, took in her standing there, blocking the way, and the closed door behind her.

He dipped the brim of his hat in her direction, offered an "Excuse me, Ma'am," and kept on coming.

He had the coldest eyes Mara had ever seen. Killer's eyes. Deep silver. They seemed to look right through her. She ordered her feet to stay put when he came up on the third step. He was forced to stop, the shoulder of the woman in his arms almost brushing her folded arms.

He seemed surprised to find her still there. Why, when it was her house he was trying to enter, she didn't know, but he was surprised as evidenced by the way his right eyebrow arched up.

"You're standing in my way, Ma'am."

The woman in his arms turned her head into his shoulder, murmured something and kept her face hidden.

Mara kept her response short, "I know."

His left brow shot up as high as his right, "And you don't feel that's a might unneighborly?"

She slid her hand into the pocket of her skirt through the slit until she could finger the hilt of her knife. "No."

"You here alone, Ma'am?" he asked.

She looked across the yard to the barn. There was no sign of movement.

"No." Cougar was going to kill her for opening the door, especially to a man who wore two guns strapped low on his thighs.

"Your husband know you greet strangers on the porch?"

"Yes," she lied.

"He approve?"

The woman in the man's arms stirred. With his big hand, he pressed her face into his shoulder, rendering the words she uttered senseless. Her hand swung at his head. He caught it with the hand under her knees as he balanced her weight on his forearm.

"Pardon my saying so, Ma'am," he said as he shifted the woman to a better position, "but I find that hard to believe."

She didn't particularly care. She pulled her knife free of the sheath, letting it rest against her thigh. "Who are you?"

"I'm your neighbor to the left."

That told her nothing.

"Do you have a name?"

"Uh-huh." He winced. Mara had the impression that the woman in his arms had just bit him. Nothing in his expression changed except for the fact that she saw a flash of amusement chase across his stern features.

She pulled the knife from her skirt. "You need to put the woman down."

He looked at her, at the knife, and then back at her. "Not a wise choice of orders if you ask me, Ma'am."

"I didn't ask you."

He clucked his tongue and shook his head. "Seeing as how I'm a friend of your husband's, I feel obligated to educate you on this one."

This time, she heard the "Shut up, Asa," the woman groaned before he buried her face back into his shirt.

The name tickled the edge of her memory. While she worked on dredging up where she'd heard it before, Asa continued with his lecture. "If I put Elizabeth down, two things are going to happen. One, she's going to start lecturing me on the impropriety of carrying her across the yard and two, my hands are going to be free."

Mara stepped back. She hit the door.

Asa nodded. "Yup. And that would be number three. You've got nowhere to go, and considering my arms are longer than yours and I've been in more knife fights than years you've been alive..." He shrugged. "Well, I'm going to be the clear winner in this wrangle."

She paused, assessing his easy confidence. He might be right. It didn't change her course of action, but it did put a dent in her confidence. The last she didn't let show. "You still need to put her down."

"We're both going to regret it."

"I don't think so."

He shook his head. "You'll see. By now, she's worked up a good head of steam."

"Which I imagine she'll be directing at you."

His sigh was long-suffering. "You could be right."

He ever so gently let the woman's legs drop until her feet hit the porch. His big hands on her shoulders were protective as she found her balance. They slid to cup her pregnant belly as he pulled her back against his chest.

The woman rested easily against him. She straightened her hat. The little feather poked the man in the eye. He flinched back but his hands never left her body and he never removed his support.

The woman looked at Mara. Her face was red with embarrassment. Her expression wry. "You must be Mara McKinnely." She held out her hand. "I'm Elizabeth MacIntyre."

Mara wiped her hand on her skirt before taking Elizabeth's. This perfect example of propriety was the woman Cougar admired, and spoke of with such warmth? She felt rumpled and inadequate in her hand-me-down gown. "Nice to meet you."

Elizabeth placed her hands over her husband's and removed them from her stomach. She stepped to the side. "This is my husband, Asa."

He took his eyes from his wife just long enough to tip his hat to Mara. "Pleased to meet you."

His hand hovered near the base of his wife's spine. Mara got the impression he thought she was in eminent danger of tipping backwards. Why he would think that, she didn't know as the woman's stomach was so huge, Mara didn't see how she kept from pitching onto her face.

"I hope you don't take offense about my visiting?" Elizabeth asked.

"Of course not."

Elizabeth wiped her forehead. "Oh good. Some women are so wrapped up in propriety that they would be."

Mara hadn't a clue to what she was talking about. She made a mental note to look it up in her etiquette book.

Elizabeth grimaced and stretched her spine. "Which I think is perfectly ridiculous. There's nothing unseemly about an expecting woman."

"Unless it's the way she takes risks," Asa muttered, his hand going to his wife's spine where he massaged gently.

Elizabeth groaned softly and curved into his touch. "The backaches are a killer," she told Mara through a soft hiss of breath.

"Oh." Mara couldn't think of anything more eloquent to say.

This time, Elizabeth was the one to grimace. "I suppose I shouldn't have mentioned that. It's all Asa's fault."

Asa's skeptical "Uh-huh" coincided with Mara's curious "Oh?"

"Oh, absolutely." Elizabeth turned, kissed her husband's lips lightly and stepped away. "He has a complete disregard for propriety. It's rubbing off on me."

Asa didn't look the least repentant.

Again, she didn't know what to say. She settled for, "Really?"

Elizabeth nodded. "Definitely. If I'm not careful, our children will grow up hooligans."

Asa climbed the last step. This close, he was too big, too masculine. Mara shifted to the side. As if he sensed her unease, the big man took up a position on the other side of his wife.

"If they grow to be hooligans, it won't be because of me," he assured Mara. "I've been toeing the line proper, right down to the rule that states very pregnant women should stay home."

Elizabeth waved off his censure. "He's convinced our son will make an appearance the first time he looks the other way."

"I'm convinced you're going to shake her out before she's ready by riding around in that buggy."

Elizabeth tugged at the fingers of her black lace gloves. "I'm having a boy and if it were that easy to have a baby, they wouldn't call it labor."

"Uh-huh. And if it were as safe as you want me to believe, it wouldn't be called a delicate condition."

Elizabeth cocked her eyebrow at him. "Don't you have work to do?"

"As a matter of fact I do, but seeing as you're determined to be difficult, I'm stuck here."

To Mara's eyes, he didn't look stuck. He looked pretty darned content. And so did Elizabeth.

Mara decided there was nothing to do but invite them inside. She wished the place wasn't such a mess. She wished she'd baked those cookies she'd been planning on making. At least, she'd set a pitcher of tea to brew. "Would you like some cool tea?"

Elizabeth brightened immediately. "I would love some."

Asa reached around both women and opened the door. He cupped his hand under Elizabeth's elbow as she passed, steadying her as she stubbed her toe on the doorjamb. Mara thought it was cute the way he hovered while Elizabeth just proceeded as if her walk hadn't been stolen by a waddle. The fond amusement in Asa's eyes as he watched his wife lumber to a stop in the middle of the foyer was obvious.

"She has no idea the number of heart attacks she gives me over the course of the day," he drawled to Mara as he held the door open.

"She seems fine," Mara answered, waiting for him to step into the house so she could follow.

"She is fine, just a bit impulsive." He still stood there, holding the door patiently.

"Oh, this is just beautiful," Elizabeth called over her shoulder as she looked around the room.

"Thank you," Mara called back.

"I don't bite," Asa offered, waving her through.

She didn't believe that for a moment. For all he apparently loved his wife, he was too...masculine for her to be comfortable around him.

She folded her arms across her chest and nodded to the interior. "After you."

Asa sighed. "All right, but I hope you understand you are setting me up for about an hour's worth of lecture on the proper etiquette of holding a door for a lady."

"You look tough enough to endure it."

His smile was wry. "It's obvious you've never heard Elizabeth when she gets going. The woman has a mean edge to her tongue."

"You'll survive."

"Uh-huh." He stepped through the door. Mara was a good two feet behind him, but she caught the arched brow Elizabeth cocked at her husband and his attempt at a helpless shrug. As if a man as big and hard as he looked could pull off helpless.

"If you'll just have a seat, I'll get the tea," Mara offered, conscious of everything that wasn't the way she would have wished it to be.

Elizabeth's "That would be lovely" was perfectly sweet and neutral, which made Mara feel all the more foolish when she realized there wasn't any place to sit. She'd had one of the hands move boxes and smaller crates onto the sofa and chairs so she could unpack them.

"I'm so sorry." She rushed over to the armchair and grabbed a crate. Unfortunately, it was the one with the new cast iron cookware. Her arms screamed in pain and her nail tore as her hands slipped off.

Big hands caught her waist and lifted her away from the chair. Before she could catch her breath, Asa had the back of her hands resting in his while he inspected her palms. "Darn, that's nasty, Mrs. McKinnely."

His grip was gentle as he turned her hand, exposing the sliver wedged in her palm.

"That has got to hurt," Elizabeth said as she peered over Mara's shoulder.

No doubt it was going to hurt, but right now, all Mara could feel was embarrassment. "It looks much worse than it is. I'll just go get tweezers and pull it out."

She tugged at her hand. Asa let her go. She stepped away, cradling her hand against her chest, keeping it angled so blood didn't get to her dress. When she looked up, both Asa and Elizabeth were staring at her. Elizabeth with concern, Asa with sympathy.

"I'm sorry everything is such a mess."

"There's nothing to be sorry for," Elizabeth countered. "We should apologize for just dropping in without even sending a card ahead."

Asa reached over and pulled up the box as if it weighed nothing. "I assume you want this in the kitchen."

"I was going to wait for Cougar to come home."

"I imagine he'll be here shortly, but for now, you can order me about."

She couldn't imagine ordering Asa anywhere. "If you came to talk to Cougar, he's not due back until about dark."

"I imagine he'll be here shortly."

She frowned, calling after him as he made his way to the kitchen, "Why?"

"Because I imagine the guard he's got posted announced a rider heading here fast and he'll not rest unless he knows who it is."

"Surely the guard knows Asa," Mara said to Elizabeth.

Elizabeth waddled over to the chair. "You might as well take his word for it. If Cougar is as possessive as Asa, he won't be able to stand it unless he knows for sure."

She balanced herself on her feet in front of the chair.

"Actually, I'm surprised he left you here alone."

"One of the hands is in the barn," Mara answered, biting her tongue on a "be careful" as Elizabeth looked over her shoulder and judged the distance to the seat.

Asa's "Dammit" preceded his entrance to the room. Elizabeth rolled her eyes as he wove his way back through the crates.

"I was just going to sit down."

"Uh-huh." He took her forearm in his and braced the other around her back. Light as thistledown, he settled her into the chair. "If you don't take more care, I'm going to hire someone to sit with you."

"I'm pregnant, not sick," Elizabeth retorted as she pushed herself back in the seat. With his boot, Asa nudged an empty crate to the foot of the chair. With an efficiency that spoke of practice, he lifted Elizabeth's legs and slid the crate beneath her heels.

"Ooh, that feels good," Elizabeth sighed.

"This is absolutely your last outing before our daughter is born," Asa growled, his eyes concerned.

"I'm having a boy."

"You can have whatever you want as long as you give me a sweet little girl with red hair and green eyes," he countered as he stacked items off the adjacent chair into his arms.

Mara felt like a third wheel, holding her hand, listening to the affection behind the argument. When Asa glanced at her, Mara pointed to a clear spot in the corner.

"You say there's a hand in the barn?" Asa asked, heading to the corner with the crate.

"Yes."

"I think I'll go have a word with him." He looked around. "Right after I take care of your hand and get you two settled."

"It's just a sliver."

Asa shook his head. "No injury is just anything."

"He's right," Elizabeth pointed out. "I've got my medical necessities in the buggy," she told Asa. "If you bring them in with the rest of the stuff I brought, I'll take care of Mara's hand."

"Sounds good."

He tipped his hat at both ladies, his boots making even clunks as he left.

He no sooner cleared the door than Elizabeth said, "If you value that hand in the barn, you'd best scoot over there now and tell him to hide."

"Why?"

"Because I think the word Asa wants to have with him is more in line with a beating."

Mara didn't have to ask if she was serious. "Why?"

"Asa doesn't take chances with me. Since he and Cougar are cut from the same cloth, I imagine he doesn't think Cougar would be too pleased to find out that we were both able to ride up here, confront you, and come in the house without someone checking it out."

Mara did like Bill. He was young. Enthusiastic. A bit distracted but a nice kid. "Asa really wouldn't hurt him, would he?"

"Hurt who?" Asa asked, coming in the door, his arms full of boxes and bags.

"Bill."

"Don't have any intention of it," he told Mara as he put the pile down beside Elizabeth.

Elizabeth cast him a knowing glance. "Ask him if he knows who Bill is."

Asa caught a hatbox as it teetered on the top, straightened it and then looked at Mara. "Who's Bill?"

"The wrangler Cougar left here."

"Oh him."

Never had she heard more information left out of two syllables. "Are you intending to hurt Bill?" she asked suspiciously.

"Nope. No need."

The look Elizabeth sent her husband was skeptical. "Ask him—"

Mara was way ahead of her. "Why isn't there a need?" Mara cut in, forgetting her hand and wincing when she snagged the splinter on her dress.

Asa's smile was kind, neutral and sent her suspicions through the roof. "You catch on quickly. Cougar must be right proud to have you as his wife."

"You didn't answer my question."

"Let me see your hand."

"Answer my question."

"Tenacious too. Cougar ought to be about in heaven."

"You still haven't answered my question."

"That's probably because I'm stalling."

"For what?"

Asa pointed to the front door. "For him."

Chapter Eighteen

Mara turned, her hand clenched against her chest. She wasn't at all surprised to see Cougar's big silhouette filling the doorway. Inwardly, she rolled her eyes. She was entertaining the first company in her new home amidst the clutter of unpacked crates, she'd torn her hand, and she didn't have a thing to offer them to eat. It only stood to reason he'd be there to witness the fiasco.

She didn't even get a chance to get out a hello. He focused in on her hand.

"You're hurt."

"Just a sliver. Nothing serious."

She tucked her hand behind her back, and raised her face for a kiss. He ignored her cheek and her hint. Reaching behind her, he pulled her arm to the front. His frown deepened as he caught sight of the piece of wood sticking out of her palm.

"That's got to hurt."

"That's what I said," Elizabeth volunteered.

"It's just a sliver," Mara contested, tugging on her hand. Cougar merely tightened his grip and lifted a brow at her.

"How'd you get it?"

"Carelessness."

His golden eyes flashed at her. "So you weren't moving those crates that I told you to leave be?"

With absolute sincerity, she said, "I didn't move a one."

His lips twitched at the corners. He held her gaze for a second more. "I bet." He glanced at Asa and Elizabeth. "Would you excuse us while I take care of this?"

Asa wasn't even trying to hide his amusement as he said, "Go right ahead."

Elizabeth at least had the grace to appear concerned for Mara's welfare. "It was our fault really, Cougar." She struggled to push out of the chair.

"No need to get up, Elly," Cougar answered, amusement in his tone. A little knot of concern in Mara's stomach dissolved. Cougar did not have deep feelings for Elizabeth.

Elizabeth flopped back, shot a glare at her husband and said, "Without help, I'm going to be a permanent house guest."

Cougar pulled Mara to his side. "And we'd be happy to have you." He nodded to Elizabeth and Asa. "Excuse us."

Mara set her feet, but that just incited Cougar to put his arm across her back and sweep her along toward the kitchen. With no other option available, she called over her shoulder, "I'll be right back with the tea."

"You'd better add a couple more glasses because Dorothy said she was planning on coming over, too."

"Will do." Cougar paused at the door. With his hand, he motioned Mara through. She shot him a glare, but proceeded. It really was unfair the way he used his size.

He motioned to a kitchen chair. "Have a seat."

"I want to get the tea out."

"It'll keep," he pointed to the chair. "Sit."

She did, albeit slow enough to earn her one of those enigmatic glances he occasionally threw at her.

He pulled his big knife from his belt. She pulled her chair back.

"There are tweezers in the kit."

"Don't need them."

She tucked her hand behind her back, looked at the knife and said, "I don't think so."

He stood over her chair, the knife flashing in the light. "You're a lot safer with me using this than you would be if I tried to wrap my hands around those tiny tweezers you think are going to do the job."

He held out his hand for hers. She shook her head and kept hers behind her back. "I'll just ask Elizabeth to do it."

He shook his head. This time, he was the one who said "I don't think so." He curled his fingers at her and then waited. For her hand. So he could apply that nasty curved knife. Oh, she really didn't think so.

"I'll just do it myself."

"Don't be a baby."

"I wouldn't dream of it." She pushed back into the chair, pressing her hand into the small of her back.

"Our company is waiting." He raised his eyebrow at her.

"Why don't you entertain them while I get the tea?"

"What kind of husband would I be to leave you injured?"

"A sliver does not count as an injury."

"You were bleeding."

"Not anymore."

"You were last time I saw."

It was instinctive to check. As soon as her hand cleared her hip, he had it in his in a move so fast that she was still blinking when he held the tip of the knife up in front of her eyes. On it rested a sliver of wood.

"On this you'll have to trust me, Angel," he said as she glanced up at him. "I'm very good with a knife."

She looked down at the small wound in her palm. At the knife. And at him. "So I see. Can I get the tea now?"

"Just let me put some salve on that first."

She couldn't help it, stop it, or otherwise mitigate it. As he took the few steps to get to the drawer, her entire body heated with a blush. He turned from the drawer, looked at her, and a slow, sexy smile began to creep across his face. "Any particular reason you're red in the face?"

Her "No" was a bit strangled.

His smile was not. He dipped his finger into the jar and swirled it around as he stepped closer, holding her gaze, his eyes picking up the heat from her cheeks.

"You sure?"

She jumped from the chair, and grabbed the jar from his hand. "Absolutely positive."

He slid his hand over her buttocks as she brushed past him. That had her muscles clenching, and the heat in her face approaching a burn. "Stop it!"

"Stop what?"

"You know."

She shoved the jar back in the drawer.

He touched her cheek. "A pity."

"We have guests!" she gasped and turned around.

"Angel, I'm not doing a thing." He rubbed the salve onto her palm. Soft, gentle circles with little pulses in the middle.

Her knees melted. She pulled her gaze from his. She put her free hand on the counter to steady herself. She added one more to her list of things that had gone wrong today. She was an incorrigible wanton.

He released her hand, but not his grip on her senses. He had only to be within two feet of her and they switched loyalties.

His finger tipped up her chin. "It works both ways, you know."

"What?" She was not going to look at him.

His hand slid around to the base of her neck. "The hunger."

She didn't say a word, but she did look at him. "The only difference is," he continued, his fingers stroking the nape of her neck, "I like it."

Well, spit. So did she. She liked the way he could make her feel, the knowledge that with just a touch, he could turn dull to exciting. She liked the thrill of anticipation she got when he was near. She liked it—she just didn't always like feeling so helpless before it.

"You do?"

"Oh yeah." His thumb tipped her mouth up to the descent of his. "I do."

His lips met hers. As always, there was a moment in which she debated the rightness of her response before she gave in to it. Her lips parted beneath his.

"Oh definitely, I do," he sighed into her mouth, his tongue tangling with hers, his desire spiking hers. Her fingers clenched in his shirt. The nip of pain in her palm reminding her they had company just beyond the swinging door.

"Asa —"

"Let him kiss his own woman," Cougar growled, kissing the corner of her mouth.

She laughed, and ducked her head until her forehead hit his chin. There was a stirring at her hairline as he placed a kiss there. "I meant we have to get back in there."

Both his arms slid over her shoulders as he pulled her fully up against his body. As her belly cradled the hard ridge of his erection, he groaned, the hiss of breath blowing stray tendrils of hair at her ear. "You'd better go in and keep them company."

"The tea?"

"I'll bring it in when my body cools down."

She paused, stepped back and looked at him. Really looked at him, from his long black hair pulled back into a loose braid for work, his exotic face with its high cheekbones, and wide hard mouth, to his well-muscled body. Lastly, she let her gaze stop at the juncture of his thighs. Against his denims, his cock pressed hard. For her. Scrawny, undesirable her.

She caught her lip between her teeth and slowly reached out and cupped him in her hand.

"Shit!" His knees buckled. It was a slight buckle, but those hard thighs with their well-defined strength went weak at the touch of her hand. Amazing.

She looked up, knowing the wonder she felt inside was showing on her face, and pretty much not caring. "You really do like me."

He pushed his cock harder against her palm. Even through the heavy material, she could feel him pulse with anticipation just before she squeezed gently.

"What was your first clue?" he asked, leaning harder into her grasp, his breath seeming to catch in his throat and hang there as she stroked him tenderly.

She shrugged. "I thought you were just doing your duty."

"You think a man gets it up five times a night for something you can call a duty?" His voice rose with every syllable.

"Keep your voice down!" she hissed, glancing at the door. "And you needn't sound shocked."

"Can't help it. I am," he groaned, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Asa and Elizabeth were just on the other side of the door.

"Lower your voice."

He tipped his head back as she tweaked the head of his cock, feeling it swell beneath her hand, growing harder, pulsing stronger. He dropped his head back with a moan as he asked, "You giving orders now?"

Was she? She thought about it, stroked him twice more through his clothes and came to a decision. "Yes."

"Well, damn."

He didn't sound upset. He widened his stance, giving her more room to play.

"So you don't get this way for every woman?" she asked, needing to know.

He slit his eyes open. Through his lashes, they glittered like gold. "You serious?"

"Yes."

"No."

"And you really like my...breasts?"

"Haven't I said so?"

"No." She slid her hand down his thigh, following the descent of his cock until she could feel the flared crown. "Why?"

"They're small and delicate, and those nipples. Darlin', I could come just staring at those wanton nipples of yours."

"You think my nipples are wanton?" She stroked his cock from base to tip.

"Oh yeah," he answered, pumping his hips in time with her strokes. "They plump up so eagerly for my mouth and melt as sweet as honey on my tongue."

The floor squeaked as he shifted his stance wider. "Harder, Angel."

She increased the pressure and speed of her strokes, looking at him speculatively. "And you could come just from looking at them."

His breath was more ragged now. Harsher. "Get on your knees, open your bodice and I'll demonstrate."

"Open your pants first."

He stopped moving altogether. "What?"

"I want to see you first."

"Shit." If she'd shocked him, it didn't slow him down. He had his pants undone and his cock in his hand almost before she had a chance to be shocked at herself.

His cock sat solid and heavy in his palm. Thick. Eager. As she watched, a bead of pre-come appeared on the tip. She licked her lips.

"Shit," Cougar groaned, and had her eyes flying to his in time to see his gaze lock on her lips, and the tip of her tongue. He pumped into his hand, his cock sliding in and out, the little bead of pre-come disappearing as it eased his passage. She had no doubt he was imagining her mouth on his cock. She smiled and dropped to her knees.

She brought her hands to the top of her dress.

"Hurry up, we don't have much time."

She undid the first two buttons and glanced at his cock, red and angry in its impatience. "You're in that much of a hurry?"

"Yeah. That, and Asa and Elizabeth are going to get suspicious soon."

She'd forgotten about them. Amazing. She opened the rest of the buttons double-time. She paused, her dress unbuttoned, her breasts covered, her pussy pulsing with anticipation.

"You're killing me, Angel." He pumped harder into his hand. Faster.

"Good." She kept her gaze locked on his face as she slowly, slowly pulled the material aside. His expression was hard, locked in lust. He seemed barely able to breathe at all until, with one last tug, she pulled the material away from her distended nipples.

"Aw, damn." His jaw clenched. His breath broke in small hitches, and a sheen of sweat broke over his face and throat. He leaned into the wall behind her, the weight of his body forcing her back into the cabinets. He bent his knees and pressed his cock against her nipple. She watched as her nipple slid into the tiny slit. Cougar's curse above her head sounded almost like a prayer, and then his cock jerked and her breast was bathed with hot moisture as he came. A quick shift and he treated the other nipple to the same erotic bath. He seemed almost helpless in his climax. Needing her body, needing her acceptance of his come. As his thigh shuddered against her shoulder, she slid down and took his pulsing cock into her mouth, his last burst of seed sliding in a silky wash over her tongue.

"Damn, I'm sorry, Angel."

She glanced up, a question in her eyes.

"I didn't mean to actually do that." He grabbed the dishtowel.

But he'd wanted it. She knew that. Had wanted, with every fiber of his being, to fuck her breasts. Had been helpless to resist the urgency once he'd seen them. He pulled out of her mouth, his cock only slightly diminished.

She stopped him before he could wipe away his semen. She slid both hands under her ribs and dragged them up, scooping his seed and then rubbed the silky fluid into her breasts, against her nipples. "I like it."

He dropped to his knees beside her, his eyes on her hands. "Have I mentioned that you're killing me?"

His hands replaced hers. He massaged his seed into her breasts, drawing his hands from base to tip, using the milking motion she liked.

"In a good way, though?"

His forehead hit the counter with a soft thud. "Oh yeah."

His cock, rock solid, throbbed against her side. "You're hard again."

He slid his cheek along hers. "And going to stay that way for awhile."

She buried her face in his hair where it draped from the loose braid. She pressed her lips against the side of his neck. His shudder vibrated through her lips along her spine to reverberate in her pussy. "Why?"

His smile pushed the muscle of his cheek against hers. "Because you have that effect on me."

He grabbed the towel off the floor and rubbed at her chest, removing his seed and replacing it with a hum of anticipation. "And," he continued, "it's going to take a while for me to get the image of those gorgeous nipples of yours shining with my come out of my head."

She leaned back as he concentrated on her nipples. Rubbing them a little harder, sending shots of fire through her body.

He stopped. She looked up.

"Are you wet for me?"

She nodded.

"Good."

He tugged at her dress until she leaned back and the material slid free. He eased the towel beneath her dress, and between her legs. The cotton abraded her swollen labia as he wiped her juices from her pussy and thighs. Twice it brushed her clit, she gasped and flinched and gushed. He had to wipe her all over again. He pulled the towel out, held it to his nose, and breathed deep. "Tonight, I'll tend to you, but right now, I need to get you buttoned up so you can attend to our guests."

She didn't think she could do anything, her legs felt so shaky, but as he buttoned her dress, his gaze clinging to her breasts to the last possible moment, she knew she'd do it. Because he asked her to. Because he wanted her to. Because she could.

His big hands on her hips steadied her as she stood, ready to catch her if she fell. If she needed him. She smiled down at him, centering her feet under her, resting her palm against his cheek. Scraping her nails on his beard as he pressed a kiss between her thighs through her skirt, drawing strength from his obvious enjoyment of her.

The whole event had taken about five minutes, but she felt totally transformed.

She slid out of his grip, waited until he closed his pants, and then headed through the door.

"I'm so sorry it took so long," she called as she passed through. "I'm a bit of a baby about knives."

"Knives?"

"Cougar doesn't believe in tweezers."

"Good God!" Elizabeth gasped.

"Where's the tea?" Asa asked.

Cougar smiled at the amusement he heard in Asa's voice. He'd bet the other man had accurately interpreted the flush on Mara's cheeks. Just as he'd bet Mara's innocence would save her from the knowledge.

Her unselfconscious "Cougar's bringing it," confirmed his suspicions.

He reached up to the top of the cupboard and pulled six glasses down from the shelf.

"What's in all the boxes?" he heard Mara ask. "Dresses for you," Elizabeth answered. "I heard Cougar had you prisoner up here without a proper wardrobe."

"He's not exactly holding me hostage. And I can't take these."

"Of course you can." Cougar grinned at the no-nonsense tone Elizabeth adopted. "I'm so fat now, they'll never fit me again. Besides, Cougar paid Asa for them."

"He did?"

"Yes." Cougar figured that meant he would in the near future.

There was a long hesitation and some rustling and then a soft, "Oh."

The wonder in Mara's tone ensured Elizabeth could name any price she wanted to replace her wardrobe. He owed her big time for this thoughtfulness. He knew how little true kindness Mara had known in the past. And how much this visit meant to her in terms of acceptance.

"Do you like it?"

"Oh yes."

"Dorothy told me your measurements. I hope I altered them correctly."

The kitchen door swung open. Asa walked in.

"That'll keep them busy for awhile."

Cougar handed Asa a glass of tea. "Good."

A quick glance down his body and Asa's grin kicked in full bore. "So you're happy with her?"

"Yeah."

"Better than with Emily?"

Cougar winced, and shrugged, accepting the other man's amusement. "Emily was what I thought I wanted."

"And Mara?"

Cougar poured two more glasses of tea. "Mara is what I need."

Asa leaned against the counter, and took a sip of his drink. "She know about Cecile's yet?"

"No."

"You planning on telling her?"

"No." A little of the tea spilled, and he smothered a curse.

"She's going to be hurt when she finds out."

"I know."

"She will find out."

"I know."

"It would probably be better if she found out from you."

"Probably." But she would leave him then. No way could a woman ever forgive him for what he'd done. He was living on borrowed time, but he wasn't going to bring it to an end any sooner than he had to by telling her.

"It was nice of you to bring her the dresses," Cougar said, changing the subject.

Asa shrugged and smiled. "Elizabeth was quite scandalized to hear Mara only had two dresses."

"Actually one."

"I thought the Reverend bought her one?"

"That one met with a mishap."

Asa laughed outright. "He is a good-looking son of a bitch."

"Yeah." The type of guy Mara might turn to when she found out about him.

"Well," Asa drawled, "truth be told, I should be thanking you."

"Oh?"

"Elizabeth's been bored to tears this last month."

Cougar raised a brow in sympathy. "Elizabeth's about unlivable when bored. Has a real tendency to get into trouble."

"Tell me about it," Asa drawled, shaking his head as he took a long pull from his glass. "About the only thing that saved my sanity was when Dorothy mentioned to Elizabeth about Mara needing clothes."

"Elizabeth's a stickler for propriety."

"Yeah. About shocked the hell out of her to hear you had a young woman holed up here without underthings or a proper wardrobe. Sent me straight to the closet for all those new clothes I bought her before she started to show."

"I'll pay you back."

Asa waved away the offer. "You already did."

The sound of a wagon rounding the house interrupted the conversation.

"Sounds like Doc and Dorothy are here," Cougar said, filling the rest of the glasses and putting them on the tray.

Asa held the door open for him. "Yup. We'd better hurry up if we don't want to miss Doc laying down the law to Dorothy."

Cougar smiled. "Again."

Chapter Nineteen

Mara stood on the porch, waving goodbye to Asa, Elizabeth, Dorothy and Doc, laughing as Doc's "Goddammit!" floated behind them when the battered wagon hit a rut in the path.

"He really should just break down and buy Dorothy a decent carriage," she mentioned to Cougar who stood behind her.

His moccasins made no sound as he took a step closer, his hands sliding around her middle, pulling her back against him. "What would be the fun in that?"

She tilted her head back to see his face in the soft twilight. "Then they wouldn't have to keep arguing about it."

He bent over, his long hair falling on either side of her face surrounding her with the scent of sage and the faintest hint of smoke. "You've got to get over this hitch that says there's something wrong with a discussion now and then."

She slid her hand up his neck and over his cheek. His beard pricked her palm. "Does this mean you want me to mention the fact that you've been smoking again?"

"Nope."

She smiled to herself as she rubbed his cheek with her palm, liking the rasp of his beard on her flesh. He turned his head until he could kiss her palm.

"You thinking how good those whiskers are going to feel against your pussy in about five minutes?"

"No!" Shock had it coming out more of a gasp than the calm response she would have preferred.

He turned her in his arms, his hand under her chin bringing her gaze to his. "Now isn't that a shame?"

She knew she was going to regret asking, but she had to anyway. "Why?"

He smiled, able to read her mind. "Because then, you'd be plenty wet for me when I tend to you like I promised."

Who was he kidding? She was always wet for him. "Oh."

"That all you got to say?"

He bent down and slid an arm behind her knees and the other across her back. She relaxed into his grip as he swung her up in his arms. Cougar would never let her fall.

He didn't move after picking her up, staring at her with those deep gold eyes. She realized he wanted an answer. "Yes."

The hint of a smile deepened the laugh lines by the corners of his eyes. "Can't say I'm not disappointed."

He headed for the front door.

She slid one arm around his neck. "Why?"

She slipped her fingers between the buttons of his shirt until she could touch his chest. His flesh was hot and smooth beneath the curling chest hair.

"I had a hankering to hear how you wanted my mouth on your cunt, nibbling on your clit, lapping at your pussy, and swallowing all your sweet cream."

Her fingers tightened convulsively on his chest, wrenching the hair there. She could just imagine it. His moist tongue, his hot breath, his prickly beard. Her vagina convulsed as pure lust speared through her.

He tossed her a bit to open the door. "That death grip you've got on my chest hair mean you're interested?"

She would have thought she was past embarrassment by now, but apparently, she wasn't. The best answer she could come up with was a squeak.

He pulled the door shut behind him and dropped the bar. The room was dark compared to the outside. More intimate. More conducive to love talk. "I'll take that as a yes."

"You would."

He let her slide down his body, his right eyebrow kicking up as he asked, "Is there something else I should be taking it as?"

"Maybe an indication that you're just hungry in general?"

He slipped his knife from its sheath; the blade gleamed in the faint light. "What made you think that?"

She eyed the big knife warily. "All that emphasis on nibbling and tasting."

He caught her wrist in his hand and turned her palm up. "I aim to do plenty of tasting and nibbling."

He put the tip of the blade under the sleeve of the old dress. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Preparing my meal." He caught her eye. "Don't move."

The command was unnecessary. As soon as that big knife started cutting through the worn material, she'd stopped breathing altogether. As the shoulder seam gave with a pop, he smiled and said, "Breathe."

She did, but only until he set the knife to the other sleeve. As smoothly as the first, he slit this one from sleeve to collar. As the remains of the bodice slid to her waist, leaving her torso bare to his gaze, he shook his head at her. "Angel, when it comes to me and knives, you've got no cause for concern."

"So you keep telling me."

He put the knife back in its sheath, those dark eyes wickedly amused as he asked with apparent innocence, "Have I nicked that sweet pussy once while shaving it?"

She could feel the blush rising as she answered. She didn't know if she'd ever be at ease with talking about the things they did together. "No."

"So why are you sweating one old dress?"

"Because it's a damned big knife!" she burst out.

He unbuckled his knife sheath. "And I'm the man holding it. That's all you've got to remember."

"So you keep telling me," she muttered, flitters of anticipation shivering over her skin as he began to unbutton his shirt.

"And what else did I tell you?"

He shrugged off the shirt, baring the wide expanse of his shoulders and the slabs of muscle layering his abdomen, the scars here and there doing nothing to diminish his beauty. She stared a little helplessly. Lord above, he was gorgeous.

He closed her mouth with the tip of his finger. "What else did I tell you?"

"That I should trust you."

"And if you didn't?"

Oh damn, she'd forgotten about that. "That you would punish me."

Suddenly, all that muscle wasn't so inviting. She took a step back.

He caught her by hooking his hand behind her neck. "Now that makes two things I'll be punishing you for."

She swallowed. "Two?"

"Yup." His fingers massaged the back of her neck, sending tingles down her spine. His voice was a husky growl. "The second for thinking I'd break my promise not to hurt you."

She closed her eyes and went with his tug, her "Oh God" breathed against the firm muscle of his chest. His laugh rumbled beneath her ear.

"No. Cougar."

She swatted his forearm in retaliation and then gasped as he dragged her sensitive nipples across his upper abdomen. Every ridge and hollow seeming to grab at the swollen points, sending weakening jolts of pleasure radiating out from her chest. Her knees were the first to succumb to the assault. She fell against him, trusting him to catch her weight, to see her through. His cock throbbed, solid and heavy against her abdomen.

"Steady," he murmured, his hands on her shoulders.

"I can't when you do that."

"You will if I tell you to."

She glanced up, loving the way his face hardened with his desire. For her. Only for her. "Are you?"

"What?"

"Ordering me to stand up?"

He smiled slightly, stretching his thumb up so he could stroke the corner of her mouth. "Nope. I want you to walk." He turned her around and gave her a little push toward the kitchen. "Go."

She looked at the swinging kitchen door, remembered what had happened there before, and took one shuddering step and then had to wait for the bursts of arousal to fade to take another.

Cougar's low, dangerous, sexily drawled "Is there a problem?" had her creaming her thighs with her juices and picking up her pace. She didn't need to turn around to know he was behind her. She could hear the whisper of his moccasins over the wood floor as he stalked her through the door and into the dim interior of the big square kitchen. Once there, she didn't know where to go, so she stood still in the middle of the room, and waited as he crossed to the door. The thunk that the wooden bar made as it hit the cradle made her jump.

Her heart thundering in her ears, she watched as he stopped at the drawer by the stove. His teeth gleamed white in the gloom as he fished out a familiar round jar.

Her ass clenched and her knees buckled. His low laugh as he closed the distance between them let her know he'd seen the slight dip before she'd caught herself. He whispered, "Glad to see you approve," against her ear.

Mortification mixed with the burn of arousal until she didn't know where one left off and the other began. She didn't know what to say, or what to do. She just held still and waited. He didn't give her any clues. He just stood there, the heat of his skin teasing hers, his scent wrapping around her the way she wished his arms would. She was never comfortable with silence, worrying that it existed because she'd failed to do something expected.

Finally, she couldn't stand it anymore and blurted out, "Am I supposed to be doing something?"

He pulled back and looked at her a moment. His expression considering, his eyes unreadable shadows in the gloom. "Is there something you wanted to do?"

It was all she could do not to shift under his gaze. "You were just standing there..."

He touched her cheek lightly. "Just thinking on where to start."

"Oh."

Now she felt stupid.

"You worry a lot, don't you?" His finger slid down her neck to her chest. He drew a figure eight around her nipples with his finger.

She bit her lip as the circles drew closer and closer to the center of her breast with each pass.

"I wouldn't say a lot," she finally admitted.

"But you'd rather know the lay of the land?"

"Wouldn't everyone?"

He flicked her left nipple with his finger. "Maybe."

She absorbed the sensation, controlled it, trying to concentrate on the conversation. "But you'd rather I be more adventurous."

He paused, his finger mid-flick of her right nipple. "More adventurous?"

She glanced up to see the wry smile flash across his face. Her lip slid between her teeth as he took that finger and pressed it dead center of her nipple and pushed down. "Angel, I don't think I could keep up if you were."

She caught his wrist in her hand, halting the distraction of his touch. "Maybe adventurous was the wrong word."

The jar clattered as he dropped it to the table. She jumped as he brought his hand down on her buttock, the smack stinging pleasurably through the folds of her dress. Her breath caught for a totally different reason and she clutched his wrist to steady herself.

"My touch, however I want it," he reminded her as he brought his hand up to cup her cheek, his fingers threading through her hair, his thumb coming to rest under her chin. With pressure on the base of her neck, he tilted her face up.

"Now, you want to tell me what subject you're dancing around?"

"Not like this."

"How not like this?"

She swallowed. "Looking at your face."

He shook his head and strands of his hair fell forward, sliding against her breast, tickling the sensitive flesh. He backed her up four steps, until the top of her hips hit the edge of the big cherry kitchen table.

"Exactly like this."

"Why?"

He shifted his grip to her waist and lifted her up. "Because I want it."

She wiggled back onto the table only to look at him with surprise when he caught her by the thighs and brought her hips to teetering on the edge.

"Stay put and talk."

"I can't."

"What?"

"Sit like this," she finished in exasperation as she almost slipped off again. He held her steady.

There was a tight edge to his smile that had her pulse doing double time. "Spread your legs."

She almost sobbed with frustration when the skirt hampered her movement. He reached to his waist and the big knife was moving in her direction again. She held as still as possible while he slit the skirt from hem to waist. She was vastly relieved when he left the waistband alone and just parted the material. His hands covered her thighs,

his flesh dark against the white of hers. His thumbs dipped into the silky cream coating the soft inner flesh.

"Damn, you're pretty."

He wasn't looking at her face, and again she marveled that he found her attractive. He looked up, caught her watching him and smiled. "Now, what did you want to say to me?"

He pulled her thighs wide and stepped between, allowing her to lean against his chest for support.

Just inches from her pussy, she could feel the heat of his cock. She balanced on the edge of the table, caught between the erotic promise of his touch and the embarrassing end to their conversation.

He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head back. Lord help her, but her pussy wept with pleasure at the small tingles radiating out from her scalp.

His eyes were dark with things she didn't understand as he said, "Answer me."

She struggled to find a way to say she was boring without actually spitting it out. "I'm probably not as bold as...some of your other women."

"Ah." He touched the inside of her thigh. She instinctively moved them wider.

"You're worried I don't find you exciting?"

She stared hard at his chin. "Yes."

"Why?"

"I never do anything," she whispered.

"You mean when we're private?"

He unbuttoned the fly of his denims. His knuckles brushed the damp folds of her pussy as he worked his fly open. She couldn't help the surge of her hips at the butterfly movement.

"Yes."

"And you think that bores me?"

Her big eyes turned to his. "Don't I?"

"Take my cock out."

Cougar smiled as her lids dipped under the impact of the command. He loved the way she melted at the thought of his touch. There was that little hesitation followed by that erotic little shiver, then her hands obediently slid into his pants and gently pulled his cock free. Immediately, her fingers fluttered along his length in possessive caresses that brought a groan to his throat.

He held her hand on him, squeezing her fingers, unable to help the groan that slid past his control. Her gaze flew to his.

"It turns me hard as a rock," he explained, "knowing that you're waiting on my command, ready to give me what I want, when I want it, however I want it. That you get wet at the thought of me coming to you. That you trust me to give you what you

need, no questions asked. I've never had that before." He brought his mouth to hers, bit at her lips until she parted them, took her gasp and then speared his tongue straight into her mouth, plundering her depths, taking her taste as his. She tasted of tea and sweet, willing woman. He pulled back. "Trust me, Angel," he rasped, trying to find breath to speak normally. "I intend to hold onto it as long as I can."

She frowned up at him. "I told you I wouldn't leave."

He kissed her quickly. "I know."

But that promise could only hold until the truth came out. He touched her cheek. "Now lean back on your elbows."

She did. He knelt, draping her legs over his shoulders, staring up at her from between her spread thighs. She looked hungry, apprehensive and embarrassed all in one shot. "I want you to watch."

She closed her eyes briefly and then asked breathlessly, "Couldn't I just imagine what you're doing?"

This close, her scent was intoxicating. He pressed a kiss to her left labia and then to the right, her shaved flesh soft as satin against his lips.

"No."

"Oh."

Such a soft, melting sound. And he knew she was melting. Against his lips, her pussy pulsed its pleasure with his presence there. Her juices coated his lips and tongue as he pressed past her outer lips and lapped at the smooth pink flesh within. He parted her with his fingers, rimming her vagina with his tongue, teasing the tiny opening, resisting the pressure of her calves on his back to increase the pressure. He owed her for this afternoon and payback was going to be a deliciously long, drawn out, pleasure-filled bitch.

He worked his way up to her clit, running his tongue over her smooth flesh in a zigzag pattern, slowing his approach as he neared, feeling her anticipation in the increased tension in her thighs. He heard her breath hitch as he parted her folds with his fingers, exposing her clit as it rose from its protective hood.

It was swollen and hard. He touched it with the tip of his tongue. An experimental flick to gauge the extent of her readiness. She jerked, and her pussy spasmed. Her juices spilled onto his fingers, her small scream telling him that she was at the edge. He didn't make her wait this first time. He took her clit into his mouth and sucked lightly while rubbing his tongue around the small protuberance, first using the tip and then flattening his tongue for a broader, more encompassing caresses. He slid his finger into her pussy, fucking her with the same slow pulse of suction that he applied to her clit. Her inner muscles grabbed at his fingers, protesting his retreat, welcoming his return. Her calves wrapped around his head, dragging him closer as she worked her hips against his face. He tilted his face, whiskers catching and dragging on the slick flesh, the increased stimulation driving her higher, her movements punctuated with small breathless screams. When she was on the edge, one heartbeat from coming, he removed

his fingers, removed his mouth, and unwrapped her legs from his shoulders. She stared at him mindlessly as he stood between her legs.

"And now for your punishment."

He didn't wait for concern to replace confusion. Instead, he lightly snapped the back of his hand against the swollen wet folds of her cunt. She gasped and her body jerked taut. He slapped her again, watching her carefully, increasing the strength behind the blow as she wiggled on the table, unable to get away or get closer. As her fingers clawed at the smooth wood, her panted pleas for release grew incoherent. He turned sideways and worked two fingers into her greedy pussy, fucking her hard and fast, in keeping with her hip's silent demand. On the fourth thrust, he smacked her hard on her clit. Her scream was a high-pitched cry of satisfaction. The strength of her orgasm jerked her torso off the table. He caught her behind her neck, easing her back down, his fingers buried in her pussy, keeping her hips still for his attentions.

"Cougar," she sighed as he worked his fingers in and out.

"At last, we've got that right," he murmured, glancing up over her heaving chest at her flushed face. He kissed her stomach, working his way up her torso.

"As if I could forget," she groaned, her inner muscles still spasming around his fingers.

He smiled at the grumpy edge to her voice. He lapped at the bead of sweat between her breasts, relishing the salty taste, the feel of her flesh against his, the way she gave herself to him.

"You took your punishment well," he said as his face came even with hers. He caught the frown lingering in the pleasure of her expression. He pulled his fingers free of her pussy, added a third and then worked them back in. "Did you like it?"

Her lip slipped between her teeth and she shuddered around him before she answered self-consciously. "You know I did."

He kissed one flushed cheek, and then the other. "But?"

"Should I have?"

"Oh yeah."

He brushed her nose with his, shaking his head so his hair fell around them. "Open your mouth."

She immediately fisted her hands in his hair and did as he asked. He slid his tongue between her lips once, twice, before asking, "Can you taste yourself on me? Can you taste how sweet you are to me?"

"Yes," was a soft, embarrassed sigh. She pulled his hair as he chuckled and nibbled at her lips.

"I want to taste you, too," she protested as his thumb slid up through her cleft until it rested on her clit, while his fingers worked lazily in the wet grip of her pussy.

"You had your turn this afternoon. This is my time."

"That's not fair," she gasped, lurching as he raked her clit with his thumbnail.

"I'm not interested in fair." He kissed the side of her neck. He loved the way her breath shuddered when he did that. "I'm more interested in hearing you scream."

She tilted her head back, facilitating his exploration. "What about what I want?"

He nipped the cord between her shoulder and neck and then sucked the flesh into his mouth. He held it until she moaned and then let it go with a soft pop.

"I tell you what." He kept his thumb on her clit while he increased the pace and force of his fingers in her pussy, letting the friction and pressure drive her passion. "You come for me five times in the next hour and I'll give you anything you want."

She arched her spine off the table. "Anything?" she groaned.

"Anything," he promised as his lips settled over her straining nipples and he began to suck.

Chapter Twenty

When he'd agreed to anything, he'd been thinking along the lines of fucking, not standing in the middle of an unruly crowd listening to an Easterner preach about women's rights. But, he'd been bound by his word, and when Mara had stated her want, he'd been helpless to deny her. Bringing Mara to Cheyenne and risking someone mentioning the Pleasure Emporium, and maybe his part in it, had not been in his plans for a long while yet. However, hogtied as he was by his word, he was stuck. Though he damned well was going to talk to Elizabeth about the subjects she brought up with his wife. He did not want Mara turning into a suffragist because of some misguided need to be in charge.

Anna Dickinson left her podium amidst cheers and heckles. None too soon, to Cougar's way of thinking. The crowd was turning nasty. He reached for Mara's arm just as she turned. Her nose collided with his chest. Stepping back, she rubbed the offended appendage, her eyes crossing as she checked for damage.

"Is what she said true?" she asked, holding her fingers to her nose.

"Depends what part you're wondering on."

"Is it true that if I leave you, my children, my property, and my money stay with you?"

"You're not leaving me."

"But if I wanted to, would it be true?"

Cougar didn't answer as he saw a couple of wranglers to the right start throwing punches. He caught Mara's arm and steered her away from the crowd. Crowds in Cheyenne had a habit of turning nasty in the blink of an eye. With the ammunition of that easterner Anna Dickinson's speech, things looked like they were going to get out of hand very fast. Sure enough, the fight began to spread. He picked up his pace.

Some annoying tugging in his wake alerted Cougar to the fact that Mara was not trotting happily behind him. She was deliberately hanging back, presumably operating under the theory that ninety pounds of nothing was going to slow him down.

"Is it true?" Mara shouted over the lively discussions going on all around.

Keeping a firm grasp on her arm, Cougar raised his voice to a bellow. "I'll discuss this with you some place else. This could get nasty." A meaningful glance around alerted Mara to the fact that several mean-looking types appeared ready to charge into a fight. The last thing she wanted was to be involved in violence. With a nod of her head, she indicated for Cougar to lead on. An unnecessary gesture, since he was already opening a path for her.

Mara expected Cougar to pause when they cleared the crowd, but he just kept going, his long legs eating up the distance with enviable ease. Panting and skipping, Mara struggled to keep up. All of a sudden, Cougar stopped.

"I'm sorry." Reaching out, he tucked a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. "I forgot what little legs you have."

"They're not little," Mara argued. "And that etiquette book says you are not supposed to acknowledge the existence of a woman's limbs."

"You have got to be kidding."

Mara shook her head, and reached up just in time to keep her hat from listing to the left. "Nope. We're supposed to ignore them."

Continuing down the street, Cougar pulled Mara against his side. "Angel, as tight as your legs were wrapped around my neck last night, there's no way on God's green Earth I'd ever be able to ignore them."

Mara promptly swatted him with her reticule. The little purse bounced harmlessly off his upper arm. "Where are we going?"

"See that house on the corner?" Cougar asked, pointing with his free hand. "The one painted that interesting shade of blue?"

"As bright as it is, and as close as we are, it would be hard not to notice it."

"Well, that is Millicent Foster's Boarding House and Eating Establishment."

"Do you know her?"

"Oh yeah." He could already smell the food. His stomach growled.

"How?" she asked as they came abreast of the building.

"Millicent Foster makes the best chicken and dumplings you ever want to sink your teeth into, and if she were thirty years younger, she would be serious competition for my heart."

"You are completely ruled by your appetite," she grumbled good-naturedly as he held the door open for her.

"I went without enough in the past to not take a good thing for granted."

"And this Millicent is a good thing?"

He stepped in behind her. "A very good thing."

The minute Mara stepped into the big dining room, the heavenly aromas of chicken and dumplings, pumpkin pie, and hot coffee surrounded her in a warm hug of welcome. One glance around and she knew instantly why Cougar so obviously enjoyed coming here. The interior of Millicent Foster's Boarding House and Eating Establishment was as unique as the exterior. Every one of the ten tables was covered with a different cloth. Every pattern was busy and bright, clashing quite happily with the one beside it. The curtains covering the two front windows made no effort to blend with anything else. Everything was just a happy mishmash of oddities. A glance at Cougar showed him to be relaxed, with a happy smile on his face. She was prepared to

like Millicent for the simple reason that she'd created a haven in which Cougar felt accepted. She just hoped Millicent would accept her.

"Cougar! Sweetheart! Come on in."

Mara spun around to confront the owner of that husky voice, only to have her jaw drop to her toes as her gaze encompassed the whole of the woman before her. She was at least six feet tall and nearly as broad. Her hair was an impossible shade of red that rivaled her purple blouse for poor taste. Barely a wrinkle creased the plump face. On her shoulder, she balanced an over-laden tray of dirty dishes.

Cougar's hand settled into the middle of her spine. She felt its heavy weight with a sense of relief.

"Millicent, I'd like to introduce you to my wife, Mara McKinnely."

"How do you do," Millicent said in a voice so seductive, grown men would follow it to their graves.

Mara blinked at the contrast between that voice and the woman before taking the hand the woman held out to her. While her hand was in Millicent's strong grasp, her gaze remained locked on the tray the woman unconcernedly balanced on her shoulder.

"I'm very pleased to meet you," she breathed on a rush of alarm as the huge tray dipped.

Millicent laughed, and her laugh was as seductive as her speech. "Don't worry about this tray, hon. I haven't lost one yet, and I've been passing out food for twenty years."

"From what Cougar tells me about your cooking, it would be a crime for any of your food to end up on the floor." Mara held her smile and her manners. Though Cougar said that he didn't care what anyone thought of her, this woman was important to him, and so far, not an ounce of approval had shone in the shrewd eyes locked with hers.

"Hey, Millicent! Are you going to gab all day while my food gets cold?"

"Hold your horses, you young upstart, or you'll not get a crumb at my table!" Millicent ordered without even glancing in the man's direction. With the slightest shift of her body, Mara determined the upstart was a bear of a man with small, beady eyes, red hair and muscles that just bulged.

"Is there truth to the rumor that she's the missing woman from Cecile's?"

As husky as it was, Millicent's voice carried well. In the split second when Mara's day shattered, every head in the full restaurant turned to stare at her. Conversation dwindled until all that remained was a hungry silence.

A silence Mara recognized. She squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. She would not be ashamed.

"Goddammit, Millicent," Cougar growled. "Lower your damned voice."

The look Millicent sent Mara held an apology. "Sorry, hon."

Cougar's arm slipped around Mara's waist. He tugged. She didn't go. She hadn't done anything wrong. She wasn't going to walk around cowering.

The sudden silence began to fill with the murmur of voices. The rapid flick and retreat of glances in their direction let her know that she and Cougar were the topic of discussion. Lord, she hated this.

"Let's go," Cougar told her, eyeing the room himself, gauging the level of gossip while trying to pull her into the protection of his side.

She stepped away from his hand. "No."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because you're hungry. I'm hungry, and this is my day."

"We can celebrate at home."

"You have your heart set on Millicent's chicken and dumplings."

She said that as if that settled it.

"I can have them another time."

She cut him a look that dared him to utter something as stupid again. "There's no reason we can't have them now."

Nothing but the fact that the whole room was speculating on their relationship, and the way they'd met, Cougar thought.

He looked at her, the occupants of the room, and lastly the set of her chin. She had her dander up sure and certain, Cougar knew. He'd seen it in motion too many times to mistake the signs. They weren't getting out of here short of eating lunch, or a stick of dynamite under her butt. He took off his hat and slapped it against his thigh. "Ah hell. You're bent on proving a point, aren't you?"

She removed her hat with quick, efficient motions. "I apologize for my husband's profanity," she said crisply to the woman passing by.

The woman didn't acknowledge the apology or Mara. Despite the fact that the snub had to hurt, Mara kept her chin high and her expression bland. Cougar wanted to shoot them all for treating her this way.

"Damn, hon, I'm sorry," Millicent said, a frown settling on her face as a couple left their half-eaten meals, shot Mara a contemptuous glance and squeezed past them. The look she cast the man had him returning to the table to drop additional coins before he followed his outraged wife out the door.

"It's all right, Millicent," Mara said, moving to the just-emptied table. "People have a right to their opinions."

Millicent shifted the tray on her shoulder and said in a voice loud enough to carry, "They'd best not be having opinions in my place."

The silence in the wake of that pronouncement was once again complete.

Cougar had to move quickly to get around Millicent in time to hold Mara's chair for her. As he leaned forward to push the chair in, he whispered, "You don't have anything to prove."

She didn't answer, but her shoulders stayed ramrod straight and her mouth stayed pressed tight.

He sighed. It was going to be a long lunch.

He turned to take his seat. A gasp from Mara grabbed his attention just as he was sitting. He whipped around in time to see Red Palmer straighten in his seat, his hand jerking out from under the table by Mara's thighs. Mara's face was as white as a sheet. She looked the way she had when he'd been courting her. Shell-shocked and desperate. Beneath her fingers, the ridiculous little hat she'd been so proud of crumpled.

Cougar slowly straightened, satisfaction battling rage. At last, something he could do something about.

"You okay?"

Mara nodded, but only a fool would believe it. She was crying those tears again. The ones he couldn't see. The ones that tore his heart out just the same. All because some asshole thought he could get to him through her. Well, he had, and now there'd be hell to pay.

He retraced the two steps it took him to get between Mara and Red. He smiled at the two men sitting with Red. "You boys might want to move along."

"Shit, Red, what in hell'd you do?" the skinny wrangler groaned, grabbing a biscuit off the table and leaping to his feet.

The clatter of his chair tipping over brought the other wrangler's head up from his plate. Horror replaced ecstasy as he spotted Cougar. "You pissed off Gut'm McKinnely?" he gasped, food flying from his mouth with his words. "Goddamn!"

"He sure 'nough did," Cougar answered, stretching his smile to encompass all three men. "And now we have to discuss it."

The older wrangler took one look at his smile and pushed away from the table. "Hell, you're on your own, Red."

"Nice company you keep," Cougar drawled, removing his hat. As if the black Stetson hitting the table were a sign, people started diving for the corners. Plates rattled on tables, chairs overturned, until finally, the only one who remained firmly planted was his wife. Cougar sighed and stepped aside, letting an elderly couple pass.

While he waited, Red stood. Cougar sized him up. Big, mean and stupid. Damned stupid, if he thought he could touch his wife and live.

"Mara," Cougar drawled, "go to the door."

Her lips were set in that uncooperative line he was becoming accustomed to, so he wasn't surprised to hear, "I'm fine right here."

He cocked a brow at Millicent.

"I've got her," she said, setting her tray on a table and taking hold of Mara's arm. Before Mara could gather the spit to argue, she was dragged to stand at the door.

From the glare she shot him, she'd have a lot to say about that later.

Later could wait. Right now, he had other things to deal with.

"Same deal as before Millicent," he called.

"Add another hundred."

"Done."

"You planning on chatting with the women folk McKinnely, or did you want to talk to me?" Red asked, hitching up his pants.

Damn, the man was dumb. "Wasn't planning on talking much," Cougar admitted, unbuckling his gun belt. "Just inquiring on how much of you I'm allowed to spread across this floor."

"As if you got call to be spreading anything."

"You need manners on how to treat a lady."

"Everyone's pretty much guessed that lady's a whore."

Cougar would have popped him for that, but Red's back was toward the door and he wasn't going to risk him being near Mara when the bleeding started. And he was going to bleed. A lot.

"That's going to cost you," he informed the other man, who was rolling up his sleeves, anticipation on his face.

Red spat on the floor. "All I see is a lot of talk, McKinnely. All any of us have ever seen is a lot of talk out of you. Especially," Red dropped into a fighting crouch, ham-sized fists doubled in front of his chest as he started circling, "when it comes to that split tail you're trying to force on respectable folk."

Cougar turned with the man, letting the words fuel the anger sliding through him, letting them settle into the familiar, cold clarity of focus that came with it.

"Makes me wonder how much truth there is to that puffed up reputation of yours," Red goaded.

"No surprise there. Seems every asshole I meet wonders the same thing," Cougar murmured. Damned, he hadn't wanted Mara to see this. He turned in place, keeping Red in front of him, waiting until, finally, Red was between him and the big side window. Cougar shifted his weight to his left foot, and averted his eyes, providing Red the opportunity to make his move. As soon as the big man charged, Cougar turned sideways and drove his foot straight into the other man's chest, using his momentum to throw Red backwards, through the big glass window. Cougar dove after him, pulling his Bowie knife clear as he leapt through the window. He hit the other man hard, driving him through the railing and into the mud of the street. Muck sprayed high as he landed on top of Red, his knees driving into the beefy man's shoulders, feeling tendons give under the pressure. Red howled in pain.

Cougar braced himself with one hand on the other man's throat. He squeezed, unmoved by the other man's choking gasps. He'd hurt and insulted his wife. The fact that Red had done it on purpose to get a rise out of him didn't lessen the price tag one bit. Cougar held Red's gaze and brought the knife up. "Stick your tongue out."

Red choked some more and shook his head. Cougar tightened his grip and waited. The cold, hard ball of anger in his gut ensured he could wait forever. He had the patience of a saint when it came to retribution. It was what had made him so good at his job. It was what had earned him the name Gut'm. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the crowd spilling from the restaurant. He checked for Red's cohorts. They stood back, arms folded. He pressed harder on Red's throat. No one interfered.

Not only was Red dumb, he was stubborn. Cougar had to wait a good half-minute, and until Red was blue in the face before he spat out a stream of saliva, then slowly, fearfully, stuck out his tongue. Cougar narrowed his gaze, smiled and drew the blade across the appendage in a sharp move. Blood sprayed. Red's eyes flew wide in horror as they met Cougar's. Cougar put the blade of his knife against his jugular to still his bucking.

"No. I didn't cut it off," he answered the horrified question he could see in the other man's eyes, "but if you ever say one word to or about my wife again, I'll hunt you down, cut it off and feed it to you for breakfast."

"As for the rest," he stood up, dragging Red with him until he was half-propped. His big knife slashed down and then up. Red screamed, jerked double, and grabbed his privates. Cougar stood over him, his chest heaving with his anger. "That was for whatever filthy thing you said to Mara, and for thinking you had the right to touch her." He stabbed his knife in the ground between the man's legs, feeling the cold spreading to his words as he said, "Remember it because if I ever see you again, I'll geld you."

Red nodded desperately, his pig eyes glued to the knife, maybe sensing how close Cougar was to losing control. He'd never been this close before, but every time he remembered Mara's face, he wanted the bastard to bleed all over again.

A pair of boots came into his line of vision, the tips scuffed and turned up with use.

"Don't expect he'll be forgetting it in the near future, son."

Cougar glanced up from where he crouched, took in the double gun belt and the badge pinned to the black leather vest, the blue eyes looking down at him from the tired, lined face under the gray Stetson. He nodded. "Sheriff."

"Red been mouthing off again?"

"Yeah." Cougar got to his feet.

"Some of you boys get Red and take him over to Doc."

The two men who had been with Red came forward, nodded to the sheriff, gave Cougar a wide berth and took Red's arms. When they got him to his feet, the skinny one paused, looked at Red and then the Sheriff. "Red got what he deserved, Sheriff Mulden. Said something right filthy to Mrs. McKinnely. Touched her, too."

Mulden looked at Cougar. "Mrs. McKinnely all right?"

"She's had better days."

"Damn shame filth like him's allowed out among decent folk." He spat at the ground between Red's bloody boots before glancing back at Cougar. "You done here?"

Cougar looked at the semiconscious man. He wouldn't feel like he was done until he could erase the expression on Mara's face from his memory. "Looks like it."

The older man, the one who'd been eating, looked at Cougar, "We didn't know what Red was up to, McKinnely. He just joined up with the Rocking C. Don't expect the boss will keep him around after this. He's real particular about manners around ladies."

If word of this got back to Asa, Cougar knew, Red would be lucky if he wasn't strung up and horsewhipped. "In the future, you'd do best to watch the company you keep."

"I've been thinking that very thing," the older man said, giving Red a disgusted glare. "For what it's worth, none of us at the Rocking C have ever thought of Mrs. McKinnely as anything but a lady."

Cougar nodded. "See that it stays that way."

"And we're real sorry Red upset her."

"I'll pass it on."

"You boys get Red over to Doc before he bleeds to death," the sheriff interrupted. He turned to the crowd. "The rest of you get back to whatever it was you were doing. The show's over."

"If he wants to press charges, you know where to find me," Cougar said, dusting off his buckskins.

Sheriff Mulden's smile was a mere flick of the lips. "The man might be stupid, but he's not suicidal."

"I'm not going to bet my ranch on it."

"No one's going to tolerate a man touching another man's wife. He starts spouting nonsense about bringing charges, I'll turn him over to Asa to hold for the trial."

"Asa will tear him apart."

"Not my concern, but if it comes to that, we'll be sure to schedule your trial for right after his."

Cougar nodded. "I appreciate it."

He turned, sheathing his knife, searching out Mara. She stood on the edge of the wooden walk about ten feet from him. Her face white, her hands clutching the pole holding up the porch roof. Her lower lip clenched between her teeth.

She didn't say a word, just stared at him with those big eyes full of shock, and he knew.

Ah hell. She'd remembered.

Chapter Twenty-One

He was coming to her. Across the street, across the memories, he was coming to her. And God help her, she didn't know what to do. He was her husband, how could he be her rapist? He was the one she trusted to keep her safe. How could he have been the one who'd done the greatest harm? Oh God, and how could this all be happening in the middle of the street?

As he reached her, one of the bystanders handed him his gun belt. "Handy as you are with that knife, bet you don't even miss these."

"Thanks," was all Cougar said to the man as he took them and buckled them around his waist, his gaze locked on her.

He knew something was wrong. She could see it in the way he stood, as if braced, his shoulders set, face hard, his expression resigned. He expected her to scream and yell. He expected her to repudiate him, to label him a rapist in front of all his friends and family. God help her, part of her wanted to. Another part just wanted to throw herself into his arms and let him make it all go away. Torn between extremes, she wrapped her arms around her waist and went for the lesser of all the revelations.

"You're Marshal Gut'm McKinnely?"

He nodded, his eyes going over every facet of her expression as if he could find answers there that she didn't know herself.

"You're a legend."

"I'm just a man, Angel."

"I heard you were killed years ago by the Danzer crew."

"They gave it a good shot."

She rubbed her arms, taking off the chill. "Are you still a marshal?"

"I'm retired."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He shrugged. "I figured you had fears enough when it came to me without tossing my reputation on the pile."

A thought hit her, and she couldn't stop a bubble of laughter. "No wonder you kept telling me you were good with knives."

"I told you that because I am." He took another step in her direction. His gaze narrowed in concern as she laughed again. The lift of her hand stopped him in his tracks.

"Pa saw you once at a fair. He said you split a leaf right up the middle at fifty paces." He'd been awed and impressed. "He said you were more dangerous with a knife than most men with a gun. He said you were mean, fast and lethal."

He'd also said McKinnely was like a keg of dynamite just waiting for someone to light his fuse.

"And what do you think?" Cougar asked.

Mara stared at him, trying to sort through everything that had happened, what she knew, what had been revealed. "I think maybe he was right."

The only indication she had that Cougar heard her was the flicker of his eyelids. In anyone else, that would have been a flinch. She just stared at him, unable to speak for the thoughts jumbling her brain. Wanting to yell and scream. Wanting to do something, wanting *him* to do something to make what she suspected go away.

"You okay, honey?" Millicent asked, concern in her voice. She didn't answer, just clenched her hands in front of her and fought for control. Cougar stood in the street, staring at her. Waiting.

For what? What was he waiting for? The tension between them grew. She clenched her hands tighter, holding her palms against her stomach, pressing the nausea back.

Millicent stepped up to the rail. Mara jumped when her big hand landed on her shoulder. She felt like her nerves were shredding from the inside out.

"Why don't you come on inside?"

Was it obvious to everyone that something was going on between Cougar and herself?

Mara looked around the crowd. Some of the faces were sympathetic. Some were curious, and some were intent. Millicent squeezed her shoulder, motioning to the crowd. "Whatever's wrong, honey, you don't want to air your dirty linen in front of all these strangers."

Mara looked around again at the faces. The expectancy there. They knew something was going on, sure enough. They knew it was something big between the two of them, no doubt because of her behavior. And while they couldn't possibly know what it was, it didn't take a genius to figure out that they were hoping it would involve a scene. Maybe one that Cougar would get the worst of. Nausea surged again as she looked at the crowd of faces. How many knew about her? How many knew for sure what she was fast suspecting was the truth? That Cougar had been the man who raped her. How many had been laughing at her behind her back all these months? Had Cougar been laughing, too?

Lastly, she looked at Cougar. For all that his expression remained impassive, she knew him well enough to read him. He was waiting on her, too. And he wasn't laughing. Far from it. He stood like a man expecting to take a blow. Accepting he couldn't block it. Couldn't escape it. There could only be one reason why, but she couldn't, didn't believe it.

"Cougar."

His "Yeah?" contained all the discipline she'd come to expect from him. The breeze blew his hair around his face. He didn't push it away. He just stood there watching her through the strands, that resigned acceptance that looked so out of place still on his handsome face. "It's been a long afternoon," she said softly, unable to believe what she was doing in light of her suspicions, but unable to bear seeing him this way. For others to see him without his fierce pride.

He jerked a little and his eyes narrowed. He would accept whatever she said or did, she knew. Because he felt guilty. About something. She wrapped both hands around the post and leaned into it for support. Millicent's expression flashed alarm as she glanced between the two of them, no doubt feeling the tension Mara couldn't hide. "Why don't you go upstairs, hon, and lay down until your nerves settle?"

Mara shook her head, still holding Cougar's gaze. "My nerves are fine."

It was her intelligence she was beginning to question. Cougar looked as immovable as a rock standing there in the street. Proud. Stubborn and resigned. He'd been hurt so much in his life. And maybe she'd hurt him too, down the road, but not right now. Not like this, with his pride on the line and the townsfolk as witnesses. She tightened her grip in the post, gathered her courage, and said the one thing she knew would get him moving without question.

"I need you, Cougar."

He was at her side before she could blink. His moccasin-clad feet hit the wooden sidewalk with a soft thud at the same time that his big arms came around her, pulling her into his chest.

"I've got you," he whispered, as his hair swung around them, shielding her face from view. "You don't have to worry about anyone hurting you, Angel."

She wasn't afraid of anyone hurting her. Just the opposite. She didn't want to hurt anyone, least of all Cougar. She was just absorbing the reality that she could. Because he cared. No one looked like he did right now and didn't.

She'd never seen him like this. The hands rubbing up and down her back were shaking, she realized. The big body protectively holding hers trembled. She'd only said what she'd said to save his pride, but he'd taken it as more. And he was once again offering her his life for hers. Not asking anything in return. Dammit, she didn't need this, but she knew what to do with it.

She put her arms around his neck. "Take me home, Cougar."

His hand slid beneath her knees and he lifted her into his arms. She should explain to him the confusion that reigned inside, but he was looking at her with an expression she'd never seen before. A no-holds-barred combination of heat, possession and emotion that lit his golden eyes from within. Like she was the big prize he'd always coveted but never expected to win.

Oh damn. How could she hate him when she loved him? She bent her head into his chest and let him carry her across the town, her heart beating double-time, panic and

elation battling for supremacy. How could what she suspected be true? How could he have pulled the wool over her eyes all this time? How could she not have remembered *him*?

His long legs ate up distance like it was nothing, his muscled body not even feeling the impact of her weight. He stopped. She looked up. The building blocked the worst of the sun. They were at the buggy. She expected Cougar to put her down, but instead, he carried her around the buggy until they were between it and the livery wall. He let her feet slide to the ground, his hands moving up her body. They reached her shoulders and kept on coming until he cupped her face in his palms.

"Oh God, Angel, I can't wait," he groaned, his mouth hitting hers as he backed her up. She parted her lips and let his passion roll over her.

"I can't believe you did that," he moaned into her mouth.

"Did what?"

"I can't believe you chose me. In front of the entire town, you chose me."

She was probably the only person that knew how much that meant to him.

"Of course I did." He was her husband. She would never humiliate him in public.

"No 'of course' about it." He kissed her eyes, her nose, her cheeks. "You could have turned away, and no one would have blamed you. A half-breed, used-up ex-marshal isn't a prize in anyone's book."

"Neither is an ex-whore."

He stopped kissing her, his breath sliding gently across her brow. Almost as gentle as the finger he slid under her chin to tip her face up. "You were never a whore."

"Everyone else thinks so."

"Everyone else doesn't matter."

"They do if you keep getting into fights over it."

His expression turned hard, his touch stilled. "He put his hands on you, scared you. The son of a bitch deserved what he got and then some."

"You can't beat up everyone who sees me as a whore."

"Watch me." He took a step closer, pressing her back against the stable wall. His cock rose against her stomach and his breath brushed her ear. "I promised to keep you safe. It's a promise I mean to keep."

And she'd promised to love him forever, forsaking all others. Did she have a right to renege on that because of something she only suspected?

"Cougar?"

"Yeah?" he rubbed his cock against her belly. "Damn, Angel, you make me so hard."

"I need to ask you something."

He nibbled at the side of her neck, sending goose bumps chasing down her spine. "Can it wait?"

"No."

His hand drifted down to her breast, plumping her slight curves into his palm, stroking his finger over her nipple. "You sure?"

She struggled to find her voice. "I need to know."

He pinched her nipple between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing harder and harder until her knees gave out and she couldn't suppress a soft whimper of pleasure.

He brushed his lips over her cheek. "Steady, Angel."

"I can't think when you do that," she gasped.

"What's there to think about?"

Everything. Nothing. Oh God, when he had his hands on her body, nothing else seemed to matter. He made her burn, ache.

She caught his wrist in her hand, trying to pull his hand away. "Please stop."

"Doesn't it feel good?"

"We're in public."

"No one can see."

"Someone could come around the corner any moment." And that didn't upset her as much as it should have. Not when he had his big thigh between hers and was pressing it up into her privates.

"The buggy will hide us."

"Not completely."

"No one would dare look. I'm Gut'm McKinnely."

She tugged his wrist again. "Please."

He dropped his head against hers, but slid his hand to the safer territory of her back. "Damn, I want you."

"Why?"

He pulled back and frowned. "You keep asking me that."

She shrugged. "I just don't understand what someone like you sees in me."

"You talk like I'm some sort of prize."

She turned her face into the hollow of his throat. "You have to know you're every woman's dream."

His contentment hummed in his throat as she pressed a kiss there.

"I'll settle for just being yours."

"Why?"

"I don't know why, but I knew the minute I saw you, you were mine."

At last, the opening she was looking for. So why was it so hard to get the question out? "At Cecile's?"

Against her chest, she felt his muscles pull tight, his breath slow. His body took on a predatory wariness. His agreement was a flat, "Yeah."

"When you took me out of there?"

"I made the decision before then."

A quick glance showed his jaw was clenched and he was staring straight ahead. He didn't like where this conversation was heading.

"Did you rape me, Cougar?"

"Jesus!"

He tried to push away, but she put her arms around his waist and held on, going with him when he stood straight.

She ignored his effort to separate himself from her. She pressed her face to his chest. "Answer me. Did you?"

He put his hands on her shoulder. "It wasn't like that."

Another glance showed him looking down at her, his golden eyes dark with indecision. It was such a foreign expression for him, it gave her the courage to push on.

"Then put your arms around me, hold me really, really close, and tell me how it was."

"Why?"

"Because I'm afraid of what you're going to tell me. I'm afraid that it will somehow change things, but I'm not afraid when you hold me, so I want you to hold me close and make this go away."

He put his arms around her, and did as she asked. He held her so tightly, she thought her ribs would crack. "Nothing's going to change, Mara."

"It might."

"Why?"

"Because once I know, you can't pretend I'm an innocent. We'll both know how many men I had that night, what they did to me. What I did to them."

"Ah shit!" He sank to the bale of hay leaning against the building. She had no choice but to go with him. He pulled her sideways across his lap. He didn't let her go. "Don't think that way, Mara. Not ever."

"How can I not? You almost gelded a man for touching me."

"I nicked the guy's balls for scaring you."

"Please tell me."

"It was just me, Angel."

"Are you sure?"

"Have I ever lied to you?"

"No, but you keep things from me."

"And you're thinking I'm keeping something from you now?" The question reverberated in his chest.

She thought about it for a second and then she looked up from his chest, straining against his hold to see his face. "I think," she said slowly, the realization sinking in, "you would do whatever you thought you had to, to keep me from being hurt."

"You figured that out yourself?"

He was stalling. "Please tell me, Cougar. I promise you, it can't be worse than what I'm imagining."

He stroked her hair and sighed. "It ever occur to you that I might be afraid of losing you?"

"You can't lose me. I made a promise."

"Maybe I want more than a promise keeping you with me."

"Then you're going to have to trust me that I can handle the truth."

Her hair ruffled as he placed a kiss on the top of her head. "I didn't want you to ever remember."

"I know." She touched the tangled strands of his hair. "Tell me, Cougar."

"Here?"

"It's as good a place as any."

Safer too as he couldn't seduce her out of focusing on the parts he thought would upset her.

"Some stuff I'm only guessing at or I heard later," he warned as he rested his cheek on her head.

"Okay."

"Are you going to have a problem with that?"

Her laugh was more of a choking gasp. "Cougar, all I have now are horrible, vivid, distorted glimpses of what happened, which leaves me scared and desperately filling in the blanks with my imagination."

He stilled. Almost as if he'd taken a blow. "You've been thinking on this a lot?"

"Of course!"

He pulled back and tipped her chin up, studying her face. "I thought we agreed it was behind us."

"It's not something a woman can forget."

"I didn't think it would be something you'd want to remember, either."

She shrugged, unable to look away from his dark eyes. "It's scarier not knowing. It's part of my life and I can't account for it. I don't know how depraved it was. I was."

"Whoa, Angel." He leaned back, his eyes widening in shock. "What makes you think you were depraved? Hell, that you could even *be* depraved?"

He wouldn't let her turn her face away, so she focused on the tiny scar on the right corner of his upper lip as she confessed. "I know how I am with you. Why would I be different with anyone else?" She pressed her hands into her stomach, the sickening images running through her head. "Especially if I were drugged."

His finger dropped from her chin. His hard arms came around her, pulling her into him, as if he wanted to absorb her into himself. "You think what we do together is depraved?"

"I love what we do, but what if I'm that way with everyone? Any man who crooks his finger?"

He shifted back against the wall. The bale beneath them rustled with the movement, the scent of hay rising to mingle with the scents of tobacco, sage, and of her own fear. And still he didn't say anything.

"Are you being quiet because you're protecting me?" Her knuckles dug into her stomach. She clenched her hands tighter, pressed harder as she asked, "Tell me the truth, Cougar. Do you know if there were other men? Was I...wild with them all?"

He took a deep breath, shifted her higher and said, "As far as I know, there wasn't anyone but me, and you were nothing like you are now."

She wasn't sure if that was a good thing or a bad thing. "What do you mean, as far as you know?"

Beneath her shoulder, his chest lifted as he shrugged. His hand stroked her hair from crown to the ends. Slowly, carefully, as if he were measuring his words by the rhythm he set with his hand.

"Cecile said she had a new woman upstairs. That I would be the first, and that you would be mine for the night."

"She could have been lying."

His hand paused at her shoulder. "I suppose."

"But?" Lord, she wanted there to be a "but".

"No one else in the saloon had heard of you, so unless you worked in a saloon before the Pleasure Emporium, I think it's safe to say I was the only one. And to answer the question you haven't asked, you were sweet, placid and biddable, but not a bit wild. However you got to Cecile's, I'm willing to bet you were a virgin when I made love to you."

Cougar had never missed a thing before, so it would be silly to hope he would have missed the telltale clenching of her body as he mentioned her arrival at the Pleasure Emporium. "Any reason you just stiffened up like a board?"

"It's nothing."

"It's got to be something. Does it have to do with how you came to be in the Pleasure Emporium?"

He was too damned astute. "It's not important."

"I'm not taking anymore chances with assuming." He slid his hand around her side, over her arm and to her stomach. He worked his fingers under her hands until his palm pressed flat against her abdomen, a barrier to the bruising pressure she was applying. "And since we're opening cans of worms today, how did you come to be at the Pleasure Emporium?"

There were some things a woman never told a man. This was one of them. She fought to swallow back the nausea, stiffening her stomach muscles. "It doesn't matter."

He eased his fingers wider over her stomach and stroked her gently. "I think it does."

"Why were you there?"

His hand stilled on her stomach. There was a long pause before he asked, "If I answer yours, will you answer mine?"

"Maybe."

Unbelievably, he chuckled. "Tough little thing, aren't you?"

"I try."

He kissed the top of her head. "Don't try too hard. I like you just the way you are."

"So?"

"You want me to just blurt it out?"

"Yes."

"Damn."

She waited while he searched for the words, knowing from the way his expression tightened, and his eyes avoided hers that he wasn't proud of whatever he was about to say.

"Since my fiancée died, I'd been unable to..." He shifted beneath her. A quick glance up showed his lips were a hard line and his jaw clenched.

"Unable to what?" she prompted.

"I couldn't bed a woman." It came out an angry hiss of sound.

Her shocked gasp was totally inappropriate, as was her "You?"

"Yeah." He pulled his hand from hers. "Me."

She caught his hand before he could drag it away. "You loved her that much?"

He tugged his hand free. She grabbed it back, holding on when he would have stood. He stopped short of dumping her on the ground. She brought his hand to her mouth, kissing it gently. "I wasn't making fun, I was just...shocked. I mean, you're always so ready."

He was ready now. She could feel him swelling against her hip.

She kissed his palm again, keeping her gaze on the ground before her, concentrating on the feel of his callused palm against her cheek as she forced herself to say, "I don't begrudge you someone you can love. You're a man. There probably have

been a lot of women who've caught your interest. It would be silly for me to resent your past."

"Bullshit." He flipped his hand in hers and used her arm to pull her around until they were chest to chest.

She looked up. His eyes were dark and intense. His forearm across her back held her breasts to his chest. She could feel his heart beating faster than normal. "What?"

"It's bullshit that you don't resent Emily."

"That's so unfair." True, but unfair.

"You don't want me to have ever loved anyone before you anymore than I want you to have loved anyone before me."

"You don't?"

"No." He touched her cheek, the light gesture infused with the softness in his eyes as he said, "You're as possessive as I am, so you can drop any bullshit to the contrary."

"All right," she grunted, pushing against his chest. "I don't want you to have loved Emily. I hate knowing you compare me to her and she wins every time because you loved her and she's always going to have that part of you."

"I didn't love her."

"I hate wondering if I'm doing the right thing, and in private, if it's right or wrong that I do as you ask. Whether I should enjoy it, and whether Emily would have done it and therefore whether I should. I hate —"

His hand over her mouth stopped the torrent of words. She considered biting his palm. "I didn't love her."

She blinked, still not sure she'd heard him right.

"And yeah, you should definitely do as I ask in private and you should absolutely enjoy it until you scream yourself hoarse. You should wiggle and beg and —"

She bit him then. Hard.

"Ow." He didn't look upset. He looked extraordinarily pleased.

"I hate you," she whispered to her lap.

"No, you don't." He slid his hand into her hair, clenching his fingers in the loose strands at her nape, and tilted her head back until she was staring into his face. "You love me."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"Because you raped me." The tears she was blinking back pooled in her voice.

He kissed her very, very gently on her lips, brushing her nose with his as he pulled away. "But you do, and maybe, if I'm very lucky, sometime in the next fifty years, you'll find it in your heart to forgive me."

"I can never forgive you if I don't know what happened. Why it happened."

"I can't tell you why, Angel, but I can tell you how."

"Please." She just wanted it over.

He let go of her hand and pressed her head into his chest. "All I know is what I overheard and what I put together later." His words were muffled by his hand over her ear.

"That's fine. Just tell me."

"Cecile was going to auction you off to the highest bidder, make some money off you before handing you over to the regulars. Virgins bring a high price."

"Oh God!" She fought back the nausea.

His hands rubbed her back, her thigh, whatever they touched. "We don't have to do this."

"No. I want to know. I don't want to wonder about it anymore."

"You're sure?"

She nodded.

"You ticked her off and she gave you to me."

"You were my punishment?" She sounded shocked. She couldn't help it. Who could ever see Cougar as anything but a reward?

"Guess she figured being taken by a half-breed, especially one in the state I was in, would make an impression on you."

"You'd never hurt a woman."

He held her stare. "Most people are afraid of me."

"Most people are fools."

"You get used to it."

"But you don't ever like it?"

"No," he admitted after a slight hesitation.

"So I shouldn't start calling you Gut'm?"

He smiled and touched her cheek. "You do and that little pussy of yours will be red for a week."

She offered no comment.

His finger slid across her cheek and settled into the corner of her mouth. "I saw you in that room, Angel, and I knew I'd found something special. Something I'd been looking for my whole life." He shook his head, his finger insinuating between her lips until he could slide it along the sensitive lining. "You were so damned beautiful and so sexy in that floaty nightgown."

It was ridiculous but she was relieved she'd been dressed.

"I knew right then that when I left, I was taking you with me."

"Did I fight?"

He shook his head and his hair brushed her cheek. She caught the strand and held it, making him meet her gaze. "You were so drugged, though I didn't know it at the time, you didn't do much except lay there, sigh, and let me touch and play with you."

"I don't remember that."

"Then I guess you'll just have to remember the time at the ranch as our first. Remember how you rose to my touch, how you screamed in release under my mouth, how you made me senseless with pleasure."

Yes. She could do that, but first, she needed to deal with what happened at Cecile's. "What happened after?"

"At Cecile's?"

"Yes."

"You knocked me out with the lamp, and took on Aleric and Cecile. You killed Cecile. I came to in time to stop Aleric from killing you, and then I took you out of there."

"Really?" He made it sound so simple. Straightforward. So unimportant.

"Yes."

"You were my first?"

"First, last, and the only one who will ever matter."

"That's a strange way of putting it."

"I want you to remember that I'll always want you, Mara. And if anything happens to you that makes you feel dirty or uncertain, you just remember, I'm coming for you, and you hang on no matter what."

"That's a strange thing to say."

"As a marshal, you get to see a lot of things you'd rather not. One of those things is women who've been raped. They get it in their heads they can't go back, that it somehow matters, and they do stupid things."

"Maybe their husbands would have cared."

"They wouldn't have." He sounded very sure.

"How do you know?"

"Someone had to tell them their wives were dead."

And it had fallen to him. How hard that must have been for him. Cougar wasn't a man who dealt in what-ifs. He accepted life's ups and downs and made plans on how to get through them. Explaining to another something that made no sense to him would have been hard. It would have left an impression. One that had him once again gripping her chin between his fingers, the calluses on his hands rough on her flesh as he brought her gaze to his. "I don't want anyone ever coming to tell me something like that."

"I already promised I wouldn't leave you that way."

He dropped a hard kiss on her mouth. "Promise me again."

She placed her hand on his cheek, understanding in that moment, that there was no way he would have taken her at Cecile's if he'd known she was unwilling, and even if she couldn't remember what had happened, there was no way that Cougar would have been cruel. It wasn't his way. "I promise, Cougar. I'll hold on until you come for me." She stroked her thumb over his wide, generous mouth, smiling as he immediately pressed a kiss against the pad. "No matter what," she added softly, knowing he needed to hear it, understanding his fears.

His "See that you do" was gruff. She didn't take offense. He was such a deep-feeling man, her husband. He just didn't understand that she was better now, stronger. That she had strength of her own that he could believe in. She would wait for him, if it ever came to that, because he needed her and she wouldn't leave him alone with that need. As he had never left her alone with hers, even when she'd faced the specter of pregnancy.

She sat up straight. Her hand dropped to his shoulder, as she gasped, "No wonder you weren't worried about raising another man's child!"

He flinched and had the grace to look guilty. For about two seconds. Then his expression turned sober. He slid his big hand behind her neck, bringing her back against him.

"Has there ever been anything in my background or your dealings with me that would make you think I would ever turn a child away from my home?"

"No."

"Anything I've ever done to make you think I'd hurt a child out of spite?"

"No." She could see him dying to protect a child, but she couldn't see him hurting one.

"Anything you've ever heard or seen that tells you I get my jollies from hurting things littler than me?"

"No, but—"

He reared back the slightest. "But what?"

Beneath her hand, his muscles were tight, telling her that he still wasn't comfortable with the way things were between them. He still expected her to walk away on some excuse. She stroked the hard ridge of his collarbone. He had so much to learn about her.

"But if we do have kids, you'd better find a way to toughen up. I'm not going to have a household of hooligans running roughshod over me because you crumple at a pout."

There was a shocked moment of silence, a short burst of laughter and then he hooked her neck in the crook of his elbow and kissed her hard. There was passion, hope, and relief in that kiss. He rested his forehead against hers. "Witch."

"I'm serious Cougar. You'll have to hold up your end of the discipline."

He hugged her tighter. "Then you'd better make damned sure none of them look like you."

She smiled and snuggled into his shoulder. He would be a wonderful father. "I'll keep it in mind."

She let her hand slide down until it rested on his chest.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Anything."

She barely felt the kiss that landed on the top of her head. She tilted her head so she could see his face. "If you didn't love Emily, why did her death bother you so much?"

Beneath her ear, muscles jerked and his breath hitched. His expression became guarded. And sad. "Because I should have loved her. Because I couldn't. Because I tried to force the issue and she died."

"Doc said she died in a flood."

"She did, but if I hadn't pushed her, she wouldn't have fought me."

"You pushed her in the water?"

He shook his head and looked over the buggy wheel. "I pushed her for intimacy."

She could see him doing that. Easily. He was a very physical man. This time, it was her hand on his cheek bringing his face to hers. "There's no way you forced her and if you were about to be married, she should have been happy with your touch."

"She wasn't."

"Then she should have called off the wedding, not thrown a hissy fit that almost killed you both."

His smile was a small curve of his lips. "You've been talking to Doc."

She shrugged. "He offered the information."

"And you were curious."

"More like intimidated. She sounded so perfect and you were engaged."

He turned his mouth into her palm, and kissed her. "She was window-dressing. You're the real thing."

"Thank you."

"You don't believe me."

"Of course I do."

He nipped her palm and slid his hand down her thigh, pulling her closer. "Why don't you believe me?"

"I do."

He dropped his head until his mouth caressed her ear. "I showed you mine, now you show me yours."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"How'd you end up at the Pleasure Emporium, Mara?"

"It doesn't matter."

He kissed her temple, his lips sliding in her hair. "I think it does."

"It doesn't."

"You're going to tell me someday."

But not today. She laid her head on his shoulder. Between them, his stomach rumbled loudly. "You're hungry."

"I could eat."

"Me, too."

"The one thing we can't have is you skipping meals."

"You are obsessed with fattening me up."

"You're still too thin."

There was no arguing the truth, so she didn't bother. "So let's go do something about it."

His hand stroked her hair. "What are you suggesting?"

"Well, you did leave your hat at Millicent's."

He squeezed her tightly. "We don't need to go back there."

"I want to."

"Why?"

"Because I'm starving."

"We can get something to eat without having to sit amidst a bunch of gawking townsfolk."

"But I want to sit amongst a bunch of gawking townsfolk. I want them to see me with my husband. I want all those women to see me with you. I want to eat my dinner while they eat their hearts out wishing they had half as much man sitting next to them."

"You might be stretching it there."

She smiled and braided her hair down her back. "You'll have to trust me on this, Cougar. There isn't a woman in this whole territory who, after today, wouldn't give her eyeteeth to spend a day with you."

He frowned. "I don't want any of them."

She stood, straightening her skirt and brushing straw from the hem. "That's what makes it even better."

She held out her hand. He stared at her a moment, his gaze assessing, as if not really believing what she'd said. She waited until the doubt left his expression and that slight smile she loved took up residence at the corners of his mouth before saying, "Take me to dinner, Cougar."

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I'm glad you two came back," Millicent said as she passed by with a loaded tray. "Can't let riffraff chase you out of your favorite places."

"I agree," Mara said, taking a last swallow of milk. She pushed her empty plate aside and waited for her husband to finish his meal. She wanted to talk about Ms. Dickinson's speech. The second Cougar's fork touched his clean plate, Mara pounced.

"So is everything Miss Dickinson said true?"

Taking a deep breath, Cougar calmly wiped his mouth on his napkin. Mara was primed for a fight and she was going to force him to give it to her. It was cowardly, but Cougar stalled. "Not all of it, no."

Mara leapt on that like a dog with a new bone. "Which part wasn't true? The part about a man owning his wife, right down to her children and the dress on her back? The part about she's nothing more or less than a dog to him in the eyes of the law? The part about a woman being dependent on her husband during his life, and on her male children after? The part about anything that what was hers upon entering the marriage becomes his immediately upon speaking their vows? The part about how everything is the husband's to spend as he pleases even though the money was never intended for him? Or the part about how she could work beside her man all her life and he could die and leave her nothing if the spirit moved him? And she would have no recourse?"

In direct contrast to Mara's outrage, Cougar's response was calm. "The part about all men being oppressive monsters."

Mara snapped up straight. "You really don't care, do you?"

"Not," Cougar admitted, "enough to make a spectacle of myself over it."

Realizing they were once again the center of attention, Mara abruptly sat down. She lowered her voice. "I can't believe someone as concerned with honor and fairness as you would deliberately condone an injustice of this proportion!"

Cougar frowned as he shoved his plate away. "To tell you the truth, I've never given the subject a whole lot of thought."

"How could you not?" Mara cried.

"In case you hadn't noticed," Cougar defended himself. "Up until now, the subject hasn't concerned me over much. There haven't been a ton of women in my life."

"Well, it's come up now."

Cougar grimaced. Millicent's arrival saved him from an immediate answer.

"Would you all like some coffee?"

"No."

"Yes," Cougar said at the same time, his expression resigned, indicating his realization that she wasn't letting him out of this discussion.

With the coffeepot in one hand, Millicent plopped two stoneware cups on the table before bracing her hand on her hip. "Let me guess. From the tension between you two, I'd say you're both discussing that Dickinson woman and women's rights."

"How'd you guess?" Cougar groaned.

"Just take a look around." Millicent jerked her head in the direction of the other diners. "You can tell who's discussing what by the expressions on their faces. Any woman who looks ready to spit nails accompanied by a man who looks like he'd rather be at his own funeral, are chewing the same fat."

"Are all the men being as impossible as Cougar?" Mara asked resentfully.

"That depends on who you're talking about." Millicent supplied as she poured coffee into their cups. "A lot of them are spouting the Bible about how Eve gave Adam the apple and therefore all sin and suffering are a woman's fault. Father McAlester started that one by claiming women are a man's unworthier half, and only through a life of hard work and blind obedience can she make up for it."

"That's a crock." Cougar bit off.

"Amen to that," Millicent agreed. "Still, the less intelligent ones are all for it." She tapped her temple with her forefinger. "They know they don't have enough up here to win an argument with a woman, so they fall back on something they feel can't be disputed."

"It figures," Mara muttered, damning Cougar with a glance.

Cougar held up his hands defensively. "I have not once brought up the Bible in an effort to keep you in line, so don't go flashing those looks at me." He toyed with his coffee cup as he admitted cautiously. "Since I never had cause to concern myself with the subject in the past, I'm still forming an opinion."

"There isn't one to form," Mara contested hotly. "There is only one side to this issue. The correct one. If a black man is to have the right to vote, the right to own property, then there is no longer any argument for a man to deny his wife the same privilege."

Millicent nodded her bright red head slowly. "She's got a point there."

Cougar glared at her. "Who appointed you referee?"

Millicent grinned cheekily, snagging a creamer and sugar from an adjacent table and shooting them over to Mara. "It's my establishment."

Cougar grunted. Mara watched as an older man argued heatedly with one several years his junior. "What are those two arguing about?"

"The same thing."

Mara's face showed her surprise. "Which one's for Suffrage?"

"Old Man Clemence to be sure," Millicent said, pulling over a chair and flopping into it. Her voice lowered conspiratorially. "Old Man Clemence had himself ten

daughters. All ten are decent, hard working women, with horrible taste in men. That one sitting with Old Man Clemence is Harold Beacham. He's the youngest girl's choice for husband."

Mara observed the young man in his early twenties with his even features, his white blond hair and his shockingly vivid blue eyes. She could well see how he'd turn a girl's head. "He's very handsome."

"And that's all he is," Cougar sneered, wondering if his wife found the twerp's flash attractive.

"Exactly," Millicent snapped, shooting Cougar an annoyed glance. "Clemence can't stand the man anymore than he likes his other nine son-in-laws. To a man, they're a lazy, shiftless lot. On the other hand, he adores his girls. Since he had that spell last year, he's been giving serious consideration to what would happen to his family when he passes on. As the law stands now, when he dies, the men get everything he's worked his life for, and his girls will wind up with nothing. For as sure as God made little green apples, that bunch will fritter the girls' inheritance away and then be on their way."

"And that explains why Harold is so opposed to suffrage," Cougar finished.

"What are some of the other arguments?" Mara asked.

"There are some," Cougar ventured, wrapping his hands around his warm cup. "That feel giving the woman the vote will attract people and industry to the area. Right now, Wyoming is just a strip of land people cross in order to get to the other side. We thought the railroad would bring people in, but we're having to rethink that because people are still just passing through."

"Isn't that the truth," Millicent sighed. "Since they completed the Transcontinental Railroad last May, this town's lost half its inhabitants."

"What happened to them?" Mara asked.

"They moved on with the railroad," Cougar answered shortly. "They came to build it, and now that the job is done, they've left the great American Desert behind them."

"And good riddance to most of them," Millicent spat. "They called that influx of bad seed the 'Hell on Wheels' for a reason."

"Yeah," Cougar agreed, remembering the cesspool of whores, gamblers, and drunks Cheyenne had been.

Something Cougar said clicked in Mara's active brain. "You said we before." She caught his large hand in both of her small ones. "Are you a member of the legislative council?" she asked, full of hope.

Cougar sighed, knowing what she was going to say. "Me and eight others."

"Then you can convince them," she crowed happily. "When you all get together, you can convince them of the importance of this issue."

"Mara," Cougar began, turning his hand over in hers to gently clasp her fingers. "Your faith is flattering, but some of these men believe just as passionately that this movement should not proceed."

"That's ridiculous!" Mara sputtered. "What possible reason can they have to think that way?"

"I'll grant you," Cougar said, striving for patience, "that the distinctions between men and women are less defined here in the West where you depend on each other for your very survival, but there are some men that plain enjoy the knowledge that they are kings in their homes, and those men are not going to want their apple carts upset."

Before pouring herself a cup of coffee, Millicent yelled at the other patrons to help themselves to dessert and coffee. She was officially taking a break.

"It's my opinion," Millicent said around her mug. "That most of these men are just afraid."

"Of what, for goodness sakes!" Mara asked, despairing of ever reaching the bottom of this argument.

"Afraid of losing their sweet little wives."

"That's ridiculous," Cougar cut in. "Giving women the right to vote and own property wouldn't make it any easier for a woman to divorce a man."

"No," Millicent agreed in her bedroom voice. "But it would force a man to sit up and take notice of her. He wouldn't be able to dismiss her opinion, because it would matter. He wouldn't have absolute control over his wife and daughters. Sooner or later, they would challenge his opinion. Or worse yet, make him back his opinion with fact."

"In short," Mara realized in a hushed voice, "this would be only a beginning. When women got used to voting, they'd start attending rallies..."

"And you can bet those rallies wouldn't be held in a saloon while the hopeful official bought votes with beer," Millicent put in dryly.

"And once women realized their power..."

"They'd start putting it to use," Cougar finished. "Hell! No wonder those men are scared!"

Mara kicked her husband under the table. "With less drinking and more thinking, this world would be a better place."

"Don't tell me you are going to join the Temperance League, too?" Cougar asked, true horror darkening his golden eyes.

"Of course she's not going to do anything so stupid," Millicent—who enjoyed a good bottle of booze as much as her late husband had—jumped right in to reassure him.

Mara shot her a dirty look. "I haven't decided yet," she corrected in exasperation.

"Great," Cougar groaned. "That's just what you said before you became an ardent Suffragist."

"With cause!" Mara retorted.

"With cause," Cougar agreed tiredly. "But on the whole, I think we would have spent a much better day if you'd just kidnapped me like I'd suggested."

Millicent spotted one of her customers helping himself to some of her pumpkin pie, and jumped to her feet. "Hey you! I said to help yourself to some dessert, not to the entire thing." With a hurried "excuse me", Millicent was back at the helm of her establishment.

Mara shook her head at the woman's volatility. "She's as unique as her establishment."

"I'm fond of her," Cougar said, helping himself to some more coffee. When he offered more to Mara, she held her hand over the cup. "You have no appreciation for good coffee."

"It's my only flaw."

Cougar choked on the first mouthful. He stared at his wife for a good two minutes. She remained as solemn as a judge. "Because I've had enough arguing for one day," he stated magnanimously, "I'm going to let that bold-faced lie pass unchallenged."

Mara snorted and poked at the piece of pie Millicent had set before her on her way to serve another customer.

"Tell me something." Her eyes met Cougar's across the table. "If you really hadn't thought much about Suffragettes, why were you so disgusted when you found out why I wanted to come here?"

Cougar took a healthy bite of his own spicy pie. He chewed it slowly before swallowing and answering. "First off, because I really didn't want to argue with you."

"And secondly?" Mara prodded.

Cougar sighed at her persistence. "Secondly, because the few times I had heard of these women speakers, I was told they were mannish to the point of impersonation, and that they believed in free love and were generally rude, crude and obnoxious."

"And now that you've actually heard one speak?"

"I found the woman extremely intelligent, committed to her point of view, and not the least bit inclined to strip down for an all-day orgy."

She knew she was going to regret this, but Mara couldn't let it slide. "What precisely is an orgy?"

"Something you'll never get to experience."

Mara slanted Cougar a warning look. "I'll be the judge of that."

Cougar merely looked amused. "An orgy, my curious wife, is when a bunch of men and women get together for the sole purpose of rutting."

"At the same time?" she whispered, scandalized.

"Definitely at the same time," Cougar replied, humor brimming over in his eyes to spill into his voice. "And, in answer to that question hovering on the tip of your tongue: no. I've never participated in one."

"Well, I should hope not!"

Cougar tossed some coins on the table and pulled back Mara's chair. Her mind still turning over the concept of an orgy, Mara followed him meekly out the door.

"All those people naked together," she whispered as she stepped into the warm sunshine. "How unsanitary!"

Chapter Twenty-Three

It should have been easy from there on out, but it wasn't. Somehow, while that day in town had brought Cougar and Mara closer, it also gave birth to dissatisfaction. A nagging discontent that drove Mara mad with the need to test the limits of Cougar's control.

It was as if the day in town has shifted her knowledge of who she was and what she could do. She was filled with a restless energy to test what she now knew about herself. Unfortunately, Cougar was still determined to keep her wrapped in cotton wool.

Hence, the resumption of the argument they'd been having for the last three mornings since she'd heard Anna Dickinson speak.

"What do you mean, no?" Mara asked, dropping onto the bed, openly ogling the play of muscle on his body as he stood naked before the mirror shaving.

"Just what it sounded like," Cougar replied, lifting his chin to run the straight razor down his throat. Dipping the razor in the bowl of water on the commode, he rinsed off the soap.

Mara grabbed a hold of the canopy post and met Cougar's gaze in the mirror. "You're being ridiculous, high-handed and unreasonable."

The razor halted its downward path. "It is not my fault you woke up this morning with a bee in your bonnet about nothing."

"Nothing?" Mara growled, one knee coming up to rest on the bed. "You call my rights as a human being nothing?"

"This has nothing to do with rights," Cougar countered, wiping the last of the shaving foam off his face. "It does have everything to do with you attempting to become boss of this outfit."

"That's a lot of bull and you know it."

"Is it?"

"Damned straight it is."

"You looking for punishment?" he asked, reminding her he'd laid down the law about swearing.

She squeezed her thighs together and resisted the urge to melt. "You make up these rules just so you have a reason to punish me."

"And you break them for the same reason."

He had her there, but today was not one of those days.

"I'm not going to let you weasel out of this discussion so easily."

"We're not having a discussion," Cougar said with a condescending patience that set Mara's teeth on edge. "Because there's nothing to discuss."

"We are most certainly going to discuss why you refuse to sign part of this property over to me."

Cougar set the towel on the washstand. "First off, it would just be on paper and not proof of anything. It probably wouldn't even be legal."

Mara shrugged unconcernedly. "Let's pretend that it is." She really didn't care whether this transaction was legal or not. It was the principle of the thing.

"That's the most ridiculous thing that I've ever heard." Cougar turned to face her. "What would be the point of this whole charade if it wasn't even legal?"

"It would prove to me that you respect me as well as love me."

Cougar blinked twice before reaching for his blue shirt off the bed. "I never told you I love you."

Mara brushed his argument aside. "You love me so much you can't see straight."

He slid his arm into the sleeve. "I do?"

"You do, but I'm not sure you respect me."

He put his arm in the other sleeve. "You aren't?"

"No. And that's a problem."

"It is?"

"Yes," Mara tossed her hair over her shoulder. "For a man who loves me, you're proving remarkably reluctant to grant me my rights."

"For a woman who loves me," Cougar countered, a hard edge sharpening his drawl. "You are proving remarkably reluctant to trust me."

"What makes you think I love you?"

"Probably the same thing that tells you I love you." He shoved the button through the buttonhole on his shirt. It came off in his hand. "Gut instinct."

As romantic moments, this one was not going down in the annals of history. "Of course I trust you," she dismissed that absurdity with a wave of her hand. "I wouldn't be here in your bedroom if I didn't."

"You don't trust me to protect you," Cougar corrected, tossing the button into the corner of the room and reaching for his work pants.

"Maybe I don't want to be protected," Mara pointed out carefully as she retrieved the button. As she came back toward Cougar, she met his gaze squarely. "Maybe I'd like to run my own life."

Cougar stepped into his pants, ignoring the button his wife held outstretched. "We're husband and wife," he snapped. "There is no 'own life' between you and I."

Mara dropped the button into her pocket and took a deep breath and came in from another side of the same argument. "When we were speaking of the Clemence girls, you were all for them having their property separate."

Cougar ran his hand through his hair. "That's because their husbands are the biggest bunch of no-accounts ever to hit the territory."

Mara threw up her hands. "Why can't you grant the same rights to me?"

"Because you are in no danger from me," Cougar growled. "Because I'll always protect you. I would never take from you."

"You already have," Mara cried, taking a step closer, her hands clenched at her side. "Just by marrying me, you've taken everything I have."

"I haven't taken a damned thing from you," Cougar snapped. "I don't even know why we're having this discussion. I've given you everything I have."

"No, you haven't," Mara countered, regaining control. "I live here on your whim. If you decided to throw me out, I'd have nowhere to go."

Cougar grabbed Mara's arm. "I'll never let you go."

"And legally, I never could go, just by your saying that."

Cougar dropped Mara's arm as if the touch scalded his fingers. "You know I'd never hurt you."

"You're hurting me now."

Cougar's eyes widened at the accusation.

"You're denying me a separate existence," Mara continued.

"You're my wife!"

"It doesn't have to go hand in hand that wife means slave."

Cougar's head snapped back so fast, she might have slapped him. "I have never treated you with anything less than respect."

"Don't you understand, as it is now, I might as well be a slave? Just the fact that I have to stand here begging, begging you to grant me what should automatically be mine, proves it."

"And just what would you do with your property if I gave it to you?"

Mara felt hope blossom. "I'd just keep it and cherish the knowledge that you thought enough of me to respect me."

"Well, Angel," Cougar replied, flicking the tip of her nose with the tip of his finger as he headed for the door. "You're just going to have to trust in this man you love, because I'm not drawing up any such document."

And just like that, he left the room.

A cock crowed the spreading dawn. The first tendrils of morning light touched Mara's feet as she watched her husband walk out of their bedroom. Mara's foot began to tap rapidly on the wooden floor. Apparently, Cougar didn't realize the depth of her determination. Her husband was a good man. Stubborn, opinionated, yes, but he was a good man. With the right arguments, she was sure she could convince him to her point of view. She just had to work on her technique.

Mara pulled out all the stops over the next week, trying to get her husband to see her point of view. She'd seduced him, cried on him, ranted at him, and finally retreated into a separate bedroom. The first had been hampered by Jackson's sister Lorie's arrival, but none of it worked. Her husband met every maneuver with cold silence and a pointed avoidance of the subject.

Except for the separate bedrooms, Mara remembered, pulling her chemise away from her chafed breasts as she stuffed another of her new dresses into a trunk. He'd been quite diligent about pointing out her error there. Punishing her until she'd screamed for satisfaction, granting it only when he'd been good and ready. The pretty blonde's blushes after that first morning had been hard to endure.

"So you're really going to do it?" Lorie asked.

Mara turned to see Lorie in the doorway, a concerned frown on her face.

Mara shrugged. "I don't seem to have much choice."

Lorie bit her lip before blurting out, "I think he's afraid you'll leave him if he gives you what you want."

"I finally realized that yesterday," Mara admitted. "But that just makes me more determined to do this."

"I don't understand you."

Mara's smile tinged lightly with bitterness. "That's just what Cougar said. Why can't anyone understand that I want to be seen as a human being that counts?"

"You count with Cougar. That man loves you so much that he'd die for you."

"But," Mara pointed out, "he doesn't respect me, otherwise, he'd never have ordered Jackson to watch to make sure I don't leave the ranch."

Lorie bit her lip. "You figured that out?"

Mara laughed as she fished through the drawer for her stockings. "It didn't take a genius. Jackson has been trailing me around with that hangdog look plastered to his face for three days now."

"He's not real happy with his present duties," Lorie admitted.

"I am," Mara stated surprisingly, snapping the lid closed on her trunk. "Grab the other end of this. Every time I hear him behind me, it just reinforces my convictions. If I want to leave, no one, but no one should have the court-given right to restrain me. Least of all the man who claims to love me."

"I know you're right about that," Lorie agreed, grunting as they maneuvered the heavy trunk out into the upstairs hall. "But I still wish you and Cougar could come to an understanding."

"I'm working on it," Mara muttered as they half slid, half lifted the trunk down the stairs.

"How are you intending to get to town?"

"By wagon."

Lorie folded her hands in her skirt. "You realize Cougar left orders that you were not to be allowed to leave?"

Mara smiled complacently as she tugged on her gloves. "I also know he'd tear into little pieces the first man to lay a hand on me."

The humor of the situation began to strike Lorie. "So you intend..."

"To walk out there and hitch up the team."

"And calmly drive them out of here," the blonde-haired girl finished on a laugh. "And by the time they finish drawing lots as to who's going to have the misfortune of telling Cougar that his wife's flown the coop—"

"I should be safely in town, tucked under Millicent's militant wing."

Lorie's brows rose. "That's your strategy, huh?"

"Got a better one?"

"Nope." Lorie shook her head, her curls swaying around her heart-shaped face. "With Millicent to run interference for you, by the time Cougar gets to see you, he'll be well primed to listen."

"And damned grateful, I hope."

Lorie sat down on the trunk, laughter shaking her sides. "I imagine that you could screech at him by then, and he'd regard it as music to his ears."

"Millicent can be a bit harsh," Mara agreed.

"To put it mildly, and since this is a Suffragette issue, all three hundred pounds of her will be squarely on your side."

"I'm counting on it."

"Do me one more favor?" Mara asked.

"What?"

"Mention to Cougar I'm having dinner with the Reverend Swanson."

* * * * *

"Where did he go?" Mara asked Millicent who came upstairs immediately after slamming the door in Cougar's face.

"Where all men go when faced with a problem," Millicent muttered, dropping the curtain back over the window.

Mara dropped onto the bed, all her excitement and apprehension exiting her body in a rush of disappointment. "The saloon."

"Yup," Millicent agreed before issuing one of her patented snorts that meant a thousand and one things depending on the inflection. "And by the look of it, he's mad enough to spend the night wallowing in a bottle."

"Well, hell." Mara glanced down at the scuffed tip of her shoe. "You'd think after three days, he'd be lonely enough to try a little harder."

"Like you are." Millicent patted the lace curtain back over the window.

"Like me."

"Do you intend to sit around here like a goose fit for stuffing, letting him call the shots, or do you intend to keep control?"

Mara pushed a stubborn lock of hair back into her braid. "Well, I can't quite see marching into the saloon and demanding he talk to me. Besides ruining my reputation, I'm sure it would ruin my stand."

"It would that," Millicent agreed. "Our best strategy would be to get his ornery carcass out of that all male domain."

Mara perked up. When she'd chosen Millicent as her accomplice, she had no idea the woman could be so ingenious. "What do you have in mind?"

"Who says I've got anything in mind?"

"You had that same expression on your face yesterday when you sent Lorie with that note about bringing Brad into the picture."

"Someone has to do the long-term planning." She twitched the curtains aside for another peek. "Those four no-accounts who hang around outside the saloon have gone in after your husband. No doubt hoping for a free beer in return for their sympathy."

"I'm surprised the saloon hasn't fallen down without their support," Mara commented dryly.

Millicent laughed out loud at that. "It is a wonder. Now, in regard to your husband, don't you think what worked once might work again?"

Mara stared at Millicent's broad back until understanding dawned. As she gathered her hat and gloves off the dresser, she said, "You have a devious mind, Millicent."

"Thank you. Now, I think it's time you hunted up the Reverend and get knee-deep in a discussion about the weather," Millicent directed, still looking out the window.

"I think I can do better than the weather." Mara gave Millicent a hug from behind. "Thanks for being on my side."

"There's no side to it. Merely right or wrong."

Millicent kept her eyes locked on the motionless scene of the town as it blurred. "Go stir a hornet's nest under your husband before he takes root in that saloon. Lord knows, there's no talking to a drunken man."

Mara snapped off a salute. "I'll do you proud, captain."

"See that you do."

* * * * *

Homer came bursting into the saloon like someone had just set his tail on fire. Two chairs tumbled to the floor in his wake. It was obvious, before he'd even crossed half the distance to the far corner, that Cougar was his destination. His eyes wide and wild behind an untidy shock of hair stayed unwaveringly on his quarry. Which was why he never saw the table loaded with poker chips and money until he fell over it. Through the curses and pandemonium that erupted, his shout could be heard. In a voice loud enough to wake the dead, he shouted, "McKinnely, your wife's bedding the Reverend!"

The noise fell off in the saloon until there was nothing but the sound of fifteen men breathing in anticipation of his response. Only a quarter of the way through his whiskey bottle, Cougar rose from his chair with a slow growl. He kept his tone purely conversational as he asked, "Would you like to rethink your comments about my wife before I unscrew that worthless head from your shoulders?"

Homer had never been blessed with an overabundance of brains. He had however, firmly grasped the virtue of honesty. Folks said it was a blessing that he had managed to grasp something. "God's honest truth, Cougar," he whined, rising from the broken bits of wood that had once supported a heavy game. "I think she's done gone and embraced that free love business them suffragists are always talking about."

"You've never heard a suffragist speak in your life," Brian scoffed.

"Maybe not." Homer winced as he plucked a sliver from his thigh, "but you told me all about them women and as how Cougar's wife was following in their footsteps."

"Shut up, you ass," Brian hissed as Cougar cocked an eyebrow at him. "I never said Mrs. McKinnely was spreading any free love around," he swore in a voice loud enough to carry. Grabbing his dimwitted friend by the collar, he tried to drag him out the door to safety. They almost made it.

"Just what gave you the idea my wife was interested in the Reverend?" Cougar asked.

Brian stopped as if his feet were frozen to the floor.

Homer yanked free of his friend's grip. He made a big to-do of straightening his clothing. "Well, everyone in town knows the Reverend is sweet on Mrs. McKinnely. He went and bought her all new clothes right down to the..." his reedy voice dropped to a mere whisper, "undergarments."

Cougar dragged his hand down his face and struggled to hold onto his temper. Homer was a damned idiot, and he babbled like a fool. Mara was going to have to love him long and hard to make up to him for having to stand in a room full of men and listen to this drivel. He was somewhat cheered by the prospect.

Homer glanced around, satisfied that everyone was properly scandalized before continuing. "Well, it seems Mrs. McKinnely returns the sentiment."

"Careful, Homer," Brian muttered through the side of his mouth.

"Hush up, Brian," Homer retorted. "Cougar is right grateful that I was witness to these goings on."

"Well, stop blathering like an idiot, man, and get on with the telling." A recently arrived gambler urged lasciviously. "What did the Reverend and the pleasingly anxious Mrs. McKinnely do?"

Glad for the opportunity, Cougar casually reached over, grabbed the man by the back of his well-oiled head, and slammed his face into the table. In the same conversational tone as before, he nudged, "Yes, Homer, what did my wife do?"

Homer might not be a genius, but he did boast some basic survival instincts. Cougar noted when it dawned on him by the widening of his eyes that he was defaming a man's wife in a saloon full of attentive men. He also noted the moment the urge to be the center of attention took off with his good sense as he squared his shoulders and his stance assumed the importance befitting his role of town crier. Hell, Cougar thought, he hoped he wasn't going to have to kill the son of a bitch.

"I started watching Mrs. McKinnely because she was acting strange," Homer began. "She was strolling up and down the street, peeking into every store."

Brian held up his hands in defeat. "I'm out of here."

Homer gave his friend's flying retreat one pitying glance before he continued, his reedy voice booming with importance. "Suddenly, she spies the Reverend. Her whole face lights up like a bonfire and she trips right into his arms! As God is my witness!" He swore, reaching for the heavens with an upraised palm as if calling down divine truth. "They embraced right there in front of the livery."

The room was suddenly full of uneasy mutterings.

One of the men, a small-time rancher, eyed Cougar uneasily. "What do you think, Cougar? I know Homer's an idiot, but he sounds pretty...sure."

"I think," Cougar stated conversationally, knowing from the way Homer twitched that he wasn't through. "That Homer ought to finish up what he was saying about my wife."

Homer's thin chest puffed out about three times its normal size. He didn't appear to give any notice to the men fleeing his vicinity. He pulled his pants up with a flourish and resumed his telling. "Next thing you know, the Reverend's scooping that pretty Mrs. McKinnely up in his arms and heading right on down to Millicent's. Bold as brass, Mrs. McKinnely's laughing in the man's arms. It's a wonder God didn't strike the two of them down as they went right on up the stairs to her room! Twenty minutes later," he continued, his voice hushed, his manner intimate, "the Reverend comes out the door...adjusting his pants!"

"That did it," one man noted.

And in the time Homer looked around to see who did what, Cougar had him by the shirtfront. "Next time you feel the need to discuss my wife, Homer, make sure it's with the proper respect."

With one blow from his fist, Cougar laid the man out flat. He hadn't hit him as hard as he should have, but after all, Homer was a fool. "Anyone else have anything to say

about my wife?" The rest of the men in the saloon weren't operating a few straws short of a bale and he could unleash a bit of frustration on them without guilt.

"Hell no." They chimed as one.

The barkeep tossed a bucket of cold water on Homer who lay so still in the aftermath, everyone knew he was faking. "I suspect that when Homer wakes up, he'll be full of remorse for his lies."

Cougar eyed every man in the saloon coldly. "See that he is."

The trip from the saloon over to Millicent's was two minutes long. Two minutes during which Cougar went from disbelief to belief and back again. Two minutes during which he reviewed every reason why he should wring his wife's neck. At the very least, give her a beating, but somehow he couldn't get past the knowledge that making love to her would be infinitely more pleasurable.

And, he decided, if he didn't put his hand over her mouth to muffle her screams, by morning the whole damned town would be under no illusion as to whom Mara McKinnely belonged.

That smile lasted all the way up the stairs in Millicent's conveniently deserted establishment. It lasted as he kicked open the one spare room Millicent kept especially for her women boarders. It grew broader as his little wife, clad only in a chemise, dropped her hairbrush and stared at him in panic.

"Are you aware that the whole town is talking about how you just screwed the pants off Reverend Swanson?"

Chapter Twenty-Four

Mara paused, halfway bent over to retrieve her brush from the floor where she'd dropped it. She could only gape at Cougar as he casually shut the door behind him.

"I did what?"

Cougar leaned against the doorjamb as his fingers began to toy with the buttons of his shirt. "According to Homer, you lured the Reverend up here to your room and in a scant fifteen minutes, balled his eyes out." As Mara's mouth opened and closed with the grace of a landed trout, Cougar tacked on helpfully. "Apparently, he left here a satisfied man, because he was last seen adjusting his pants with a big grin plastered across his face."

"I didn't. He couldn't. We didn't," Mara stumbled to a halt, shocked by the enormity of her plan's backfire.

Cougar pushed himself away from the wall, buttons parting as he strolled over to where Mara sat, dead white, frozen like a statue. "Oh, I don't believe a word of it." He assured her arrogantly. His shirt fell open to his sides. Placing his hand under her arm, he straightened Mara gently. "This delightful body responds to my touch and mine alone, but," he tacked on as the wariness left Mara's face to be replaced with the light of battle, "you owe me for having to sit in the midst of a couple of dozen panting men while Homer spilled his tale."

"A couple of dozen," Mara echoed, noticing for the first time that her husband was undressing.

"Easily," Cougar replied, his tone still casual. Reaching out his hand, he pulled Mara to her feet. Turning her around so she faced the mirror, he slid his big hands under the bodice of her chemise. With one smooth motion, he rent the garment into two useless pieces. Mara met his gaze in the mirror and realized he was furious.

"You said you didn't believe it."

Cougar slid his arms around her torso as he scooped her breasts into his hands. He rolled the nipples between his fingers as a reward for their prompt response to his touch. "I don't."

He held her gaze in the mirror. "But that doesn't mean every lusting man in that damned saloon didn't swallow every lurid detail."

Mara swallowed hard. "Lurid?" she groaned, her body softening into Cougar's despite her wariness. She could feel his arousal pressing into her back. Try as she might, she couldn't keep her eyes off their joint reflection in the vanity mirror. He rose above her, a deeply tanned pagan. Her breasts appeared and disappeared from behind his caressing hands. Her knees gave out.

"Definitely lurid," Cougar replied, bending forward until Mara was forced to brace her hands on the vanity. He traced the line of her spine with his finger. "Very nice," he approved when a trail of goose bumps sprang up.

"No," he ordered as Mara would have straightened. "Stay right there and watch."

"You said you believed me," Mara pointed out weakly as she saw through the mirror how Cougar made short work of freeing his manhood. It sprang hungrily into the twilight of the room. The unbuttoned fly of his denim pants bracketed its hard length as he cupped the shaft in his hand, pumping its length with firm strokes, making it grow harder. Thicker. Her pulse doubled its rate. Her pussy flooded with moisture.

Cougar tore her pantalets in two. "I do, but you also owe me for three sleepless, frustrating nights."

His hands settled on her hips. His cock pressed against her pussy, settling into the little valley, feeling impossibly huge and hard. A shudder shook her from head to toe as she realized he wasn't even going to undress. In the mirror, his expression was rigid.

"I'm glad you're nice and wet, Mrs. McKinnely," Cougar drawled, his voice slightly hoarse, but still conversational. "Because we're going to do things a little differently tonight. All the way. All at once."

Mara closed her eyes against the flood of heat that surged over her.

"Open your eyes," Cougar snapped. Mara immediately complied. In the mirror, she watched as the muscles in Cougar's shoulders bunched. She felt his hands clench on her hips, and then she saw him throw his weight forward. With one primal plunge, he embedded his huge shaft to the hilt.

Her breath caught in her throat as his cock drove into her tight passage, relentlessly forcing past her resistance until she couldn't take anymore. She struggled to adjust to his presence. His hand came down hard on her ass, once, twice before he asked, "Who do you belong to?"

The combination of biting pain and searing possession had her sobbing in frustration. He worked his hips from side to side, his fingers digging into the flesh he'd so recently spanked as he pulled all the way out.

"Who do you belong to?"

She bit her lip against the need to answer. All her muscles pulled tight as she resisted the need to give in. Her vagina clenched on the broad head of his penis as he pressed against her. He slapped her buttock again as his cock pushed against her. For all that he was threatening her, she knew he wouldn't actually risk hurting her. Her suspicions were confirmed as he ordered her to relax.

"No."

In the mirror, his golden eyes narrowed. His left brow went up. "No?"

"I'm not a puppet, Cougar."

She didn't know where she found the strength for the words. Especially since her body was starved for his possession.

He braced one hand on the vanity. "No?"

The other came around to the front of her hips, slid over her hipbone and followed the crease until it found her engorged clit.

He cradled the swollen nub between his fingers, milking it in slow, short strokes. "I think yes."

Her sob was unpreventable. So was the shudder that took her and the softening of her pussy against his cock. He thrust deep and she screamed, unable to endure the intensity of the sensation driving up from her groin. He worked his big cock out of her pussy, only to drive it back in twice as hard the next time. All the while, he milked her clit, squeezing and releasing, sometimes hard, sometimes light, but never in a manner she could predict.

"Who do you belong to?" he asked as his cock hovered just outside her greedy channel. Promising everything but delivering nothing.

Her fingernails cracked against the smooth wood of the vanity. "Myself."

"Wrong answer."

Cougar yanked her onto his shaft and then ground himself deeper. He had always taken her by slow increments before, but now, he was showing no mercy. It was both too much and not enough. She breathed a sigh of relief when he yanked out, only to scream when he immediately pounded back in. The vanity crashed rhythmically against the wall. He was battering her insides, wrenching a lusty response from her woman's flesh. She couldn't engulf enough of him fast enough. With a suddenness that had her crying out a protest, Cougar stopped. He was deep inside her. His hands gripped her hips with bruising force as his balls swung against her labia.

"Who do you belong to?"

"Myself," Mara managed, gasping for air, tears on her cheeks, compelled to defy him to the end despite the fact that she was straining back with every fiber of her being to accommodate every fraction of his length.

Cougar's response was a step backward. Mara closed her eyes and felt every swollen inch as it dragged free of her clinging flesh. She was, she realized, on the verge of a climax. And, she noted, opening her eyes and meeting Cougar's in the mirror, her husband knew it. She bit her lip to keep from weeping out loud.

Cougar held her wild-eyed stare in the mirror. "Who do you belong to?"

She wanted him. Oh God, how she wanted him. She was nearly mindless with it, but Mara still maintained a thread of control. "Myself," she gasped weakly, half hoping he wouldn't hear.

But he did. "A pity."

Keeping his grip on her pussy, he knelt behind her.

"What are you doing?" Mara looked behind her, trying to see his face.

Cougar stroked the quivering mounds of her buttocks, dipped his fingers in the juices lying thick on her flesh and spread them to her anus.

"This," he replied as he touched his tongue to her sensation-charged flesh.

A high, keening cry tore from Mara's throat. Very delicately, Cougar fluttered his tongue over her moist flesh, tracing the tight opening to her ass before stabbing within. He withdrew as Mara's hips pushed back, seeking more. "Think how nice it would feel if I just played here for a while. I'd enter just a little. You'd be so tight around me, you'd burn me alive."

Mara's blood thundered in her ears as he rimmed her with his tongue again. He gathered more of her juices, spreading them over the sensitive opening before lapping them off. All her being focused on the lash of that hot tongue on her vulnerable flesh. And then there was nothing. As before, on the brink of completion, Cougar left her hanging.

"Damn you," Mara hissed. She actually hated him at that moment.

His knees between Mara's feet kept her from closing her legs. Very gently, Cougar traced the crease in her buttocks. "You are one stubborn woman, Mrs. McKinnely," he said hoarsely, teasing her tender rosette with one big finger before sliding it in. "But I love you in spite of it." He took some hand lotion off the vanity and greased his cock, spreading it to her ass. He slid in another finger and then because she begged, another. "Now, who do you belong to?"

"You, dammit," Mara sobbed, her control broken as he removed his hand.

He brought his cock to her ass, watching as it pushed against the tiny hole, pressed, stretched and finally entered. As he surged inside the dark channel, Mara exploded around him, her ass squeezing him tightly as she screamed, "I belong to Cougar McKinnely!"

Cougar clutched Mara's hips as they lurched with the splendor of her release, loving the way she cried his name. Her internal muscles dragged at him, milking him but he grit his teeth against the temptation. He planned on his stubborn, passionate woman coming quite a few more times before this night was over. By morning, he never expected to have to worry about that too handsome Reverend again.

He waited until she gathered herself, holding himself still inside her, poised between heaven and hell as the heat of her channel both soothed and beckoned. After a few minutes, she stirred, her head lifting from her arms, her body struggling to flex around his hard shaft.

"Cougar?" she asked timidly, no doubt remembering his threat of a beating.

"Too much?" Cougar asked hoarsely, stroking her back.

"You're so deep, I can taste you."

"Jesus." Cougar groaned, his head dropping to the delicate arc of her spine. Against his will, his hips ground into hers before pulling back.

Mara's grip on the vanity tightened as he jerked against her, pushing his cock deeper into her overstretched channel.

"Sorry, Angel," Cougar groaned, kissing the nape of her neck. "But if you want me to maintain control, you're going to have to watch what you say."

Mara bit her lower lip. "Are you still mad at me?"

Cougar paused and assessed his emotions. Nestled securely in his wife's warmth, he found it difficult to hold onto his animosity. He planted a kiss dead center of Mara's spine. "No."

Skimming his hands down Mara's legs, he lifted first one foot and then the other free of the remnants of her pantalets. Retracing his path, Cougar slid his hands around Mara's ribs until they cupped her small breasts. "Push back with your hips. Take a little more."

"I don't know if I can."

"Just try. That's all. Just a little more." Her flesh gave and he slid a little deeper, the entrance straining over the thickness of his cock. "See how easy that was?"

She had almost all his cock up her tight ass. He could feel the shivers snaking down her spine as he held himself still inside her.

He pinched her clit once, twice. On the second one, she bucked back against him. Whimpered as the wider base of his cock stretched her further.

"I can't think when you do that," she moaned.

"Good. I just want you feeling. You're going to take all of me tonight."

He felt her straining muscles try to clamp down on his cock. "I don't know if I can." She tossed her head, sending her hair flying across her back in a red cloud of silk. "It hurts."

"I can help with that." He nuzzled the hair aside so he could set his teeth to the taut cord joining Mara's neck to her shoulder. Immediately, her back arched into his stomach and a shiver shook her from head to toe. His cock worked a bit deeper. Cougar soothed the sting of his teeth with his tongue. She tilted her head to facilitate his caress.

"That's so good," Mara moaned, pushing back.

Cougar stifled a moan of his own as her tight flesh dragged against his cock, tugging and pulling at the nerve endings. He would never get enough of this. Of her laughter. Of her temper. Of her. Period. Very slowly, he withdrew. The cool air was a shock to his desire after the fire of her possession.

He spanned the width of her buttocks with his hands, outlined the quivering flesh with his fingertips and then massaged the plump cheeks until they glowed a rosy pink, all the while pushing back into her body. Mara sucked in a breath as he did, pressing her back into his chest. Her flesh was damp with sweat. The scent of arousal rose thick in the air around them. His. Hers. There was no separating the two.

He worked his cock deeper, kissing her spine when he felt her begin to tense. "Steady."

He could feel her struggle to relax. To take him. He opened his hand and started smacking her labia the way she liked. Slowly at first, and then with greater frequency as

she began to jerk against him, her breath coming in pants. So much cream poured from her pussy, his hand made wet, slapping sounds as it connected with her soft flesh.

"Come for me, Angel," he whispered into her ear, inching the soft blows along her cleft until they were making contact with that most sensitive of areas. As she arched against him, taking that last inch, he delivered a slap directly on her clit. Her scream was a high-pitched break of sound as she convulsed beneath him. He cupped her in his hand, holding her spasming cunt as she sobbed and shook in his arms.

When she was still, her breath coming in jagged gasps, he began fucking her in earnest, pulling out before plunging back in.

"Oh God," Mara groaned.

"Cougar," he corrected, gritting his teeth against the pressure building. She pushed back, easing his way, taking all he had to give, demanding more. Not letting him hold back. Denying him his control.

"Come for me, Cougar," she whispered, arching her back, pulling him deeper. "Fill me full of your cock. Full of your seed."

"Jesus, Mara," he grunted through gritted teeth, his fingers digging into the lush curve of her hip, his hand dark against her lighter skin. "I can't hold out if you talk like that."

"I don't want you to hold out," she whispered. "I want you wild and hungry and coming."

She was going to get her wish. He was about out of his mind. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You can't hurt me by loving me," she moaned. Her muscles fluttered around his cock, her hips pushed back to meet his thrust. "Come for me, Cougar."

His control was a goner. He was a goner. He grabbed her hips and pistoned into her like a wild man, dragging her onto him. Giving no quarter.

Not that she asked him for any. She took all he had to give and demanded more. The vanity slammed against the wall as he drove into her again and again. His hips grinding into hers. His balls slapping her pussy with every downward stroke. All the while she murmured words of encouragement. Sex words. Hot words. Words that drove him crazy until, finally, he came in a burning torrent, pouring his life into her. His heart. His shout of satisfaction equaled hers in volume.

As soon as he regained his breath, he eased his chest from her back. Their damp skin parted reluctantly as if it too didn't want to break the connection.

"You okay?" he asked. She moaned and shook her head. He couldn't tell if it was a "yes" or a "no". He eased his cock from her ass, massaging the base of her spine as she winced as each inch slowly separated from her body.

"Sore?" he asked. Her nod was faint. He kissed her between the shoulder blades and stepped back. A trickle of seed worked down her thigh. Cougar walked over to the

commode and poured water into the white bowl. He brought it back to where she stood, bent over the vanity, too satiated to move. He dipped the cloth in the water and gently washed her body. Dipping the cloth into the water again, he pressed it against her ass, leaving it there when she moaned.

"Feel good?"

"Yes."

He pulled the cloth away, parted her cheeks. She was red and swollen. As he watched, another dribble of seed, his seed, escaped from the little rosebud. He replaced the cloth holding it firmly against her, telling himself he was a bastard for hardening again at the sight. "I need to be more careful with you, Angel."

"Why?" She sounded sleepy and satisfied and totally unconcerned. He kissed her shoulder.

"Because you don't know your own limits."

"Hmmm."

He refreshed the cloth, washed himself off, adjusted his pants and then pulled Mara from the vanity. She turned languidly in his arms, leaning against him, trusting him to support her. As he picked her up, she snuggled into his chest.

The trip to the bed was short. He laid her down, undressed and climbed in beside her. She turned immediately into his arms. He kissed the top of her head. "I missed you."

"I thought you were never coming."

"I'll always come for you."

As he pulled up the covers, his hand brushed her still swollen nipples. They beckoned him with a siren's lure. Very gently, he lowered his mouth to the tempting nubs. Mara moaned a protest, but he kept it easy and slow and her protest subsided to sighs. She didn't protest at all when his mouth moved lower. She just parted her thighs and gifted Cougar with the depth of her trust. He loved her gently, thoroughly, and when she was shifting against him, he slid up her body, sliding his cock into the snug channel of her pussy, working it past the tight grip of muscle, sliding inexorably deeper until she took him all. Then he rested, letting her get used to him, enjoying the sense of coming home.

"Who do you belong to, Mara?"

She reached up and touched his cheek. "I belong to you."

He caught her hand and pressed a kiss to the palm. "Yeah. You do."

He replaced her hand on his shoulder, braced himself above her and loved her slowly, tenderly, thoroughly. When she came, it was with gentle contractions, her arms wrapped lightly around his shoulders, her hips undulating lazily against his. Feeling as if he poured himself into her, he gave his essence into her keeping.

He pulled his cock free and turned her back to him, knowing she liked to sleep on her side. He curved in behind her, cupping her buttocks in the curve of his hips. He

eased his softening cock inside her as far as it would go. Needing the connection between them. He laid his hand over her belly, knowing his seed was inside, wondering if it took root. He'd like a child with her.

With a little murmur, she caught his hand to her lips, tucked it under her cheek, and went to sleep. Cougar smiled and kissed her hair. He pulled the covers over their shoulders and closed his own eyes.

She was smothering. It was a heck of a thing to wake up to, but Mara couldn't breathe, and when she tried to slip out from under the weight pressing her into the mattress, every muscle in her body cried a protest. Even her eyelids hurt, she thought as she forced them open. Creaking her neck to the left, she saw her husband's face tucked into her shoulder. He looked so relaxed in sleep. So manageable.

"Wake up, Cougar," Mara whispered when she couldn't budge him by pushing against his shoulders.

His eyes cracked sleepily in response, and then widened to golden pools of slumberous remembrance as they traveled her blushing cheeks. "Good morning yourself." He braced his weight on his elbow and dropped his lips to hers. His lips were sleep soft and tantalizing. Mara rubbed hers across the boldly masculine contours and sighed as hers parted beneath the lazy tap of his tongue, but then his hipbone pressed into her middle, and she was physically reminded of why she had awakened her lion.

"I need to get up," she whispered, separating their mouths.

"Hun-uh." Cougar shook his head, kissing the bold arch of her brows.

"Afraid so," Mara sighed, unloosing her arms from around his neck. "What's more, you're going to have to leave."

Cougar flopped back on the pillows. With the deep sigh only a completely satisfied male animal can emit, he shifted his big frame deeper into the mattress. "Not a chance."

Mara winced as she swung her legs over the edge of the bed and her well-loved body connected with the mattress. "Wrong answer." She countered as she tugged a sheet off the bed and wrapped it around her body. Every move was an effort and progress was slow.

"I need privacy," she stressed as she flipped the end of the sheet over her shoulder.

"I see I'm going to have to indulge you in this bit of modesty," Cougar grumped as he slid out of bed. Totally unconcerned about his nudity, he dropped a chastising kiss on the end of her nose.

Mara was about to make a retort about correct behavior between husband and wife the morning after when a veritable flood of wetness ran down the inside of her thighs. Paralyzed with embarrassment, she stood there, eyes wide, desperately thinking on a way to get rid of her husband so she could deal with the mess.

As if he knew about her predicament, Cougar cupped her intimately through the layers of sheet. His right brow cocked upwards as he felt the dampening material. "My seed," he stated complacently.

Mara had been sure that nothing Cougar could do would ever embarrass her again, but when he cupped her so possessively and boldly deduced her dilemma, she wished the floor would open up and swallow her.

Using the sheet, Cougar patted his wife's thighs dry before sliding his hands beneath the cotton folds and staunching the flow with his palm. There was no denying the possessive pleasure in the action. With his free hand, he wrapped his fingers in her hair and pulled until her head tilted back and her face was inches from his. "I like knowing your body is filled with my seed," he whispered, slipping a finger inside her swollen warmth to explore the luxurious wetness. "Just knowing a part of me rests in this tender belly makes me hard."

The proof of his words pushed against Mara's thigh. She shook her head. "I can't. I'm too sore and achy," she kissed his beard roughened cheek as he nibbled the taut cord of her neck.

"I know," Cougar concurred regretfully. "I can feel how swollen and hot you are."

Mara mumbled an inarticulate cry of dismay.

Another flood of wetness leaked over Cougar's hand. "Lord, woman!" He laughed softly. "It's a wonder I didn't drown you."

Mara swatted the hard masculine shoulder where she buried her flaming face. "Don't sound so pleased."

"I want to see."

"No! Positively not!"

She might as well have spoken to the wall. In the time it took for her to deny permission, Cougar was on his knees, separating the folds of the sheet. When his view was obstructed by her thighs, he pulled on her ankles until he was satisfied. Up the length of her body, he captured her gaze. "Do you know how much I love you? Right now, with the scent of our lovemaking so strong, and the evidence of last night so obvious?"

Mara shook her head.

Cougar pressed a tender kiss to the moist top of her pubic mound before getting to his feet. "Enough." His voice rumbled from deep in his chest. "To order you a bath and to grant you that privacy you want."

Mara watched in silence as Cougar pulled on his pants and buttoned his shirt. One of these days, she vowed, she was going to develop the degree of outrageousness necessary to put her husband in his place. Right now, however, she'd settle for not withering away from embarrassment before he left the room.

* * * * *

The first pain hit when Mara was soaking in the tub. One minute she was stretching luxuriously in the steamy warmth, and the next, she was doubled over with the most agonizing pain she'd ever known. As it subsided, she caught her breath, only to release it in a splintering scream as another followed the first. Somewhere in her body, there was a release and then the water in the tub began to turn red with her life's blood.

The sound of his name being released in that bone-chilling scream had Cougar out of his seat and up the stairs before he even realized that he had moved. Millicent wasn't far behind.

When he tested the door and found it locked, Millicent spurred him on. "Break it down."

The door crashed to the floor as another of Mara's cries rent the late morning peace. Cougar stared uncomprehendingly at the bloody bath where his wife huddled.

Millicent took in the scene with a glance. "She's losing the baby. Get her out of that water and onto the bed."

"The baby?" Cougar echoed.

"Yes. The baby," Millicent repeated harshly, giving him a shove as she raced for clean sheets. "And if you don't get her out of that bath, you're going to lose her, too."

"Never!" He would never let her go.

"Not there, you dolt," Millicent snapped as he went to lay her on the side of the bed. "Put her in the middle. She's bound to thrash around. We don't want her falling out of bed and complicating matters with a broken bone."

He put her down in the middle. Mara doubled over with another wrenching pain. Blood spread in a bright red pool on the white sheet beneath her. Cougar had never seen so much blood in anything other than a fatal wound. He glared at Millicent. "Do something!"

Millicent shot him a helpless glance, looked at the spreading pool of blood, put her hand on Mara's forehead and said only one thing. "Go get Doc. Now."

He did. As if the hounds of hell were after him. Mara might be losing their baby because of him, but he'd be damned if she'd die. He wouldn't let her. He wouldn't let her leave him like this.

Chapter Twenty-Five

"Land of Goshen! Are you cleaning that furniture or attacking it?"

"A little of both," Mara admitted, turning to see Pearl Washington standing in the doorway.

"Aren't you a little late, Pearl?" Millicent asked with a last swipe at the bookcase with her feather duster.

Pearl grimaced as she removed her gloves. "Hetty Kittering marched in again today, loaded down with patterns."

Millicent snorted as she tossed the feather duster into a corner. "Is she still at it?"

With great dignity, Pearl removed her hat. She handed it to Mara. "Thank you, Mara." She settled her tall, lean form onto the settee before she continued, "That woman has the persistence of a gnat!"

Millicent flopped into the cushioned rocker opposite. "And the taste of one to boot."

"Amen to that. That dress she decided on for her daughter's wedding is the most atrocious thing I've ever seen." She shuddered with restraint as she patted the seat beside her. "Come sit here, Mara. I've been thinking about your situation."

"Who hasn't been?" Mara knew she was the talk of the town.

Her impertinence earned her a frown from Pearl. "I have been thinking constructively on the situation."

"Are we on the subject of that idiotic son of mine?"

"Come on in, Dorothy. Nice to see you again, Lorie," Millicent greeted the new arrivals.

"We are most certainly discussing your son," Pearl said as Dorothy and Lorie drew up chairs.

"Well, something has to be done about it," Lorie agreed. She pulled off her gloves. "The man is a walking toothache."

"Let me take your hats and gloves."

"Thanks."

Conversation halted until Mara resumed her seat.

"I appreciate all of your concern," Mara began, "but I think it's time for all of us to realize that Cougar has no intention of coming back for me. Even the town's people aren't buying the story anymore that he left me here to recuperate." Mara bit her lip. For the first time, Mara admitted the unvarnished truth to herself with no excuses or pretty words. "He can't forgive me for losing the baby."

"Horse shit!"

"Stuff and nonsense!"

"Bull feathers!"

"They'll be making snowballs in hell before that's true."

Each exclamation reflected each woman's upbringing, from Millicent's crude denial to Dorothy's softer version. All were different, but alike in their singular dismissal of Mara's belief. Mara grit her teeth. "I admit I'd love to believe you all. You're special friends, but after three weeks without a word, it's time to admit the truth. A loving, forgiving man does not abandon his wife who's just had a miscarriage to strangers and disappear from her life."

"Sure he does," Pearl rebutted. The three older women nodded sagely.

Lorie hesitated before giving her opinion. "He gave you the deed you wanted."

Mara snorted, a habit she'd picked up from her hostess. "Nothing more than a sop to his conscience for deserting me two minutes later."

"I'm with that man on a daily basis," Lorie said. "That man loves you to hell and back."

"Then why isn't he here?" Mara whispered the question that had haunted every second of her life since Cougar's last visit.

"That," Pearl decreed royally, "is why we are all gathered here today." She looked at each woman pointedly. "There are five women seated in this room. That's more than enough to decipher the twisted thinking of one man."

"Probably wouldn't take much more than one of us, actually," Dorothy confessed in an aside to Mara.

"But then, we wouldn't have an excuse to call a meeting," Millicent whispered into her other ear.

"A meeting?" Mara echoed blankly. She looked at Lorie who just shrugged.

Pearl wagged her eyebrows. "Womb!"

Mara blinked, not sure she'd heard the dignified woman correctly.

Millicent glanced at the clock on the mantle, and frowned. "Where in Hell is that Reverend? You did tell him three o'clock, didn't you?"

Pearl pulled herself up to her full height. She glared down the length of her nose at her friend. "Is three o'clock the time we agreed upon?"

"You know it is as well as I do."

"Then three o'clock is what I told him."

"It was only a simple question," Millicent muttered while Dorothy smothered a laugh behind a cough.

"Don't get your feathers into an uproar." Pearl smoothed a crease out of her respectable gray skirt.

"The Reverend Swanson will be here directly," Dorothy assured the room in general.

"Brad is coming here?" Mara asked in dismay. The last thing in the world she wanted was for Cougar to decide she'd found someone new.

"Of course."

"Couldn't have a meeting without him."

"Perish the thought!"

Mara and Lorie exchanged bewildered glances. Lorie was the one with the fortitude to press on. "Since Mara and I are attending this meeting," she began respectfully, "do you think we could be let in on just what," she blushed as she continued, "Womb is?"

There came a sharp knock on the back door.

"That's the Reverend, I expect," Millicent said, pushing herself to her feet. "Why don't you fill these two in on our little group while I show him in?"

Pearl patted her bun in place before intoning loftily. "Women Outmaneuvering Male Bullheadedness."

Mara clapped her hands together as she understood the acronym. "W.O.M.B.!"

Lorie laughed out loud. "I like it."

"Good," Dorothy chuckled as two sets of heavy footsteps could be heard approaching. "If you like the name, I expect you're just going to love the rest."

Millicent returned with Reverend Swanson in tow.

"Ladies." Reverend Swanson tipped his hat to the gathering. In his hands, he held a bulky package wrapped in brown paper. "I take it from the message I received this morning that another meeting of W.O.M.B. is about to take place?"

"He knows?" Lorie asked as Mara squirmed uncomfortably on the settee. Pearl poked her in the ribs with her elbow.

"Darn tooting." Millicent relieved the good Reverend of his burden. "Couldn't have a meeting without him."

"Would I be correct in assuming Cougar McKinnely is the impetus of this meeting?" Brad asked.

"It's not like we lack a surplus of targets with all the men in this town," Dorothy grumped, "but right now, Cougar has done his damndest to beat the rest to the head of the list."

"I'd probably feel sorry for the man, if I didn't agree with you in this instance," Brad confessed as Millicent handed him a basket draped with a white napkin. "Ah, my favorite payment." Reaching into the basket, he pulled out a still warm sugar cookie. He waved it under his nose, savoring the aroma before he popped it into his mouth. Waving a second one in the air, he took up his earlier point. "The Good Lord knows, I felt sorry for your last victim. Old Man Clemence is a fine, upstanding man."

"He still is," Dorothy pointed out.

"Just more enlightened," Pearl observed.

"At least those girls of his will be protected now."

Brad laughed outright. "Does anyone else know why Clemence changed his stand on the suffrage issue?"

"Not hardly," Pearl declared.

"And they'd better not, either," Millicent warned.

Brad held up his cookie like a shield. "If anyone does find out, it won't be from me." He slanted Dorothy a considering glance. "Tell me, my dear woman, how did you get Doc to convince Clemence that he had a life-threatening disease?"

Mara, whose head had been on a swivel ever since Reverend Swanson walked into the room, was surprised to see the "dear woman's" face burn red.

"I have my ways."

A smile, entirely too wolfish to sit on a reverend's face, spread across Brad's lips. His "I'm sure you do," had Dorothy choking on embarrassment.

Millicent whacked her on the back. Lorie caught her before the blow could knock her to the floor.

Pearl's eyes drifted to the brown wrapped bag on the end table. "If you've finished embarrassing the tar out of Dorothy, Reverend, I believe it's time for you to go."

Brad tipped his hat to each lady present. When he got to Mara, he winked. "Don't you worry, Mara. You put your faith in these women, and you'll be back with that man of yours faster than Calvin can spit."

Knowing Calvin Wyatt prided himself on his ability to rattle a spittoon six times a minute, Mara was a bit dubious, but she smiled her thanks anyway.

Brad's "I'll see myself out," no sooner faded than the neat parlor was a flurry of motion.

"I'll get the glasses."

"I'll get the cards."

"And I," Pearl said, brandishing the mysterious package high. "Have got the whiskey!"

* * * * *

Three hours later, the prim and proper parlor had all the earmarks of a saloon. The scent of lemon oil blended with whiskey fumes and the stench of cigar smoke. Five women sat hunched over a round table, their cards held close to their chests. Pearl had a cigar clenched between her teeth. Dorothy shot it several sharp glances, but beyond waving her hand in front of her face now and then, she held her tongue. Mara figured

that was due more to the scowl on the woman's face than to politeness. Pearl, Mara had discovered early on, took her cards seriously.

"Goddammit. It just can't be legal what you're doing."

So did Millicent, it appeared. Mara winced as she dealt the last card to that large woman. Owing to the hours she'd spent sharpening her poker skills with Cougar, Mara had a sizable pile of winnings in front of her. And she was coming under attack as a result.

"You know," Lorie ventured slowly, her voice ripe with implication. "There were rumors of cheating out at the ranch."

Dorothy poured herself another glass of whiskey. The bottle rattled against the glass. Her head snapped up so fast, she landed back in her chair with an audible plop. "Oh...?"

"And who was the one spreading the rumors?"

Lorie shrugged unconcernedly in response to Millicent's growl, a small, triumphant smile toying with her lips. She took another swallow of whiskey, "Cougar."

"And we all know what a polecat he is," Mara jumped in, anxious to divert all that hostility from herself. She shot Lorie a dirty look.

"Aw, hell," Millicent cursed, tossing her cards into the middle of the table. She folded her arms across her ample chest. "I suppose he taught you everything you know?"

Mara nodded tentatively.

"Damn cardsharp!" Dorothy blurted out. Mara thought they were talking about her until Dorothy threw her cards into the middle of the table, too.

"That boy took a month's egg money off me in the time it took to sneeze."

"The man has no respect for the gentler sex," Pearl declared, blinking twice to focus her vision.

Mara was beginning to catch on. Apparently, she wasn't the only victim of her husband's "innocent" card games. "How much did he take you for?"

"Ten dollars. The money I was saving for some special Irish lace for my parlor curtains."

"He took me for ten Sundays of free chicken and dumplings." Millicent looked properly aggrieved. "Didn't even have the grace to look guilty."

Lorie joined the crowd and tossed her cards into the middle of the table. "I've got three bushels of apples in the root cellar I've got to make up into pies."

Pearl uncorked the last bottle of whiskey. She filled each woman's glass as they held it up. "Ladies, it appears to me a certain Cougar McKinnely is in dire need of a lesson, and not only for his treatment of our sister member Mara."

A hearty "Amen" followed that declaration, and as skilled as any seasoned drinker, each woman downed the drink in her glass. As one, they dragged their sleeves across their mouths and broke into laughter. Pearl was the first to recover.

"Since we are now pleasantly sloshed, and free of inhibitions, it is now time to plot the downfall of one Cougar McKinnely."

"I favor the cast iron-frying-pan-over-the-head school of thought myself," sweet and gentle Dorothy volunteered.

"While that has merit," Pearl acknowledged, "I'm afraid it won't work in this instance."

"Why not?" Mara demanded. It sounded pretty good to her.

"Head's too hard," Millicent informed her.

There was that.

Pearl pulled her spine taut, battling its tendency to slump. "As I mentioned when I got here today, I have given this matter considerable thought."

"Just spit it out, Pearl," Millicent growled, rubbing at her forehead.

Pearl pulled her dignity around her like a cloak. The effect was slightly ruined by the way she kept swaying in small circles. "Well, we all know that Cougar went crazy when Mara lost the baby, right?"

"I thought we were going to lose him right along with Mara."

Pearl inclined her head regally to let Dorothy know that she didn't mind the interruption. She caught herself on the table before she could fall flat on her face. She looked at Mara for confirmation. "And then as soon as you were out of the woods, he slapped that deed in your hands and, poof! He disappeared."

Mara carefully placed her hands on the arms of her chair to keep from spinning off with the room. "Yes. Without a word, he left." Familiar anger swelled in her breast. "Damned bastard."

"Be that as it may," Pearl silenced the angry muttering threatening to drown out her voice. "I feel that is significant."

"Doc says Cougar's Ma died giving birth to a brother," Dorothy volunteered, knowing the information was important, but unable to remember why. All she could think of was the good time she and Doc had had in bed that morning and how pleasant it would be to do it again tonight. "And he was with that twit Emily when she died."

"How was your night life?"

Mara gaped at Millicent, unable to believe the woman had asked such a blunt, personal question. She glanced at Lorie to see if she was as shocked as herself, but Lorie was staring blankly out the window, humming a tuneless song, oblivious to all that happened around her.

"Uh," Mara stalled, her cheeks burning.

"Well?" Millicent prompted. "Did you and Cougar make the mattress creak nightly or only once a week?"

"Really!" Pearl protested.

"Don't go putting on airs, Pearl. Sometimes, I swear you've been cultivating that prim and proper role so long, you've forgotten how to live."

Pearl looked at Millicent and smiled a special smile. "Oh, I wouldn't say that."

"Neither would the blacksmith," Dorothy interjected. Millicent's sexy, booming laugh filled the room. The outrage on Pearl's face dissolved into amusement.

"And here I thought I was being so discreet."

"This town isn't that big," Millicent chided.

Suddenly, the laughter stopped and as if someone had pointed, all eyes were upon Mara. "So Mrs. McKinnely, what's the answer?"

There was a tiny drop of liquor in the bottom of her glass. Mara took an inordinate amount of time to drain it. "Four or five times."

"A week?" Dorothy prompted kindly.

"A night," Mara corrected.

"Every night?" Pearl asked and when Mara nodded shyly, she gasped. "Lord have mercy!"

Millicent was skeptical. "You're telling us that big lug pleasures you four or five times a night, every night?"

Mara had to swallow twice to find the small thread of her voice. "He makes love to me four or five times a night, but he likes to pleasure me more than that."

"Holy shit!" Millicent boomed. She dropped back into her chair and fanned herself vigorously with a fistful of cards.

Lorie came out of her reverie for a moment. Just long enough to sigh, "That's the man for me."

Millicent eyed the young woman pityingly. "Honey, that's the man for anyone."

The women studied Mara with new respect before they nodded their heads slowly in agreement.

Dorothy cleared her throat. She unbuttoned the top button of her dress as she made a mental note to drag Doc off to bed as soon as the supper dishes were cleared. "Maybe you could get back to your plan now?"

"Yes, well." Pearl sat heavily on the nearest chair, struggling for her train of thought. "Remind me to take care of business next time before we start drinking."

Lorie, who was having a tough time focusing on anything beyond the view out the window said, "I think that might be a good idea."

"Stop getting sidetracked, Pearl, and get on with it," Millicent ordered. Mara sat quietly without saying a word. After that last volley, she didn't dare call attention to herself.

"All right," Pearl snapped. "It occurred to me that Cougar might be feeling guilty."

"Because he blames me for losing the baby," Mara nodded wisely. "I had the same thought myself."

"Then you shouldn't have wasted your time thinking. Now, don't interrupt and pay attention."

"Don't be so sharp, Pearl," Dorothy reproved. "Mara's been through enough without our adding to it."

"I know," Pearl sighed. "It just gets me so mad when a woman takes the blame for her husband's stupidity."

Mara released her tongue long enough to venture a question. "If it's not my fault, then whose is it?"

"No more whiskey for her," Millicent piped up. "It's obvious it clouds her thinking." She clucked her tongue and shook her head. "It's a downright shame, too, usually the girl rows with both oars in the water."

Mara reminded herself that everyone had had a bit too much to drink. She looked to Lorie for support, but her would-be ally was slumped with her head on the table. Very unladylike snores were escaping with each breath.

Mara bridled her temper. Counting to ten helped. "Then what does Cougar feel guilty about?"

Pearl's smile was as smug as any cat that got the cream. "He feels guilty about getting you pregnant in the first place."

"That's crazy!"

"Crazy or not," Dorothy interjected, "that's a man for you."

"It's the way they're brought up." Millicent threw in her two cents. "All their lives they're told what delicate, fragile creatures we are. From day one, some older man is impressing upon them how women don't have a brain in their head, how it's always the man's responsibility to take care of his woman."

"Makes for an awful load of guilt," Dorothy sighed. "I almost lost Doc that way."

"Doc? But he told me he asked you to marry him."

"Ha! He would like you to believe that, but truth be told, I had to compromise that proposal out of him."

"But he loved you."

"Sure he did, but he had it in his head that he wasn't good enough for me. He wouldn't listen to a word I said, so I climbed through his hotel window and then screamed blue murder for the manager."

"You didn't," Millicent laughed.

Dorothy shrugged self-deprecatingly. "Sometimes a woman has got to take matters into her own hands."

"Which," Pearl hastened to interrupt, "is exactly what Mara is going to have to do."

"I agree."

"Me, too."

Mara stared at her three conspirators cautiously. "Just what do you suggest I do?"

"If Cougar's got it in his head that he's responsible for you losing that baby, it's going to have to be pretty drastic."

Millicent agreed with Pearl. "How's your stomach girl?"

Mara touched her belly. "Fine."

The older women nodded as one. "Good, because it's going to take everything you've got to pull this off."

"Pull what off?"

"Our simplest and most devious plan to date," Dorothy explained, actually rubbing her hands together with her glee.

Mara held up both hands as if she could stop this, but she might as well have tried to halt a freight train. Once Pearl, Millicent, and Dorothy got the bit between their teeth, she discovered, they tended to run with it. Pearl dragged in a battered valise from the hallway. As she pulled out the contents, Mara felt her face go up in flames and her heart take wing.

The ladies of the secret society of W.O.M.B. might just be able to pull this off after all.

Chapter Twenty-Six

"I can't believe I've come back to this," Mara muttered, standing in the doorway to Cougar's bedroom. Her bedroom. On the big bed where she and Cougar had loved so vigorously, rolled her husband with a dark-haired woman. Mara's hand slid through the slit seam in her skirt to rest on the hilt of the knife strapped to her thigh. And not just any woman. She'd recognize that profile anywhere. Nidia.

"Goddammit, woman! Get off me."

Mara's eyebrows rose. "I might believe she took advantage of you once, but twice is more than I can manage."

"Holy shit!" Cougar swore as he emerged from under layers of ruffled petticoats. He swallowed as his worst nightmare stared him in the face. Mara stood in the doorway, and any hope he had that she might be understanding about this wilted under the heat of her glare. He ran his hand through his hair.

"It's not what you think." He began. Nidia's arm snaked around his neck. He struggled to throw it off. Damnation, the woman had more tentacles than an octopus.

Mara pulled her knife free. "On the contrary, it's exactly what I think." She advanced on the bed. Reaching around Cougar, she grabbed Nidia by the hair. "I warned you before about touching what's mine."

Nidia tossed her head. Mara tugged, but Nidia plastered herself to Cougar's bare back.

"Move, Cougar," Mara ordered in a voice that gave her husband pause.

He didn't believe Mara would really hurt the woman, but then again, her eyes were hot enough to scorch glass. "Now, Mara," he began.

Mara dropped the knife to his groin. A tiny prick through his denims, and Cougar knew she had drawn blood. "Now."

Cougar moved. The triumphant smirk faded from Nidia's face when she realized Cougar had no intention of protecting her from Mara. Nidia eyed the knife in Mara's hand speculatively. Very slowly, she slid toward the edge of the bed.

Mara flashed a hard smile. As Nidia gathered her muscles to pounce, Mara used her grip on her hair and yanked her to the floor. She hit with a thud. As Nidia spun over, Mara placed the tip of her knife to her throat. Cougar had never guessed that she could be like this.

"The only thing saving you from me doing to you what I did to Cecile is the fact that he's still dressed and you didn't get what you wanted," Mara stated with a cold conviction that heated his blood. Damn, she was sexy when mad. Stepping back, Mara motioned Nidia to her feet.

"Get out."

Nidia turned to him. He held up his hands. "I'm not calling the shots right now."

It was a rather novel experience. One he didn't have much time to appreciate because as soon as Nidia left the room, Mara turned to him.

"I'm glad you understand that."

Something in the tone of that soft statement caused Cougar to study his wife more closely. She looked as fresh as a spring day in her red and white striped dress. He remembered that dress. If she moved just right, all that frothy lace at the neckline moved in such a way as to give some intriguing glimpses. He'd missed those breasts and the woman they were attached to.

Mara's gaze dipped to his groin, and her smile stretched to something he couldn't translate. "We have to talk, McKinnely."

The knife winked in the morning sunlight. "Put the knife down, Mara."

"When I'm ready."

"Now."

"Not until after we talk." She motioned to the door with the knife. "In your study."

He folded his arms across his chest. "Make me."

Mara pulled her arm back until the knife was in perfect throwing position behind her shoulder. Her gaze focused with unerring intensity on his groin.

"You wouldn't."

"After what I just walked in on, I wouldn't push it, McKinnely."

Cougar decided now was not the time to challenge Mara's authority. She was mad enough to spit bullets, and everyone knew an angry woman was an unreasonable woman. Maybe unreasonable enough to take a knife to a man's pride and joy. With as much dignity as he could muster, he headed out the door and down the stairs. "You know you have me at a disadvantage," he remarked casually over his shoulder as if his wife wasn't strolling in his wake, a knife pointed at his back. "You know damned well I wouldn't hurt a hair on your head."

Mara's only acknowledgment was another enigmatic smile.

"Don't you feel a little guilty wielding a knife on a defenseless man?" he asked as he entered the study.

"Nope."

Cougar spun around. "Why the hell not?"

With a hard push of her small hand in the middle of his chest, Mara toppled all six foot four inches of him into the big leather chair behind his desk.

Mara braced one hand on the chair and with the other, strategically placed the knife at his groin. "After the way you deserted me, I'm not inclined to feel guilty about much. In case you haven't noticed, I'm damned pissed."

"You're not the only one," Cougar muttered as cold steel bit into his flesh. Anger began to perk along with desire. "And if you don't remove that knife immediately, you're going to find out how dangerous it is to cross a McKinnely."

Mara glared right back at him. "You'll have to let me know how it feels. Because you've already crossed one, and that McKinnely is madder than hell."

"That McKinnely is going to get her fanny tanned."

"It would take a better man than you to do it. You're nothing but a low-down cheating coward!"

"You know there was nothing going on between Nidia and myself."

"And how do I know that?"

Cougar folded his arms across his chest. He did his best to ignore the back of the knife as it pressed on his erection. "Because you know I didn't get hard until you walked into the room."

The knife bit into his flesh as she blinked. "You're still outrageous."

"And you're still out of line."

"No." Mara shook her head. "For the first time in the last month, I'm on the right path."

Cougar arched a brow at her. "Threatening your husband's manhood is the right path?"

"It beats the hell out of sitting in some damned boarding house blubbering over why you left me, and blaming myself for your stupidity."

Cougar winced. He knew that his decision would devastate Mara, but he didn't like hearing it put into words. He also didn't like the unladylike mannerisms she'd picked up from Millicent. "Your language needs improvement."

Mara remained unfazed by the rebuke. She merely shrugged. "So do your manners, but you don't hear me complaining."

"My manners?"

"It's not gentlemanly to abandon your wife immediately after she's had a miscarriage."

"It wasn't immediate," Cougar muttered, remembering how hard it was to leave at all.

Mara's grip on the knife handle tightened and her expression went from angry to determined.

"Watch it," Cougar snapped as the knife bit into his flesh, wondering what the hell was wrong with him that his cock was so hard, it felt like it would split his flesh.

"Sorry." Mara took a deep breath. "Now, I want you to explain why you deserted me after handing me that stupid agreement."

"Now she calls it stupid," Cougar muttered into the air. "A month ago it was serious enough for you to leave me because of it."

Mara shrugged. "When you give it to me as a sop to your conscience and a prelude to divorce, it became meaningless."

Cougar bristled, nearly castrating himself on the blade of the knife. He subsided back into the chair, but his eyes burned golden fire. "There will be no divorce, and the deed was not a sop to my conscience."

Mara tilted her brow skeptically as she hunched her shoulders slightly. "Then what would you call it?"

Cougar's eyes were drawn to that tiny gape in her bodice like a magnet. "I wanted to give you something that would make you happy."

"You make me happy."

Every muscle in his body pulled tight as she dropped her voice an octave. Her eyes met his. "If you stripped down right now and took me here on the carpet, I guarantee I would be very happy."

Cougar swallowed against the rise of lust that surged. It'd been too long since he'd been in that lithe body. Too long since he'd had those nipples in his mouth. Knowing that it was going to be a hell of a lot longer was the worst kind of torture. He closed his eyes against the urge to take her, to risk it just this once. "That's not going to happen."

"Why not?"

"Because you could get pregnant."

"Not if you come in my mouth."

Jesus! His body jerked as if flicked by a whip. When had she learned to play his game?

"I couldn't stop there."

Her "I know," didn't sound the least upset. Which didn't make sense. He opened his eyes as a hard coil of rope dropped over his shoulders.

"What the hell...?" Even as he collected his muscles to leap, Mara had him trussed as neatly as a Christmas goose, the rope wrapped around the back of the chair and his hands bound to the arm rests. The only part of him he could move was his feet. And then that freedom was taken away.

Mara looked up from where she was binding his ankles to each chair leg. Her speech was a little jerky owing to the struggle he was putting up. "Pearl suspected you might be thinking along those lines."

Cougar jerked on his arms to no avail. "Pearl knows what you're up to?"

Mara nodded.

He pulled on his bindings again, but not one gave. "Who the hell taught you to tie knots?" he growled.

Mara sat back on her heels and smiled her satisfaction at him. "Clint."

"Damned traitor."

"Oh no. He loves you very much," Mara corrected, retrieving her knife. She began to saw at the legs of Cougar's denims. "He's just sick and tired of living with a jackass."

Cougar caught his breath as she sawed over his knee, nicking his kneecap. "It's a pity he didn't teach you how to use a knife."

"It would be easier if you'd hold still."

Cougar sucked in his lip as Mara's hand skimmed the inside of his thigh. The feeling was sublime. "Do you mind telling me what would be easier?"

"Why, your rape, of course."

"A woman can't rape a man."

One by one, she popped the buttons that held together the front of Cougar's shirt. "I don't see why not," she argued. "As I see it, rape has to do with unwillingness." She arched her brow at him. "Do you want to make love with me?"

Cougar bit his tongue against the unqualified "yes" that leapt to the fore. "I won't risk you to childbirth," he said tersely. "Since I don't trust myself to keep my hands off you, I'll maintain a separate home."

Mara nodded her head sagely as she spread the red cotton material clear of Cougar's chest. "Dorothy said that was your problem. You have a marvelous chest, you know."

"First Pearl and Clint, and now Dorothy. Have you been all over town crying on every available shoulder?"

"Actually, I didn't have to go to that much trouble," Mara countered. "We had a meeting." She shook her head at Cougar before very gently freeing his swollen manhood from the tattered remains of his clothing. "And you needn't try to make me angry. It's not going to work."

"Nidia was right. You are a *bruja loca*."

"And what's that?"

"A crazy witch."

"If I am," Mara settled on her knees between her husband's spread thighs, "it's your fault, leaving me all cold and alone in that big empty bed."

She looked up at him. "Did you know my father left me in that brothel, Cougar?"

"No." He bit his tongue on saying more. She wouldn't break him with sympathy.

"He did. He sold me to settle his gambling debts." She leaned forward, so close, he could feel her breath on his cock. Cougar's hands tightened convulsively on the arms of the chair. "I'm sorry, Angel. Do you want me to kill him for you?"

Right now, he would love to wrap his hands around someone's neck.

She laughed softly. "No. He's not worth it. He's a drunk and a fool, but when he left me, I swore no one was ever going to be able to hurt me like that again, but—" She shrugged. "I didn't know you existed."

"And?"

"You're stuck with me, Cougar." She kissed his cock the way he liked. A soft, gentle prelude to the violent need she roused in him.

"So you say." It was a pathetic attempt at a growl. He wasn't surprised when she ignored him. Opening her mouth, taking him all the way to her throat, sucking him, swallowing hard when he hit the back, dragging a moan from his lips.

He couldn't believe she was actually doing this. He said so.

In response, Mara pulled back. "Why ever not? It appears to me that you've forgotten who you belong to. It's up to me to see that you remember."

"Dammit, Mara!" Cougar snapped. "Back off. I don't want this."

Mara shook her head and kissed the tip of his cock. She ran her tongue along the broad tip, bathing him in the heat of his own desire, stealing his will as she stole the drop of pre-come that rose to meet her lips.

"Yes, you do. You're just scared silly that you'll lose me."

She engulfed him in the heat of her mouth.

"You almost died," he grated through the agonizing pleasure.

"And I could catch pneumonia tomorrow and die next week." She ran her lips down the length of his cock, her muttered words a caress unto themselves. "There's no way of knowing what tomorrow has in store for us, but unlike you, I intend to savor every moment we have together on this earth. I'm not going to waste a single second hiding away in fear of what might happen. And I'm not going to let you either." She looked him directly in the eye, and Cougar felt his gut sink at the determination in hers. He struggled and cursed his helplessness.

"Angel, I outweigh you by a good hundred pounds, and I can flip you as easily as you flip a pancake. You can't make me do anything."

The smile she sent him was full of pity. "I can get pregnant."

"Not by me, you're not!"

"Oh, I think so. And once I'm pregnant, your honor won't let you leave." Mara raised her hands to her bodice. Looking Cougar straight in the eye, she dipped her fingers beneath the lace. He bit back a moan as she worked her fingers over her flesh, letting her head drop back as her hands worked beneath the lace. He knew how those nipples felt. How they gave with pressure, sprang back against his finger with the release. Dammit, he knew. As if reading his mind, Mara pulled the bodice of her dress down so her nipples peeked out through the lace.

Cougar sat on that chair and felt as if he were going up in flames. He'd thought he was safe once he'd broken the seductive gaze of his sexy wife, but now the lure of those provocative peaks was too much to resist. "I don't love you anymore," he growled desperately.

Mara smiled, and swayed harder. Her "bull" coincided with her dress falling to her waist and Cougar knew he was lost. "You look like a whore."

"But you like it," Mara purred.

"It" was the most flagrantly sexy corset Cougar had ever seen. It was unabashedly red, and made of fabric so sheer, it merely coated Mara's white flesh with the color of passion. And the top of it. Cougar's eyes helplessly followed the path of Mara's finger as it trailed the contours of the scooped bodice.

"It's perfectly scandalous, isn't it?" Mara teased as his breath caught in his throat and his cock throbbed with relentless demand.

"I know you like my breasts. Do you like the way it leaves them bare? The way it cups them and shoves them up as if toward a man's mouth. Your mouth?" She pinched her nipples between her fingers. Her voice went hoarse. "I've got a confession to make."

"What?" Cougar's fingers contracted and opened as if they were the ones touching those plump nipples. His pulse hammered in his throat. Its cadence echoed in his groin. If he didn't get his act together soon, he was going to lose this war.

"When I have my dress on and the bustier shoves them up so hard the lace rubs them," her voice dropped to a whisper, "it gets me all hot and bothered."

Cougar swore long and hard, and then recovered himself. "You even talk like a whore," he accused scathingly, wanting her to take offense and run, but not holding out a lot of hope that she would. Mara was tenacious when she wanted something. Even when that something wasn't good for her. Like him.

Mara merely smiled and loosened the last buttons on her dress. It fell to the floor in a soundless puddle of red and white decadence.

"Holy Mother of God!" Cougar gaped like an idiot. She didn't have a single thing on beneath that dress except the sheerest of stockings that exactly matched the red of her bustier. Black lace garters held the stockings in place and framed the red-brown curls now shielding her pussy. Her tiny feet were encased in fragile, high-heeled shoes that emphasized the delicacy of her build. Her slender legs seemed to go on forever. Cougar swallowed, tried to come up with another insult, and gaped some more. His heart was threatening to burst under the unrelenting tide of lust that swept over him.

"I'm glad you approve," Mara said as she sauntered over to him.

"Now, let's see about this little problem we have here." She knelt between Cougar's thighs. She teased his cock with random strokes of her nipples, laughing in delight when he arched his hips off the chair in demand for more while above her head he cursed her with every breath he took. She cupped the hard-soft sacs between his thighs, and then blessed him with her mouth.

Damn, she was good. Her mouth was hot and hungry as she took the head in. Her hands were greedy on his balls, encouraging him to where she wanted him to go. Forbidding him dominance here.

She sat back on her heels. "You never let me play, Cougar," she said, her eyes devouring him with a hunger that slid over his skin like a caress. "You always take over, but today, I think I'll play."

Her hands settled on his abdomen, her thumbs dipping onto the well of his navel, anchoring her palms as his muscles sucked in on a hard breath. She leaned forward and placed a kiss on the scar just above his left hipbone.

He never knew damaged flesh could be so sensitive, but when her tongue lapped at the edges, darts of fire struck at his desire, at his control. He couldn't hide his reaction. Pre-come beaded on his cock.

She smiled into his eyes, not one whit put off by his scowl. Slowly, she dipped her head, her gaze holding his. Very deliberately, very delicately, she lapped at the creamy fluid. The little flicks of her tongue on the inflamed tip of his shaft had him squirming on the chair.

He needed more. So much more. Before he broke down and begged, she released his cock, leaving him aching and throbbing, and moved her lips to his belly. Kissing her way up over his ribs, she snuggled his shaft into her slight cleavage as her mouth reached his right nipple. Desire writhed through his body like a plains fire, wild and unchecked by anything except the bonds she'd placed on him.

"Are you sensitive here like I am?" she asked him.

He didn't answer, but when she tapped his small, dark nipple lightly with the hot point of her tongue, his whole body flinched, his cock jumped and more moisture beaded the tip. Her smile was wicked as she kissed her way back down to his cock, arching her body away, preserving the thick drop of seed for the sweep of her tongue. The chair rocked as he arched toward her mouth, needing her generous heat to flow over him.

His efforts met with air as she once again stole his seed and then kissed her way up his chest, this time to the left, pausing to kiss the length of the knife scar on his biceps, before proceeding to his nipple. She was relentless once she discovered she could make it pucker for her kiss. Nipping, sucking, pinching, she wrenched groan after groan from his lips, and drop after drop of come from his straining, painfully swollen penis, lapping each away before returning to torment his nipples. He was one throbbing mass of relentless need. Semen dripped from his cock in a steady stream, curses and pleas slipped from between his clenched teeth with the same unending drive.

She was going to win this one, he realized. He couldn't resist her. Didn't want to resist her when she brought his body to such a burning precipice. He was lost and he didn't even give a damn.

"I want your baby, darling," she whispered against the crown of his penis before sliding him deep into her mouth, drawing hard on him, as if determined to suck his seed from his body against his will.

And there, Cougar realized with a small functioning corner of his mind, was his way out. As she'd pointed out, she couldn't get pregnant if he came in her mouth.

But Mara must have felt the change in his intent because as soon as he made the decision, she backed away. Cougar groaned as cool air bathed his cock where before

there had only been heat, but he concentrated hard on the sensations charging through his body, rushing himself toward release.

Mara stepped up onto the chair. Squatting over him, she reached between their bodies, positioned him in the well of her vagina. Her lip slipped between her teeth as she slipped her legs between the arms and the seat and took him in a lusty plop.

Cougar felt her body shudder as his cock tore into the incredible wet heat of her tight pussy. A hissed "Steady, Angel," was all he managed before his balls exploded in an agonizing release that had him shouting her name and jerking under her thighs.

Mara stroked Cougar's cheeks as he bucked under her. "That's right, Cougar," she coaxed. "Just like that." Her hands dropped back to his thighs and she forced the last half inch of his cock home. "I want it all. Every drop."

Cougar opened his eyes and stared at his wife's pretty breasts just out of reach. "Damn you then," he growled, as another spasm ripped through his body, the ecstasy dimming his vision. "Take it!" He bucked against her. "All of it," he hissed, coming hard and high in her, filling her full, groaning as his seed overflowed her pussy and spilled onto his thighs, helpless as always to refuse her what she wanted, scared to death of the repercussions of giving her what she wanted. "I love you, Angel. Too damned much."

"Impossible," she whispered. She kissed his lips, her mouth a gentle oasis amidst the violence of his release. "You can never love me too much, too hard, or too completely," she whispered, resting her cheek on his chest and holding him close as the last final searing shudder of completion racked his body.

It could have been two minutes or two hours later when Cougar fought his way out from bliss. Mara lay against his chest, her head tucked under his chin. His meek and mild little wife. He remembered his thoughts on how she'd conform, and despite himself, he smiled.

"Are you still determined to be difficult?"

Cougar rested his head against the back of the chair. "Because my wife tied me up and used me as a stud? Why on Earth should I be angry?"

"I could be pregnant. We could have made a baby."

"Don't remind me."

Mara bit her lips and pulled back so she could see her husband's face. They were still intimately joined and her unsatisfied flesh was unbearably sensitive. "Do you really mind so much?" she whispered to his chin.

Cougar lowered his head so he could look into her eyes. "I almost lost you because I can't control myself around you," he paused, and the fear in his gaze made Mara wince and cup his cheek in her palm. "I need you too much."

"There's no such thing."

"I almost killed you."

"I lost our baby. According to Doc, that's an act of God."

"Helped on by my lust."

She caught his face between her palms, meeting the challenge in his gaze with the certainty she felt inside. "Bullshit."

He blinked.

"Women lose babies all the time with nothing more going on than breathing in and out."

"Mara, the night before you lost the baby, I was out of my head with lust. I took you hard. Too hard. Too many times."

He was so full of crap. She sighed and stroked his cheek before clearing up his misconceptions. "There was no 'taking' between us that night." She shook her head at the stubbornness that immediately entered his gaze. "Do you think I don't know that all I ever have to say is 'please', and you'll stop? No matter how much you want to go on? No matter how wild you are?"

"You don't know your own limits." He was determined to take responsibility for this, as if she needed shielding from the reality of their passion for each other. As if she'd want shielding from it.

"Yes, I do, and as soon as you reach them, I'll let you know." She reached over to the table, got the knife, and cut through the bonds around his hands. "But if you want to go placing blame for losing the baby on what we did that night, then place it on me, because I suspected I was pregnant and I didn't do anything to stop you."

"You knew and you didn't tell me?"

"You weren't there."

"I was home where you were supposed to be."

"I was waiting for you to come get me." The rope pinning his right hand snapped free.

"You wanted me to come?" He flexed his wrist.

"Yes. Like you promised me you would." She went to work on his left. "Besides, why else would I tell Lorie to tell you I was having dinner with the Reverend?"

He stared at her as if she'd grown two heads. "Because you were?"

Oh good grief. His left hand came free. She dropped the knife on the desk. She placed her hands on her hips. "How can you know me so well in some ways and not know me at all in others?"

His hands covered hers, rocking her on his thighs, flexing his cock inside her. "I have no idea."

"You're going to have to stop thinking of me as helpless."

"Maybe." He slid his hands under her hips, the rope still around his upper arms hampering his movement. He lifted her slightly, gliding out of her flesh before gently

letting her back down. "And maybe you're going to have to remind me frequently." She shifted her hand to his shoulders.

"I can do that."

"Good." He lifted her again, a little higher this time, his cock swelling inside her demanding she make a place for him. She did. Willingly, gasping as the flared head dragged along her sensitive tissue.

"You're ready again, so soon?"

"Angel, that last time didn't even count."

She clenched her pussy around him when he would have withdrawn. His groan almost drowned out her "Excuse me?"

Cougar cocked his dark brow at her, his expression a combination of censure and barely leashed passion. "You should be begging my pardon, rushing things like that."

"Rush nothing," Mara contested. "If anything, I was just in the nick of time."

"I don't like it when you don't come."

Mara blushed to the roots of her hair.

Cougar's deep laugh filled the room. "How can you still blush after what you just did? Hell, how can you blush and wear what you're wearing?"

"I don't know," Mara groaned, his mirth vibrating her clit against the base of his cock, sending spasms of fire ricocheting up her torso, spearing to her nipples, drawing them so hard and tight that they ached. Cougar's smile was wicked as he pulled her harder against him. "Untie me and I'll see to your itch."

"Are you going to disappear again?"

"Hell no. As you so succinctly pointed out, you could be pregnant even now."

"And if I'm not?"

"I have a feeling you soon will be," Cougar said with deep resignation, knowing this woman was his fate, and she wouldn't let him run from her. "I'm as randy as a billy goat."

Mara shifted her hips delightedly as he swelled further within her. "So I see."

She grabbed the knife off the desk and began sawing on the rope.

"Damn, that feels good," Cougar murmured as Mara's body vibrated around his with her efforts. "But aren't you being hasty? I could be lying about sticking around."

"If you are," Mara grunted as the rope proved tougher than she'd thought. "I'll wait until you're asleep some deep dark night, and then I'll tie you up again."

"Is that a promise?" He held out his right hand. "Give me that, Angel."

"I can do it."

"I know. But I can do it faster."

Mara handed him the knife.

Her nipples were red and swollen. They had to be hurting for attention. "Play with your nipples while I do this."

Her small fingers immediately came to her chest. He almost sliced his stomach open as she pinched them delicately between her fingers.

"Shit!" He jerked the knife away. She teased them both with a dainty touch. He placed the knife against the rope and drew up, his eyes locked on her fingers as they rolled her nipples, the pressure too light to satisfy either of them.

"Witch," Cougar growled as urgency throbbed in his blood. With one last yank of the knife, he was free. The knife clattered to the floor, and Mara's breasts nestled into his palms. His sigh was long and heartfelt. "That's better."

Mara arched into his hands. He curved his fingers around her ribs, cupping his palms, accepting all she had to give as she moaned, "Definitely better."

He brushed her hands aside, and then he had her nipples between his fingers. He pinched them briefly and then came back for a longer, harder caress, knowing he'd hit the right pressure when she moaned and arched closer. He held her there for two heartbeats, and then gave her a little more, smiling as her whole body jerked and cream gushed over his thighs.

"There's something we have to get straight here, McKinnely," she moaned as he released her nipples.

"Lean back on my thighs," he ordered. "I want to see you in this outrageous bit of nothing as I love you."

Mara did as bid.

"Very nice, Mrs. McKinnely," Cougar murmured as his eyes toured from head to groin where his manhood nestled in liquid fire. He leaned forward and took one of Mara's fully distended nipples into his mouth. He teased it with his teeth, making her writhe on his thighs before asking, "What do we need to get straight between us?"

Mara dug her nails into his chest, her pussy locking on his cock with painful intensity. Her fingers ran through his hair, curling into a fist half way down its length, dragging his mouth harder against her nipple.

"Who do you belong to?"

Cougar lifted one brow at the autocratic tone. He tugged her nipple with his teeth, before loosening his grip. It sprang free of his lips with a soft pop. A smile tugged his lips when Mara moaned a protest. He looked directly into her cinnamon-brown eyes, the love and passion there a mirror echo of his own. "That's easy. I belong to Mara McKinnely."

"See that you don't forget."

Arched back as she was, she was totally reliant on his hands to keep her from falling, yet she took that tone with him. His smile grew. Damn, she was something. And damn, how he loved her. "Yes, ma'am." He flexed his cock in her pussy, pulling her

closer so her tender clit rubbed against his groin. Her breath escaped on a hiss. Her hands in his hair tugged hard.

Her "Oh God" was a harsh groan.

He sighed and shook his head. "No. Cougar."

He bent his head to her breasts. And smiled.

Sometime over the next sixty years, she might just get that right.

About the author:

Sarah has traveled extensively throughout her life, living in other cultures, sometimes in areas where electricity was a concept awaiting fruition and a book was an extreme luxury. While she could easily adjust to the lack of electricity, living without the comfort of a good book was intolerable. To fill the void, she bought pencil and paper and sketched out her own story, and in the process, discovered the joy of writing. She's been at it ever since.

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