

# ESMERELDA'S SECRET

by

ADRIANNA DANE

Amber Quill Press, LLC <http://www.amberquill.com>

Esmerelda's Secret An Amber Quill Press Book

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the author's imagination, or have been used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

Amber Quill Press, LLC <http://www.amberquill.com>

**All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be transmitted or reproduced in any form, or by any means, without permission in writing from the publisher, with the exception of brief excerpts used for the purposes of review.**

**Copyright © 2004 by Adrianna Dane ISBN 1-59279-238-3 Cover Art © 2004 Trace Edward Zaber**

**Layout and Formatting Provided by: ElementalAlchemy.com**

**Published in the United States of America**

When the tires of her car crossed the county line, the rhythm of Willow's body intuitively shifted. She quivered with awareness. Long dormant desire blazed unexpectedly. Her breath quickened.

With fear or anticipation?

The glow of her car's headlights captured the dark wood and white paint of a road sign. Esmerelda, Population 10,592. First Established 1752.

Willow, shrouded in memories and the icy silence of a moonless, fall evening, traveled along the bittersweet familiarity of Main Street. Orange jack-o'-lanterns swaying in the wind cast a flickering ghostly glow to the lonely night. It was 11 p.m. She remembered well the unwritten commandments of this small town on the edge of the Massachusetts border. No one stayed out past 9 p.m.

In Esmerelda, the commandments and the law were laid down, and upheld, by the Family Dalton.

Willow was raised during the tenure of Sheriff Jack Dalton. Tradition held that he eldest Dalton son always stepped into the black-and-white embrace of law enforcement.

This was a community defined by tradition. Tracing back to 1752, Daltons had stood guardian for the innocent. When Willow was growing up, those who crossed Jack, or anyone of Dalton blood, might as well fold up and call it a day.

Willow bitterly remembered being the recipient of the thunder of Dalton anger. After the unjustified gossip over the incident with Kenny Miller, a Dalton cousin, she might as well have been branded with the letter A.

Even her mother had encouraged her to leave town. She never asked Willow for the truth. But then, neither did the man who professed to love Willow. No one wanted the truth. Justice is blind was never a truer statement than in Willow's case. In Esmeralda, a story didn't need to be true to spread like wildfire, or be held as gospel.

At seventeen, Willow had been too naïve to withstand the suspicion and humiliation. Once she graduated from Esmerelda High School, Willow fled to Boston. She never looked back. That was ten years ago. She wondered if anyone would even remember Willow MacKenzie today.

She turned into the parking lot of the Comfy Lodge Motor Inn and turned off the engine. Willow closed her eyes and inhaled deeply.

The week before, she had received a form letter from her mother's lawyer informing her that Moira Mackenzie had died. Her mother, the woman who had raised Willow from a sense of duty rather than love, who never tried to contact her after she'd left, was gone. Something beyond a sense of duty to her mother had brought Willow back to Esmerelda.

She trembled as the devil tiptoed along her spine. Willow was about to come face-to-face with the demons that had chased her for ten years. Tormenting memories kept her yearning, but never satisfied; made her want, but never fulfilled.

The wound to her soul inflicted a decade earlier had abscessed and she yearned to have it cleansed. Only one person could help and that person was in Esmerelda. Her mother's death was but the catalyst that returned her to the source.

\* \* \* \*

The pulsing rain of wet heat soothed away the long hours of driving. Willow's body recalled a time when callused, long fingers had massaged and inflamed, soothed and stimulated every inch of her sensitive skin. Her own slick fingers now moved down her hips, soaping and massaging, remembering, craving...

For ten, long years she had dated other men, kissed them, allowed them to woo her, and was left bereft with her turbulent memories. Memories that had flared instantly to life when she'd crossed over the county line. Subliminal signals delivered her body from its deep, numbing sleep and primed it for the one man who could set her soul free.

With the memory of his touch, Willow's body surrendered to sensations so forcefully they caused her pain. She turned off the water and stepped from the shower. As she shook with unfulfilled desire, her stomach cramped.

Willow grasped the sink and leaned forward, inhaling slowly and deeply.

Lavender pools of hurtful yearning stared back from the misty reflection. If her memories alone did this to her, what would happen when she finally confronted him in reality?

The pain subsided; she knew her craving never would.

Willow wrapped a white towel around her head turban-style, and another around her body in sarong fashion. She walked from the small, heated bathroom into the twenty-degree-colder main bedroom.

Abruptly, she stopped in disbelief. Had she summoned him with her erotic ruminations? She would recognize those broad shoulders anywhere. How had he gotten inside?

"J.W."

Instinct had her body responding to him. She was not prepared for this.

He turned toward her. John William Dalton, eldest son of Jack Dalton, and the current favored son of Esmerelda. There stood the man who had stolen and destroyed her heart and soul, leaving her with long, dark years of emptiness.

In uniform, he appeared larger, more muscled than she'd remembered, his face chiseled in shadows. Hard eyes studied her, and it was obvious he found her lacking. Willow gripped the towel. How had he known she was here?

At last, he broke the silence.

"Hello, Willow. It's been a long time. I'm sorry about your mother, but I hope you're not planning on staying long. We don't need your kind around here." His voice caressed and destroyed her in the same breath.

So much for pleasantries.

The words had been meant to hurt and to send her into retreat.

Hurt, they did.

Retreat, never.

She would not let him see her pain.

Willow turned away, rummaging through her suitcase, blinking rapidly to hold back the tears. She couldn't find what she sought, so stopped looking.

"What do you want, Sheriff? Are you here to railroad me out of town before I can cause another scandal?"

She faced him, in control of herself now. Her hands were balled into fists, her stance rigid, and her head high.

"I'm not seventeen, Sheriff, and I don't scare easily. I'll leave when I'm damn well ready to leave. Your scare tactics won't work."

"Think not?" His voice was deceptively quiet. "You've forgotten a lot since you left."

He stood close enough to taste. His magnetism captured her. Willow had the sinking feeling her yearnings would defeat her.

Willow had been certain the years would blunt her response to J.W. She had underestimated. Exorcising his memory was why she was here, but it wasn't working so far.

She stood mesmerized, unable to move, as he reached out and traced down the length of her naked arm with one finger. Chilled awareness raced up her spine. Willow moved to step away, but one hand grasped her forearm, stopping her.

His other hand yanked her close. The cheap white towel was no barrier to his fire. His breath whispered across her skin. In a quick, unexpected motion, he dragged the turban from her head. Her hair fell in damp disarray to her shoulders.

J.W.'s unreadable eyes studied her. What was he looking for? Willow withstood the look, unflinching. She would not surrender. He anchored her to him, and the cold metal buttons on his shirt pressed into her. His left hand curled in her hair, and he was relentless as he drew back her head.

"Sunlight. I wanted to see if it was still the sunlight I remembered."

Loving him had never been passive. It was filled with intensity and burning, fierce and passionate.

"How many have there been?" His voice was like gravel under tires on a hot July day.

The blue blaze in his half-closed eyes seared her with its intensity. Willow did not pretend to misunderstand.

"None of your business. You gave up that right a long time ago."

She remained unresisting as his eyes bore into her, yet hoped she revealed none of the primitive lust seething inside. Her fingers itched to rip open his shirt, to expose his naked chest to her eyes, to her mouth. Her breath hitched.

The room closed in. Without warning, he released her other arm and yanked the towel from her body. Willow gasped in surprise. Her nipples tightened with arousal. J.W.'s eyes flashed. He lowered his head, and his mouth explored and

reacquainted itself with the curves of her right breast. The hand that had removed the barrier now bit against the warmth of her naked hip. He licked, sucked, and teased, drawing a helpless moan from her lips.

"Don't do this, J.W." Her words came out in a ragged burst.

Her body responded with rising poignant pleasure to the touch of his lips.

He ignored her.

His mouth moved to her other breast, suckling and tugging at the sensitized bud, spiraling her into a world of passionate, dark needs. The music of her body, long silent, swelled to life. Willow felt helpless to do other than undulate to the rhythm he plucked from her. She gave one last plea before the melody he commanded totally consumed her.

"J.W."

"Be quiet," he growled. His right arm snaked around her waist, arching her closer, stretching her back, opening her to him. He drew her breast more fully into his mouth, his tongue circling and rasping over her hardened nipple.

Willow reached for him, her hands curling into the cloth of his shirt. Her head dropped back, while her lower body pressed against his rigid abdomen.

He raised his head, repeating his question, his voice raw with passion. Or was it rage?

"How many? Don't lie. I know what you did in Boston." His question abruptly dragged her back from the edge of euphoria where his dangerous, sensual mouth had transported her. With one last, superhuman effort, she pushed away from him, stumbling, yet moving fast. The bed now served as a barrier.

"What I did? What are you talking about?"

Willow made a quick grab for the robe she at last saw peeking from the corner of her suitcase. She wrapped the lily-patterned silk around her and tied the belt.

His eyes gleamed. "I know you're a stripper."

Those passionate mirrors to the soul she had loved so much insolently traced the curve of her body beneath the silk.

"What did you have to do for that piece of expensive clothing? How many men did you fuck?"

White-hot anger dueled with blazing arousal. The robe was a luxury she had designed herself.

"You insulting son of a bitch! How dare you assume anything about my life? Get out! I don't have to explain to you how I live."

She yanked open the door. "Leave, Sheriff, before I say something I'll regret."

He towered over her.

"We aren't finished, Willow."

"Too right, Sheriff. And when you're ready to hear what I have to say, you let me know. You always assume the worst. And you're always right, aren't you, Sheriff? Let me know when you want to listen. But now, I want you to leave."

He stalked past her and she slammed the door behind him.

She shot home the security bolt as well. How could she have forgotten how infuriating and overbearing he could be? Even worse, how could she have underestimated her response to him? This time he had taken her by surprise.

Next time she would be ready.

\* \* \* \*

The Main Street Restaurant occupied an 1800s renovated and converted former private residence. Situated next to Mary Agnes's Beauty Parlor, it had provided a convenient place for Willow to eat lunch when she worked at Mary Agnes's as a teenager.

Once the gossip spread, however, Willow had given up her job, unable to face the whispers of the beauty parlor customers.

Now, she shook loose the cobwebs of memories and sat at a booth near the back of the restaurant. It was 9 a.m. and Willow had an appointment with her mother's attorney at ten. It left her just enough time for a quick breakfast. She was waiting for her food to arrive when a woman sat down across from her.

Willow looked up in surprise. A knife pierced her heart. Elizabeth Anthony. No, that was wrong. Elizabeth Anthony Dalton.

Elizabeth had married J.W.

"Hello, Willow." Elizabeth's hothouse, regal beauty had always left Willow feeling like a windblown dandelion.

"Hello, Elizabeth. What can I do for you?"

The woman's perfect lips curved into a polite smile.

"I heard you were back in town. I just wanted to say hello."

"Really..." Willow knew Elizabeth wanted something.

The smile left Elizabeth's face.

"All right. I'll come to the point. What are you doing here? I don't want to see J.W. hurt again."

Willow was speechless.

J.W. hurt?

He was the one who did the hurting, not the other way around.

"I thought you were divorced, Elizabeth."

Willow had subscribed to the Esmerelda Sentinel, concluding long ago the newspaper was her instrument of self-flagellation. Every time she opened the paper, she found the name Dalton plastered somewhere between the pages.

A year after her departure, she read that J.W. had gotten engaged; six months later, he married. That was the one and only night Willow allowed herself to drink beyond her limits.

In her apartment, she had sat on her living room floor, old photographs and a bottle of cheap Scotch her only company. The photos hadn't survived the binge.

She'd passed out on the carpet, the pieces of her heart scattered around her.

A year later, Willow had read that Elizabeth filed for divorce, and felt only sadness at what might have been--had J.W. been a different man; had Willow been a stronger woman.

Elizabeth sighed.

"Yes, we're divorced. But we're still friends. You hurt him, Willow. You being here will only reopen old wounds."

"What about you? You didn't hurt him when you divorced him?"

The demon inside Willow had roused.

Did she really need to know the details?

Elizabeth remained silent for a long time.

"That was the problem. I thought when he first asked me out and I heard the gossip about you, I had a chance with him. When he asked me to marry him, I was ecstatic. I was sure he loved me."

Elizabeth looked at her hands, neatly clasped on the table.

"I was wrong. Marriage takes two to succeed and J.W.--" She shrugged. "--wasn't really there, if you know what I mean. I've realized the truth since then."

Elizabeth's china-blue eyes bore into Willow.

"It's you. You've always been the problem. I just got tired of trying to fight your ghost."

Willow shook her head in denial.

"You're wrong. He doesn't love me. He despises me."

"You're the one who's wrong. Look beneath all that Dalton pride and self-righteousness."

Elizabeth rose from the table.

"I've always disliked you, Willow. You stood in the way of what I wanted. However, it appears one can't change fate, and I'd like to see J.W. happy. He's a shell of the man he should be. I've got a feeling you're the only one who can

heal him. Remember that fine line between love and hate. Both such intense feelings. See you around."

The breakfast arrived just as Elizabeth walked away. Willow looked at the plate of unappetizing scrambled eggs and toast, not seeing it.

How was she supposed to eat with her stomach in knots? Absently, she picked up the glass of orange juice.

In her mind Willow saw J.W. naked, making love to Elizabeth...the woman's cool beauty arching...

J.W. entering her...

The glass shattered in her hand. Willow stared blankly at the pink-tinged orange juice leaking onto the table.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Willow heard the angry exclamation, but it didn't immediately register. A hand grabbed her injured hand.

What was he doing here?

J.W. held her stinging fingers between his two large hands. Willow could not look at him--was unable to answer him--still caught up in her tormenting vision. His eyes unreadable, J.W.'s jaw clenched. He grabbed a couple of napkins and loosely wrapped them around her hand to stop the trickle of blood.

"Come with me." He pulled her up and pushed her down the hallway.

"Mary," he called to the waitress, "Miss MacKenzie cut her hand. I'm afraid there's quite a mess at the table. I'm taking her in the back to make sure we remove all the glass."

"Sure thing, Sheriff. Anything I can do to help?"

"No. I'll take care of this."

Oh, yes, Willow thought.

Sheriff Dalton had everything under control.

He pushed her inside the men's room and shut the door with a thud, locking it.

"Wait! I can't be in here." She would have opened the door to leave, but he held her wrist and wouldn't let go.

"Just shut up and let me look at what kind of mess you've made of your hand."

He pulled her wrapped hand over the sink, then gently unwound the stained napkins. He bent close to examine her wounds.

Willow stared at his dark head, her mind filled with Elizabeth's words. She tried to tell herself that Elizabeth couldn't be right. J.W. didn't love her.

"I don't see any glass. You were lucky. What were you doing?" He turned on the cold water and held her hand beneath it. She hissed. His lips tightened.

Standing so close to him in this small room was shattering her self-control.

"It was an accident," she said, her voice hardly above a whisper.

"Some accident. You could've done some serious damage."

He surprised her as he brought up her hand and pressed his lips to the center of her palm. The tender kiss sent desire spiraling through her; electric shocks traveled up her arm and down past the pit of her stomach.

"J.W."

"So soft and delicate," he murmured.

His lips moved from her palm to her wrist, eventually centering on the intimate curve of her arm. She shivered as the moist tip of his tongue traced along the sensitive crease. The fingers of her hand instinctively curled inward. Erotic heat blinded her. Her other hand rose to caress his short, dark hair.

He straightened, before his head descended.

He met and captured her lips. They parted for him and his tongue entered her mouth, darting and teasing. Her tongue mated with his, plunging back and forth, circling, dancing. He consumed her, bending her to him. His erection pressed against her pelvis. She ached to have him inside her, filling her.

Unconsciously, her legs parted, urging him closer.

He groaned.

His hands circled around her to cup the cheeks of her bottom, grinding her into him. Hot lava pulsed through her veins, settling between her legs. Primitive lust and a need so long denied, devoured her. She desired this man and no other had ever, or could ever, satisfy her.

Eyes closed, her skin responded to every caress. Everywhere his hands touched burned out of control. Then they were beneath her skirt, ripping away her white thong. She was slick with her need to have his cock inside her, filling every void and empty space in her body.

She was no match for the demands his mouth and tongue were calling from her.

Her hands dropped to unbuckle the belt at his waist and unzip the front of his pants. In a moment she had freed his hard thick shaft. The fingers of her right hand clasped him. She slowly stroked his length. Willow heard his groan as he moved against the rhythm of her hand.

His hands were beneath her skirt squeezing and kneading her bottom. He brought her closer and his right hand traveled to the entrance of her vagina.

His tongue rimmed the inside of her lips, then he scattered light kisses along the curve of her neck. At the same time, she felt his fingers circle her clit before parting her labia lips--testing, pleasuring. His fingers dipped into her vagina, and she gasped at their invasion.

"You're so tight. Hot. Wet. Tell me you want this." His words were low and ragged. His fingers stopped moving. She looked up into his eyes.

"Tell me you want this, Willow. Are you protected? I don't want to hurt you. I'll stop if want me to."

Willow was mindless with need. "Yes, I want this. Yes, I'm protected. Please," she begged. "I need to feel you inside me. Now."

Willow released him and reached up, pulling his head down.

She feathered kisses along his hard jaw. She needed to taste him, to draw on the elixir that was J.W.

His fingers again entered her, filling her, and moving in and out of her slick heat.

His thumb massaging her clit had her rubbing against him, reaching for release.

He played the instrument that was her body to perfection.

He slid his fingers out. His hands moved up her body, dragging her skirt with them. He lifted her and Willow wound herself around him. Slowly he brought her down on the head of his hot, thick erection.

Her legs wrapped around his body, leaving her open to his probing. She gasped as he entered her, pleasure spiraling. He stretched her slowly, groaning as he penetrated deeper and deeper inside her.

"You feel so good. You're so damned tight. Are you okay? I don't want to hurt you."

"Don't stop. I need you deeper." She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and thrust against him harder, arching to take him more fully inside her.

She needed to taste him.

Willow unbuttoned his shirt and frantically pushed it aside, giving her access to his shoulder and neck. The salty taste drove her to the edge of mindlessness.

J.W. moved a step and Willow felt the wall against her back. He was lodged deep inside. He was still, as she adjusted to his presence.

"You're mine, Willow MacKenzie." Unhurriedly he withdrew, until only the tip teased her swollen lips, then he lunged and impaled her long and deep.

"You always have been, and you always will be."

She growled deep and low, clasping him to her.

"Oh God, I need you harder and deeper. I need to feel every inch of you."

Again he thrust.

In and Out.

Slow and hot. Deeper and more powerfully each time.

His rhythm was a perfect accompaniment to her burning desire. Sweat beaded her skin. The music inside her crescendo. A toccata, full, high, and free carried her higher.

"J.W." It was a plea for release.

He seemed to understand her body's responses. He powered faster and faster, then plunged deep and held tight as his seed filled her. His climax carried her to

the edge of the maelstrom and dropped her into its swirling eye. Willow bit into his shoulder, turning her cries of release into muffled moans. J.W. hissed, but held her close, buried deep inside her. She clung to him as the waves of pleasure slowly receded, returning her to reality. This was no fantasy, no dream. Her face felt hot and flushed, and sweat beaded her skin.

Willow opened her eyes and was shocked when she saw the angry red outline of her teeth against the skin of his shoulder.

"Oh, God, J.W., I'm sorry," she whispered.

He looked at her and a hand rose to tuck a lock of her hair behind her ear.

"Don't worry about it." His breathing slowed and he withdrew from her body.

She felt bereft. While he was inside her, Willow had, for the first time in years, been complete. She lowered her legs. He released her only after her shaky legs steadied. A knock at the door startled them.

"Occupied," J.W. called out.

Willow's heart thumped until she heard receding footsteps. She didn't know what to say. Her hands tucked her blouse back into the waistband of her skirt, and then pulled her skirt back into order.

She saw her shredded thong lying on the floor.

She started to bend to pick it up. J.W. was there before her. She watched as he stuffed it into his pocket without saying a word.

"I'll take you back to your motel." His words were quiet.

Willow could read nothing from his face.

"I can't walk back through that restaurant, J.W."

"Willow—" He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"You won't have to. There's a back door at the end of the hallway."

She breathed a sigh of relief. J.W. had also righted his clothing.

"Let me see your hand."

She hid it behind her back and shook her head.

"I don't think that's such a good idea. Anyway, it's fine. It just stings a little. I'd appreciate it if you'd just take me back to the motel so I can change." She tried a half-hearted smile.

"Can't go showing up at the lawyer's office bare-assed, now can I?"

J.W.'s eyes glittered with an emotion she couldn't put a name to. He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead just turned and unlocked the door.

"Right. Okay then. I'll get you back to the motel."

There was so much they hadn't said to each other, so much that needed to be said. The short journey to the motel was made in silence. Before she could get out of his truck, J.W. laid a hand on her arm. She looked up, questioningly.

"We need to talk."

"Yes, I agree. It's long past time." He hesitated. "You never answered my questions last night."

She could see it ate at him. It hurt that he had even asked.

"Maybe you didn't ask the right questions," she bit out.

"Just a thought, J.W., but if you really believe I'm some kind of prostitute, I'm surprised you didn't use a condom just now. Aren't you afraid of catching something? You might want to think about that."

She yanked her arm from his grasp and leaped from the truck. Willow admitted to herself that this man continued to hold her heart and always would.

But she needed him to believe in her or it would never be right.

\* \* \* \*

Her visit to the attorney's office was brief.

Her mother's house belonged to Willow outright.

Willow had been Moira MacKenzie's only heir. Mr. Garber told her that her mother had chosen to be cremated and her ashes scattered, no ceremony. He handed her a white envelope addressed to Willow which she put in her purse.

She would read it in privacy later.

Willow now sat behind the wheel of her car staring at the old farmhouse, dealing with reawakened, painful memories.

It sat on ten acres of land just outside Esmerelda. Her stomach clenched at the thought of once more walking through that front door. She took a deep breath and stepped out of the car.

She was somewhat surprised that the door was unlocked, but then her mind centered on the ordeal before her. Facing these ghosts was part of why she had come.

The house was musty, but it had been closed for several months. There was a strange odor, which she couldn't put a name to. Ammonia, possibly? Odd. She moved down the hallway and stopped at the doorway to the living room.

The room remained unchanged.

The echoing screams of Willow's nightmare filled her head.

She remembered feeling ill that night, her head fuzzy.

Kenny Miller had come in. He had seemed solicitous. When she had complained of being dizzy, he helped her lay down on the couch. She didn't remember much beyond that point, except J.W. standing in the doorway with thunder on his face and rage reaching out to grab her.

Her mother stood next to him in horrified silence. Willow hadn't understood what was happening. One minute she'd been fully clothed; the next she was clad in only her bra and panties with Kenny on top of her.

J.W. had yanked Kenny up and would have beaten him to death if her mother hadn't stopped him. Willow had tried to stand, but was unable to do so, having still felt lightheaded and dizzy. J.W. stood over her, yelling. She had been unable to make sense of his words. Something about being a tramp and a drug addict.

He had stomped out, slamming the door and breaking her heart.

It was only later, once whatever drug had been in her system wore off, that her mother told her as much as she could about what J.W. and she had witnessed when they came in the house.

Willow had tried to contact J.W., but he refused to see her or talk to her. Finally, when he started dating Elizabeth Anthony, Willow turned tail and left town. She now realized she had been running from her memories, not toward her dreams.

That was the problem.

It's why she'd always felt a piece of her was missing.

It was. It was here in Esmerelda. J.W. was that vitally important ingredient. This time, she was going to fight for him, whether he wanted her to or not.

She turned away from the living room and headed back to the front door. This house held nothing for her. It was what the future held that concerned her now.

"Well, hello there, Willow." Willow stopped dead, stiffened at the voice, and whirled around. Kenny Miller stood in the middle of the stairs, leering down at her. What was he doing here?

He was a changed man, emaciated, with stringy, long, dark hair, streaked with gray. Only a few years older than Willow, he appeared much older and haggard, obviously having lived a hard life.

His eyes were sunken and glowed with a feral, calculating stare.

"What are you doing here, Kenny?"

"Why your dear, old mom and I were pretty good friends. Bet you didn't know that, did you?"

Willow shook her head. She'd had no idea Kenny and her mother were even acquainted.

"You might say we were business partners of sorts."

By this time, he had reached the bottom of the stairs and was shuffling toward her. She started to turn to leave. She wanted no part of whatever Kenny Miller was up to. His hand snaked out and grabbed her upper arm in a tight grip.

"Not leaving so soon, are you? Let's get reacquainted." He pulled her into the living room.

"Remember that night?"

Willow struggled against him.

"Yes, Kenny, I remember. What do you want?" She tried to remove his hand from her arm, but it tightened, cutting off her circulation.

"Maybe I want us to finish what we started."

"We didn't start anything. You know that. I was ill."

"Tsk. Tsk. We were on our way until we got rudely interrupted."

He yanked her toward the couch and she lost her balance.

As she fell, Kenny followed, pinning her beneath him. This was not happening. She tried to turn away, but was at a disadvantage to fight him. He had the leverage.

"Get off me, Kenny. I don't want you. I never did and you know it. Were you the one who drugged me?"

He grinned. His breath gagged her.

"Sure you do, honey. Your mom would've wanted us to be together. She set it all up the last time. It wasn't me that gave you that little high."

She struggled against him.

"You're lying, Kenny Miller."

"Oh, no. Your mom was into some pretty serious business. But she was just starting out back then."

Willow continued to struggle. She would not let him rape her without a fight.

"What are you talking about?"

If she could just keep him talking...

"Your mom was trying to kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. You were keeping time with the sheriff's son and she needed to put a stop to that. She also wanted to try out a new meth recipe. You were the perfect test subject."

Willow's shock was so complete she stopped struggling.

"What?"

"You heard me. She got rid of the sheriff's son and tested out her new brew, all in one fell swoop. She got a bonus when you left town."

He pulled her toward him.

"Now what I want is the key to the money and the recipe. I'm gonna set up shop myself."

Her anger gave her the strength to push him away and she leaped from the couch. She couldn't think straight. Her mother had betrayed her? Her mother had tried to destroy her life? Kenny tackled her from behind. Willow's knees buckled and she fell to the floor. Kenny was on her before she could move away.

"I'd stop right there, Kenny."

The voice was soft and menacing. It came from the doorway. How was it lately that J.W. always managed to be there when she needed him most?

Kenny looked up into death.

J.W.'s eyes gleamed with a murderous glare.

Slowly, Kenny pulled back, hands in the air, and rose to his feet.

"Now J.W., I don't want another broken nose. I didn't hear you come in."

"Obviously not. Step away from her. Now."

Kenny hastily stepped away from Willow. J.W. strode over and laid a gentle hand on Willow's arm and helped her up from the floor. A hand beneath her chin, he tipped her head back and studied her face intently.

"Are you okay? Did he hurt you?"

She was shaking, terrified, angry, and hurt, all at the same time. She shook her head no.

"I'm fine. He didn't hurt me."

"You're sure? It would be my pleasure to take him apart for you."

She saw J.W. send Kenny a feral smile that did not reach his hard, cobalt glare.

"Really, I'm fine."

She looked up at him, trying to read his expression.

How much had he heard?

Her question must have been in her eyes.

"I heard enough. I'm sorry, Willow. It's not adequate, I know. I should've known better...that you wouldn't have done what I accused you of doing."

Kenny started to move toward the door. "Well...I think I'll just be--"

"Don't you move."

J.W. spoke in what could only be called his best I'm-the-Sheriff-and-I'm-in-charge voice.

J.W. turned back to Willow.

"I have to take him in. It sounds like he's got some information we've been after for a long time. Will you be okay?"

She nodded her head.

"I'm going back to the motel. I think I've seen everything I need to see here."

"Now wait a minute, J.W. I mean, Sheriff." Kenny was using his best whine voice. It grated on Willow's nerves. She was sure it irritated J.W.

"Kenny, are you gonna make me handcuff you? Or are you going to come willingly? It's one or the other."

Willow could only assume Kenny realized it was over for him. He hung his head as tears started pouring down his cheeks.

"I can't go much longer without finding a new source, J.W. I found Moira's stash that she kept for emergencies, but that's just about gone. If you put me in jail, I'll die."

"Well, Kenny, I don't have much sympathy for you. You never should've started. You give me the answers I want, maybe we can make a deal, depending on how deep into it you are."

"But, J.W., if I give you the answers you want, I'll end up dead."

Willow watched as J.W. shrugged.

"Well, Kenny, I'm sure if you have some decent information, we might come up with some way to protect your sorry ass. Now get moving."

J.W. turned to her.

"Willow, I'll walk you out to your car, if you're sure you're done here."

Willow nodded.

"Yes, I'm certainly finished here."

"Kenny, you try to bolt on me and make me chase you down, you won't like the result. Just walk out ahead of us to my truck. Where's your car?"

"In the back. In the shed."

"It'll be safe there. Get walking."

Kenny shuffled ahead of them as they walked out to the vehicles.

Once J.W. had Kenny securely in the truck, he turned back to Willow.

"I have to get him down to the station and find out what he knows." He sounded apologetic.

"Yes." She nodded her head. "I understand that."

She looked up at him.

"But why were you out here? You didn't know he'd be in the house, did you?"

He sighed.

"I came to talk to you. The same at the restaurant and at your motel room. It seems every time I try to talk to you I get...ahhh...sidetracked. Just seeing you blows everything else all to hell."

She smiled. "Yes, I've noticed."

Willow felt the now familiar heat flood her body.

She was wet again, wanting him. "It appears I have the same...ahhh...affliction."

He put both hands on her shoulders.

"Don't leave town. I know that sounds like a cliché, but I mean it. We need to talk." A faint smile came to his lips. "Don't make me chase you down."

Heat coursed through her.

"I won't leave, J.W. Maybe this time you'll ask the right questions."

His eyes glittered and he leaned down and kissed her hard and long, leaving her breathless and needy. He pivoted and strode away.

\* \* \* \*

So many thoughts churned around in her head, she didn't remember the drive back into town. She was surprised when she

This place she had once called home held so many secrets of which she was unaware. So many betrayals, so many lost chances. Her mother must have hated her to do what she had done.

Willow knew her mother hadn't loved her, but to use her own daughter to test her illegal drugs? To put her in such a compromising situation where there was no doubt she would lose the only man she ever loved.

Willow's hands clenched on the steering wheel and she lowered her head, leaning against it. For the first time in her life, Willow realized how very alone she was.

She had such a wealth of love to offer and no one, not her mother, not J.W., wanted it. She had been used, betrayed and almost destroyed by people who had professed to love her.

She sat straight up and her eyes narrowed.

Pity party? Not likely.

She had done that to herself only once and had sworn then that she would never, ever, give in to that loneliness again.

A shower to get rid of the stench of Kenny Miller, a change of clothes, and something to eat would give her a fresh perspective.

\* \* \* \*

It was a shame the Main Street Restaurant was the only sit-down spot to eat at.

She walked the several blocks from the motel to the restaurant.

Embarrassment flooded Willow as she once again walked inside.

Luckily, it was dinnertime and there'd been a change of shifts. Mary, the morning waitress, was apparently gone.

Willow chose a different booth this time. She sat, waiting for her dinner, trying not to think about the past.

"Willow..."

She turned and smiled, unsurprised when J.W. sat across from her.

"J.W."

She studied his face. He looked tired. She leaned forward and traced the lines at his eyes and mouth.

"Was it difficult?" She wasn't sure if he could talk to her about what Kenny told him. Willow assumed it would now be considered an ongoing investigation.

He sighed. His hand came up to clasp hers. He held it and placed a kiss in the center of her palm that sent tentacles of heat up her spine. She didn't think she'd ever seen him look so defeated. He was always so strong and sure of himself.

J.W. opened his eyes and his sapphire gaze met hers. She inhaled sharply. There was so much naked pain there.

"J.W.?" It frightened her.

She didn't want him to hurt. He turned his head to look out the window. He spoke without preamble.

"I drove to Boston nine years ago."

His admission surprised her. She waited for him to continue.

"I saw you dance."

"You saw me dance? You came to the club? Why didn't I see you?"

She tried to remember that far back to the sea of faces.

"I left before you finished." His eyes again met hers.

"It took me a year after you left to realize how stupid I was. I had this vision of who I was supposed to be. I was being groomed for this job. But you knew that, even then."

She nodded.

Yes.

Dalton history was linked to Esmerelda.

It was common knowledge. She'd always accepted that.

"Back then, I thought everything was legal or not legal. You broke the law or you upheld it. I was going to be the guy in the white hat. When I found you with Kenny and realized you had some kind of drug in your system, I didn't question my response."

He shook his head.

"With my upbringing, living in a house with no shades of gray, I came to the only conclusion that made sense to me. You were caught partying with Kenny and I never knew you at all. I felt betrayed and angry. And self-righteous."

"J.W., don't do this to yourself. You were meant to come to those conclusions. Obviously my mother planned very well. We both fell into her trap."

"Don't excuse what I did, Willow. I hurt you badly. I should've trusted you were the person I thought I knew. Instead, I threw away the best thing that ever happened to me."

"Stop it, J.W. We can always look back and think we'd have made different decisions based on what we know today. But that isn't how it works. We have to move forward."

After one more kiss to her palm, he placed her hand on the table and released it.

Her hand now felt chilled.

He continued, "When I watched you dance--" He inhaled deeply. "--I saw the look on your face, your passion, and the thought of you with any of the men in that place... I saw red. If I'd stayed, I'd probably have killed someone. But it also told me I was too late."

"So you didn't see the end of the set?"

"No." He was silent for a moment.

"I knew I'd lost you forever. I forced you into a life you'd never have chosen for yourself if it hadn't been for me. There was no way you were going to forgive that." He took a deep breath.

"When I returned home, I asked Elizabeth to marry me."

Willow's breath was trapped in her chest. The pain in her heart was piercing. If only he knew the truth.

"So I not only wronged you, but I wronged her as well. I had nothing to give her. I tried, honestly, to make her happy. But I couldn't love her in the way she had the right to expect. She was right to divorce me."

His expression was so tortured it caused Willow physical pain. She didn't want this for him.

"J.W. I'm not an exotic dancer. I haven't danced in probably five years now. I did it to pay my way through college."

His head came up.

"What? You went to college?"

She nodded her head.

"Yes. Four years. When I first arrived in Boston, I enrolled. There was a girl in one of my classes I became friendly with. She knew I was working three jobs and trying to go to school at the same time. She suggested I dance. She said I could make as much money in one night as I was making in a week trying to juggle three jobs.

"I was exhausted and I knew I couldn't keep up the pace I was at, so I auditioned. They hired me. But it wasn't what you think, J.W. I didn't prostitute myself. I just danced."

He nodded his head.

"Last night when Andy, the motel manager, called me and told me you'd checked in, I couldn't stay away. I knew I couldn't fight my feelings for you any longer. But when you came out of the bathroom in that tiny, little scrap of white, I lost my head...again.

"All I could see was you dancing on that stage with that come hither look...the look I'd only seen on your face before when I was making love to you. It drove me crazy thinking about it. The thought of anyone else bringing that look of passion to you..."

He reached for her hand as though he needed the physical contact.

"What did you go to college for?"

Finally!

He was asking the right questions.

"I studied for a degree in fashion design. When I finished college, I started working as a pattern cutter at a very prestigious dress design company. I've worked my way up since then."

The look in his eyes was one of resigned acceptance.

"I did it again. I should've known. I've always assumed the worst, haven't I?"

"Maybe it's because that's what your line of work deals with on a regular basis. The very worst of humanity. You've come to expect the worst from human nature."

"But I shouldn't have done that with you. I should've trusted in my love for you enough to know you wouldn't have done what I accused you of doing."

"Stop it, J.W. Stop torturing yourself. Don't keep looking back. I think I came back here to finally put an end to my past. You have to do the same thing. It's done."

His hand tightened on hers.

"Does that include us? Have you come to put closure to us?"

The air around them stilled, as if waiting expectantly for her answer.

"No, J.W. I thought I had, but the minute I crossed the county line, I knew I wasn't being truthful with myself."

She looked at him and reached across with her other hand. She clasped the hand entwined with hers and brought it to her cheek, rubbing against it.

"You've always been, and will always be, the other half of my soul. I want us to have a future, and I needed to come back to see if that was possible."

Their connection was silent and electric. His eyes deepened to indigo. Willow swore she saw blue flames in them, and it burned her.

"Come home with me. Now." His voice was a growled whisper.

"Your home?" Willow wanted to go with him. But that vision of Elizabeth with him crawled into her mind.

He nodded.

"Yes, my home, in my bed. With me."

"I...can't." How could she possibly explain it to him?

His shoulders sagged. She knew she had hurt him. "I understand."

He released her hands and sat back, looking out the window. Only when he was touching her did she feel grounded. She knew it would always be that way.

How could she tell him?

"J.W., you don't understand." She looked down at the table. "It'll seem petty."

His eyes turned back to study her. "What are you saying?"

"It's not that I don't want to go home with you. I want very much to be with you tonight."

"Then what is it? Willow, no more secrets. You have to tell me, no matter what it is."

"Elizabeth." Okay, she'd blurted it out. She looked away from him, embarrassed.

"Elizabeth? What does she have to do with us?"

Willow sighed.

"It was the house she shared with you. I told you it was petty. But I keep seeing you together."

It killed her.

She bit her lip. J.W. reached back across the table to cup her face.

"It's not petty." He looked down at the table and shook his head.

"I've made so many mistakes with you. Apparently, I keep making them."

He looked back up at her and, for the first time, she saw a genuine smile on his face.

"Tomorrow, the whole lot goes. Everything. The furniture, the pictures, everything. You pick out what pleases you. Whatever will give you good memories. No more ghosts."

Willow laughed.

"J.W., I can't believe you'd do that."

"Whatever it takes, Willow. I want you to be happy, and I'll do whatever I have to do. I'll make whatever changes I need to make."

"Oh, J.W." She turned her head and lingeringly kissed the palm of his hand.

His eyes dilated, then she saw that familiar glitter as a wicked smile lit his face.

"I have an idea."

"Oh-oh. I think maybe I'm in trouble."

"Do you remember the cabin?"

The cabin!

Oh, yes, how could she ever forget it? It was the first place they'd made love on that long ago, hot, summer night. A slow smile spread across her face.

"Yes, I remember it."

"We'll go there. It's the perfect place for us to start fresh. Elizabeth has never been there."

"Never?"

She found that hard to believe. It was so beautiful, an old rustic cabin, secluded, high up on the hill outside of Esmerelda. It had originally been the first home built by Dalton hands, and was now used mainly as a retreat. J.W. and Willow went there all those years ago to watch the 4th of July fireworks, and made some fireworks of their own.

"Never," he assured her. "Elizabeth didn't care for the rustic life very much. She enjoys her comforts." His voice deepened. "And to be honest, I always equate the cabin with memories of you."

"I'm glad."

J.W. got up from the booth and helped Willow to stand. Willow's waitress was just bringing out her food.

"Where are you going? I have your dinner here."

Willow was at a loss for words. She felt heat creep up her neck. "I...ah..."

J.W. tossed a few bills on the table.

"Here you go, Alice. We're short on time. Ms. MacKenzie just forgot our presence is required elsewhere."

He grabbed Willow's hand and led her from the restaurant.

Am I ever going to be able to eat a meal at this restaurant? She was beginning to wonder. Well, okay, right now food was the farthest thing from her mind.

When they reached the pavement, Willow halted.

"Wait. I need to get something first. At the motel." There was a CD she wanted.

She had one more thing she needed to be sure J.W. understood, and she could do it best with a little help from music she just happened to have brought with her.

\* \* \* \*

The cabin was just as Willow remembered it, serene, secluded and a part of J.W. no other woman had ever shared. J.W. laid a fire in the fireplace and it came to life in a warm glow. Willow loved the sweet, earthy smell of the burning wood.

It grounded her to Mother Nature, the smoky perfume reminding her of what was important in the world. The realization came to her that she equated it with her memories of J.W. Wood smoke, sweat, and the sweet taste of golden, melted marshmallows.

That night in July, J.W. had built a bonfire under the starlit sky. They toasted marshmallows and shared them along with drugging kisses of heat and surrender. No wonder she never used the fireplace in her apartment in Boston. Every time she thought about buying some kindling to start a fire, she was overcome by a bittersweet, erotic pain.

All her memories of J.W. had been suppressed in order to survive, and that had been one of them. She convinced herself that she just didn't want to clean up the mess the ashes would make and left it at that.

She had been afraid to search too deeply for answers. She was never able to figure out why she rented an apartment with a fireplace if she was so set against using it. Now she had her answer.

J.W. stood and turned toward her. He peered at her, a question in his eyes.

"What is it?"

"What?"

"You have a look. I don't know, like maybe you've just remembered something."

He was too observant. She smiled, though.

"Actually, it was something I forgot. But it's okay now. I've remembered and that's what counts." She did not elaborate further.

"Would you like something to drink? I think I might be able to scrounge up a bottle of wine someplace."

"That'd be nice." She was nervous. Normally, she didn't drink before she danced. A lot of the girls did, but her friend had warned her against the dangers of it that first night. This was different.

Could she make him understand?

Her hands clenched and unclenched, palms sweaty.

"Here, you are. Red was all I could find." He handed her a glass. Their fingertips touched and electricity flashed between them. Their eyes met and held for long seconds. Willow looked away first. She took a sip of the wine and placed the glass on the shelf near the CD player.

"I want you to sit and make yourself comfortable, J.W."

She turned away to place the disc she had brought with her into the player.

"Why are you so nervous, Willow?"

"Please. Just do as I ask. It's important. I...I need to show you something. So you understand."

He looked at her quizzically.

She walked with him to an easy chair near the fire. She gently pushed him into it. He would have pulled her to him, but she moved away, then bent down and removed his boots and socks. She massaged his feet as she spoke.

"I'm going to dance for you. I want you to see the whole set. What you missed. And I want to explain what you don't know."

Switching off the lamp on the table next to his chair, she rose and moved away from him.

"Willow, this isn't necessary," he protested, starting to rise from the chair.

She held up a trembling hand.

"It is necessary. For me. Please, humor me. As you said, there should be no secrets between us. You need to know what I'm going to show you."

She took another sip of her wine. She set the glass down, hit the play button on the CD player, and adjusted the volume.

The deep, pulsing beat of Enigma filled the room.

Willow still had her back to J.W. when she began slowly to sway back and forth to the low, throbbing beat. In her mind, she visualized that sultry July night.

This was always how she'd prepared for her dance sets. It was the only time she opened her mind to memories of J.W. She knew what the men wanted to see and the only way she could give it to them was to visualize J.W. and pretend the audience didn't exist.

She practiced in front of the mirror often and knew the look she needed. The hot, half-lidded come hither look that turned J.W. on. Her face was reflected back to her in the smoky glass doors of the console. She was ready and turned swaying and dipping, throbbing to the beat of the music, her hands moving seductively over her body.

Her voice was low and hypnotizing as she spoke.

"This look on my face, John William. Do you recognize it?"

He watched her and slowly nodded.

"Where have you seen it before?" She continued to sway, moving closer to him, her eyes never leaving his face.

He swallowed, took a sip from his glass, put it down. "When I came to see you dance. You had that look. It was the way you looked at all those men."

She released her hair, which she knew would shimmer in the firelight. The music changed. Willow slowly unzipped her flowing skirt and pushed it down her swaying hips.

It dropped to the floor.

"Where else, John William?" His eyes showed puzzlement.

Willow answered her own question.

"It was in July, John William. With you. Only ever with you."

Slowly, she undid each button of her shirt, bending and straightening, hands always moving, she turned away from him.

"The only person I ever saw on the nights I danced was you. Never them. Never the audience."

She turned back toward him, her blouse open, exposing her breasts encased in a lacy, white bra.

She let the blouse glide down her arms to float to the floor.

"It was the only time I would allow myself to think of you. When I was on that stage. My memories of you protected me from their comments, the leers, hands reaching out, wanting to touch me. But I need you to know I never let them touch me, not my body and not my mind."

Willow continued to sway to the music, turning and dipping.

Now she wore only her lace bra and white thong.

"This is all they ever saw, John William. I was never completely nude. I could've made more money if I was willing to go further, but I never did. This is where the dance ended. Between sets, I'd study in the dressing room. I never mingled with the customers. Do you understand what I'm saying? Do you?"

She watched him nod slowly.

His eyes shimmered.

"Yes." There was pain as well as passion in his eyes as he followed her every move.

She allowed her head to fall back and suggestively rocked her hips. She brought her head up and looked directly at him.

"Now, here's where my personal fantasy begins."

Willow turned away from him and unhooked her bra. She allowed it to glide down her arms to the floor.

"I've fantasized and dreamed all these years of dancing for you, only for you."

She hooked her fingers at the waistband of the thong and slid them provocatively down her long legs until they joined the remainder of her clothing.

She now swayed before him, naked, clothed only in the warm glow of the fire, dancing in light and shadow, her sweat-glistened body gleaming. She brought her hand up beneath her hair, then down her sides, over and beneath her breasts.

One hand continued slowly downward until it reached what she knew would be the glistening entrance to her shaved pussy. In deliberate, slow motion, she inserted two of her fingers, her eyes never leaving J.W.'s face.

She saw his heavy-lidded passion. His hands spasmed on the arms of the chair.

When she withdrew her fingers, they glistened in the firelight, coated with her pleasure.

"For you, John William, only for you. Never for anyone else."

She heard his groan of need.

Willow moved and knelt between his legs.

She unbuckled his belt and undid his pants, her eyes never leaving his face. He lifted slightly so she could pull his pants and boxers down his legs and she threw them to the side. She ran her hands up his legs and along his muscular thighs.

"I love to touch you, John William."

His arousal was prominent, proud, and she lightly ran her hand over its hard heat.

"You are so beautiful."

The head of his cock glistened with passion in the firelight. She bent forward and kissed the tip. She opened her mouth and enclosed the head of his erection in her moist heat. Her tongue circled the velvety, purple head. She swirled and licked and kissed all the way down its length.

His hands came up to caress her head, and remained, tangled in her hair, as she continued to tease and suckle.

He stopped her.

"No more," he whispered hoarsely.

She straddled his lap, her moist pussy coming into intimate contact with his rigid, ready cock. Her hands grasped the edges of his shirt and she ripped, buttons flying in all directions.

"I've wanted to do that since last night," she murmured throatily. She pulled the shirt from his arms with his help and tossed it to the floor.

His laughter was deep and sexy.

Her hands were moving upward over his chest and she could feel the deep rumble.

Willow saw the bite bruise left by her that morning and, leaning forward, she ran her tongue across its outline, then kissed it.

"I'm sorry about the nip," she whispered against his neck, her fingers caressing his lips and the line of his jaw.

She felt his smile.

"I'm not."

His solid, naked body felt so good. He lifted her head away from his shoulder and brought her lips to his, coaxing them open with his tongue. She settled down onto his throbbing erection. J.W. entered her fully with one thrust. Her gasp of pleasure was captured by his lips.

She clung to him.

He broke the kiss and looked down at her. "Gonna bite me again?" he whispered huskily, teasing her.

"Not...yet," she gasped.

She groaned as he started to move inside her. She rode against his thrusts, slow and steady. Willow felt the familiar tension rising inside her, tighter and tighter, as his thrusts became more urgent.

Willow was panting with need until finally spiraling, she screamed,

"Billy!" into the center of her storm. J.W. continued to plunge faster and faster, prolonging her pleasure, until finally he erupted, spurting deep and long. Willow wrapped her arms around him tighter, wanting to hold him to her forever.

She collapsed against him, her head falling to his shoulder.

"I love you, John William Dalton. This has to be a dream," she murmured.

His hands stroked her back.

"If it is, I don't want to wake up. I've ached to hold you in my arms for a very long time. I'll never let you go again."

Willow smiled contentedly.

"I'm where I want to be, J.W." She snuggled closer.

"You called me Billy."

She heard the smugness in his voice.

"You heard that, did you?"

The only time she'd ever called him Billy was at the peak of her orgasm.

"Anybody standing outside this cabin would've heard you very distinctly," he teased.

She punched his shoulder. "I could've bitten you again, instead."

"Ahh, so that's why you bit me. Now I get it."

She nipped lightly at his shoulder.

"I've missed you so much, Willow. I do love you. I never stopped loving you. If I hadn't been so pigheaded and stubborn, I'd have come after you long ago. Forgive me?"

"Well, at least you admit it." For that comment, she received a light swat on her ass.

"Oww."

"I don't want to move, but I think a shower would be in order right now."

"By yourself, or do you want company?"

"Oh, definitely, I think I'm going to need some help."

\* \* \* \*

Much later, after their shower and two more orgasms, they rested naked in front of the fire. J.W. sat on the floor with his back against the chair, Willow cradled against him, between his legs.

Finally, Willow asked the question she'd put off.

"Did Kenny offer any useful information?"

J.W.'s hands, fondling her nipples, stopped.

"Yes, he did. I'm sorry, Willow, but your mother was in pretty deep. Apparently, a small network of these labs had been set up and your mother was the main contact. He gave us names. He seemed to think your mother had the illegal funds tucked away somewhere."

"We'll have to search the house, Willow." He sighed.

"I understand, J.W. I still can't believe everything that's happened." She sat up quickly, remembering.

"Oh, my God! I just remembered. Mr. Garber gave me an envelope she left for me."

She jumped up from the floor and found her purse. Willow pulled out the folded envelope and stood there, looking at it. She worried her lower lip.

"I don't want to open it. I don't think I want to know what's inside." she said

"Come here." he said.

She walked back to him and sank into his arms.

"I'm right here with you. You know that, right?"

Willow nodded.

"It's just that the whole world seems to have turned upside down." She turned and came up on her knees, facing him. "I have to do this, don't I?"

"Yes, I think you do. Would you rather be alone?"

"No," she said quickly. "Please, I need you with me."

"I'm not going anyplace."

She tore open the envelope. There was a piece of paper covered with handwriting and a small key. She held the key up.

"This must be the key Kenny was looking for."

"What does the note say?"

Willow read the four short lines written on the page.

*"Willow,*

*As my daughter, you are my only heir. What you find in this safe deposit box at the Grand National Bank in Boston is yours. Do with it as you will. I apologize for nothing. I have lived my life. You will live yours wherever you are.*

*Your Mother,*

*Moira Irene MacKenzie."*

Tears came to Willow's eyes. .

Four cold lines...that's all there were to sum up her relationship with her mother.

She was overwhelmed by the years of emptiness.

She couldn't stop crying.

J.W. pulled her to him and held her close, rocking her in his arms. When, finally, her sobs lessened, he picked her up and carried her to the bed. He got in beside her and pulled her close, soothing her into a dreamless sleep.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, Willow sat at the kitchen table sipping at a cup of coffee, wrapped in one of J.W.'s thick robes, when he dropped his bombshell.

"I've been thinking. It's going to take some time for me to wind things up here."

Willow looked at him over the top of her coffee cup.

"What are you talking about?"

"Resigning as sheriff."

"Why are you resigning as sheriff?"

He shrugged.

"Your work is in Boston. You certainly can't commute back and forth. We've already spent ten years apart. You've worked hard to build a life for yourself. I can not ask you to leave it all behind now."

"J.W., you can't do that." She was overwhelmed by what he was willing to give up for her.

"I'm sure I can find a position with one of the precincts in Boston."

"But you wouldn't be happy. I'd never ask that of you. Besides, I've already thought about it. I'll do what I've always wanted to do. I'll open my own shop. It may take a little time to get established, but I'm talented and it'll happen. The Internet will allow me a lot of flexibility. I don't need to live in Boston. You are not resigning as sheriff."

"Are you sure about this, Willow? Are you okay with being a sheriff's wife? With staying in Esmerelda?"

Was he asking her to marry him? She couldn't quite take it all in.

"Let me be sure I understand correctly. Are you asking me to marry you?"

"The only way I can tie you to my side and make sure you don't go running off again is to get that wedding ring on your finger as soon as possible. I'm taking no chances this time."

His dark brows came down in a frown.

"I repeat. I love you, Willow MacKenzie, and always have. And I'm going to tie you to me in any which way to Sunday, and that includes marriage."

"You would have been willing to resign as sheriff?"

"Yes." He nodded emphatically. "In a Massachusetts' minute, sweetheart."

Tears fogged her eyes. But these were different from last night's.

"You'd have given up everything here in Esmerelda? For me?"

She still couldn't get over the magnitude of what he would have sacrificed for her.

"Yes, sweetheart. Whatever it takes."

The tears flowed down her cheeks.

He walked around the table and knelt beside her chair.

He took her hand between both of his and looked at her.

"Will you marry me, Willow MacKenzie? Be my wife, bear my children? Stay with me forever?"

"You really do love me."

It was a statement, not a question. Finally, she believed in dreams. She threw herself into his arms.

"Oh, yes! John William Dalton, I will most definitely marry you. I've waited for you all my life. I love you so much."

She was laughing and crying at the same time. Her heart was finally whole.

### **One Year Later**

Willow was putting the finishing touches to a mannequin in the front window of her newly renovated shop on Main Street. The last year had brought so many changes to her life. In one month's time, she'd be marrying J.W. For the last ten months, they had taken turns traveling between Boston and Esmerelda.

Willow finally lit the fireplace in her apartment. No sad memories were attached to it when it came to life. Only happiness.

J.W. went with her to open her mother's safe deposit box. Inside was no more than J.W. had expected to find. There were titles to numerous properties throughout the United States, and at least \$250,000 in cash. There was, of course, no recipe for the illegal drug.

Willow did not want the money or the property.

Instead, she set up a trust fund for the welfare of the children of those parents who were arrested through Kenny Miller's information. She made Edward Garber the trustee. The children should not have to suffer for their parents' sins.

Kenny Miller was in protective custody pending the trials of those involved in the illegal methamphetamine operations. He had cleaned up his act with J.W.'s help, but who knew how long that would last.

The door buzzed and J.W. strode into the shop.

J.W. had changed over the last year, too.

He was no longer brooding all the time. It had taken him several months to realize she was not going to disappear on him.

Right now, he had that boyish grin on his face. He was obviously up to something.

"Good day, Sheriff. And what brings you to my humble shop this fine afternoon?"

He was at her side and leaned down to capture her lips in one of his searing kisses that left her breathless.

"Good day to you, Madam Shopkeeper. Have I told you today that I love you?"

She smiled and shook her head. He reminded her every single day, almost hourly, that he loved her.

"Not since this morning at any rate."

"Ahh, yes, this morning." He nodded wisely, his eyes glittering.

She could see he remembered their passionate and heated lovemaking. It had kept her in a glow all day.

"I have a present for you."

Her eyes widened in surprise.

"A present?"

"Yes. Call it a wedding present."

He handed her a small, beautifully wrapped package.

"Should I open it now?"

He nodded.

"Yes. Maybe you'll wear them for me this evening?"

Slowly she opened the package. Her eyes widened as she removed the lid from the box. She chuckled.

"Hmmm. Are these department issue?"

There was a twinkle in his eye.

"No, I wouldn't think so."

She lifted the velvet-lined handcuffs from the box, dangling them before her.

"Yes, well, somehow I think I knew that. I guess when you said you were going to shackle me to your side every way possible, you weren't just talking figuratively?"

He walked to the front door and closed the blinds, then locked the door.

He turned back to her.

"I thought maybe it was time to try out one of my fantasies. What do you think?"

Her voice lowered. "I think I'm glad you locked the door."

He came back to her, drawing her up flush against his body.

"By the way, have I mentioned that I love you deeply, absolutely, and forever?"

Her chuckle was cut short by his mouth descending to hers as he swung her into his arms.

The End