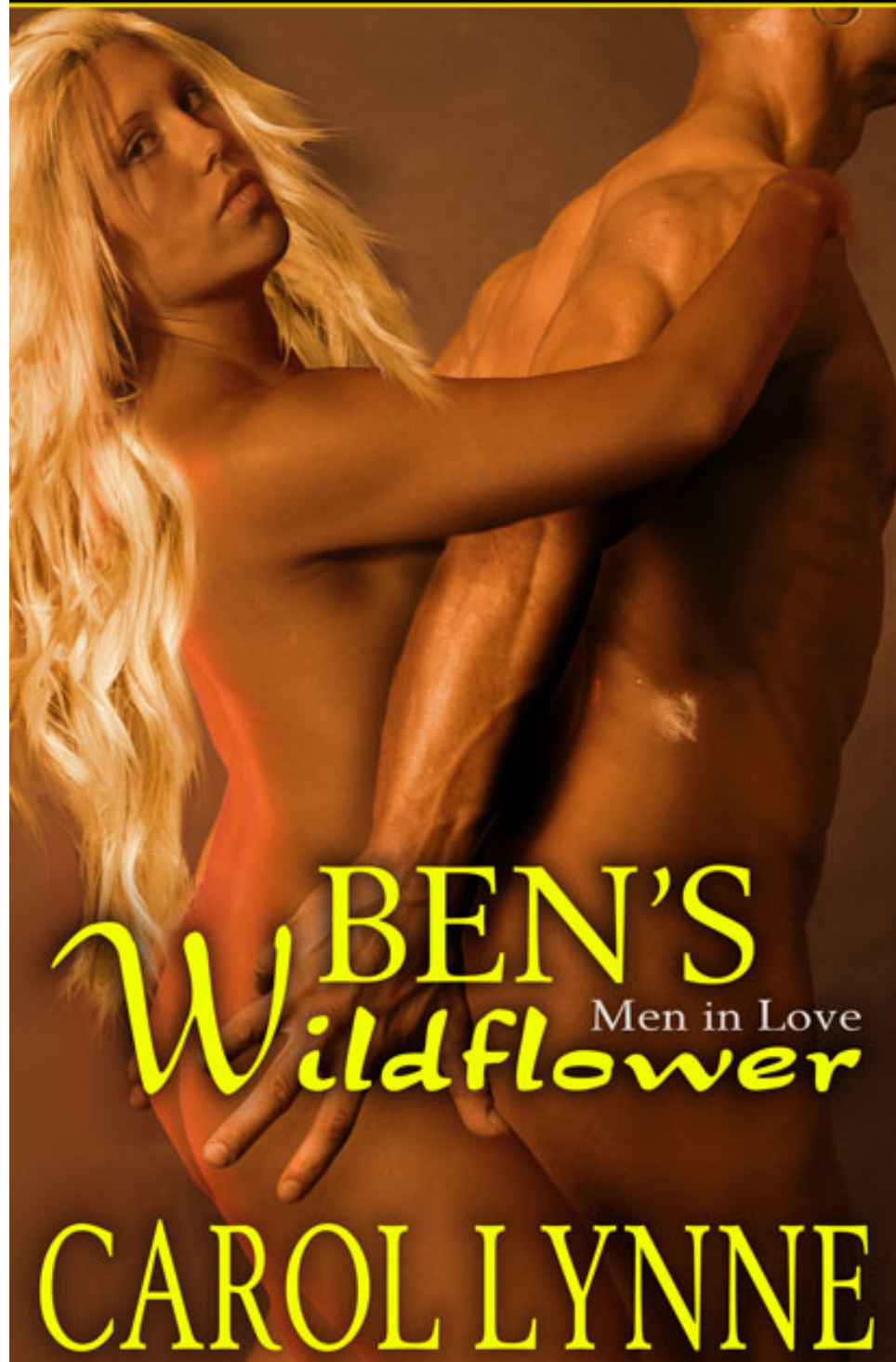


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



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Ben's Wildflower

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# ***BEN'S WILDFLOWER***

**Carol Lynne**

### *Acknowledgement*

I would like to thank Helen for her tireless work. You'd never know we live on two separate continents. Thank you for believing in me when I needed it most.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## Chapter One

The crowing of the rooster just before dawn woke him. Ben Thomas rolled over and hit his alarm clock and went back to sleep. The rooster crowed again and once again a big beefy hand slammed down on the poor clock. The third time the rooster sounded Ben sat up and reached for the electrical cord. Coming out of the hazy feeling from too little sleep, Ben shook his head. His brain still felt a little foggy but at least he laughed. "Damn rooster."

Ben had lived on the Crawford ranch for two weeks. He'd bought half of the ranch and had gone into partnership with Kate Crawford. Kate was insisting that they change the name of the ranch. Ben was just too tired to care about the name of his new home.

Ben fell back down on the bed. Kate. Just thinking about her got him tied up in knots. He remembered the first day his friend Jake drove him over to meet Kate. He'd wanted to talk to her about buying her ranch. Jake had told him she might be willing to sell. It seemed she'd been having trouble running the ranch on her own. The bank was only months away from foreclosure and Kate was trying to do it all on her own.

The problem with the ranch wasn't the ranch itself. The problem was things kept mysteriously breaking that needed to be fixed. Fixing farm and ranch machinery could get very expensive and from talk around town poor Kate had the worst luck. Every time she'd save up enough money to help pay down the mortgage loan something else would break and she'd get further behind.

Jake had brought Ben over to meet Kate and see if she was ready to throw in the towel. The late summer day when they'd pulled into the ranch yard changed Ben's life. Jake had pulled up to an old two-story farm house.

The house needed work but it appeared to be well cared for. Flower boxes brimming over with pretty red geraniums and dark purple petunias sat under every window in the front of the house. A freshly painted dark green porch swing sat beside two equally green rocking chairs. The green was further carried out on the shutters bracketing every window. As soon as Ben saw the house he could picture himself sitting in one of the rockers drinking a glass of iced tea after a long day of ranch work.

Jake walked up the front porch steps and knocked on the door. When no one came to the door Jake turned and looked toward the barn. "Maybe Kate's in the barn."

Ben followed Jake to the big red barn with white trim. Walking through the door into the barn, they allowed their eyes to adjust to the dim light and called for Kate. When no answer came Jake shook his head. "I've no idea where she could be. She never leaves the ranch. Let's keep looking."

They checked out a few of the smaller ranch buildings and headed back to the truck. "Let's take a drive out into the fields. There's a dirt road of sorts we can follow."

Ben got in the truck beside Jake and they headed toward the gate to the pasture. Ben got out and opened the gate for Jake to drive through. Shutting the gate, Ben hopped back into the truck and looked around as Jake drove down the narrow dirt path. Once they were over the second hill Jake spotted Kate.

Kate was putting up hay in the field. The problem, Ben thought, was that she was doing it all by herself. She'd drive the truck and pick up about five bales and then stop and climb up onto the truck and stack them. It would take her forever at this rate. Ben could see about a hundred acres worth of hay here. So far Kate had only done about twenty acres. Ben shook his head. "Too much heavy work for a woman."

Jake laughed and pointed toward Kate. "Don't let her hear you say that. That right there, my friend, is the hardest working woman I've ever met. She does everything by herself on this ranch and has for the last five or six years since her dad and mom were killed." Jake took off his hat and ran his fingers through his hair. "Cree and I both have offered to help but she's too stubborn for her own good."

Ben looked across the field as they drove toward the hay truck. "Well, maybe she's had enough of this hard life by now and will agree to sell." Ben watched Kate stack more hay on the truck. As they got closer it appeared the bales were almost as big as she was.

Jake pulled his pickup beside the hay truck and got out. Ben was getting out of the truck when Kate stopped what she was doing and turned around. The air seemed to leave Ben's lungs. Before him stood the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Kate was a tiny thing—only about five two. She wore old faded jeans that fit her ass to perfection and a long-sleeved chambray shirt that snapped up the front. In her struggles with the bales of hay the top three snaps had come open. A bright red bra greeted Ben's eyes. The suntanned globes spilling out of the cups made Ben's mouth water.

Immediately he was rock-hard, which for a man of his size was definitely not a good thing. Ben had to turn back toward the truck and reposition his cock to run down the leg of his jeans. If not the damned thing would be sticking up out of the top of his pants for everyone to see. Ben's ten-inch cock had always been the bane of his existence.

Kate took the old straw cowboy hat off her head and wiped her brow. A cascade of golden curls fell to her waist. "Hi, Jake. What brings you out here today?"

Jake smiled at Kate and motioned toward her open top. Kate looked down and turned just one shade lighter than the fancy bra she was wearing. She quickly turned away and refastened her shirt.

Turning back around, Kate shrugged her shoulders. "Sorry about that, Jake. Not a very good first impression to make on your friend I'm afraid."

Jake chuckled and took off his hat. "I'd like to introduce an ex-Seal buddy of mine." Jake heard Ben clear his throat. "Actually he was my Commanding Officer. Kate Crawford, let me introduce you to Ben Thomas."

Ben walked, a little stiff-leggedly, up to the hay truck and held out his hand. Kate bent slightly to shake his hand. The moment her small hand was enveloped in his large

one, a zing raced through Ben's body straight to his cock. Ben looked into her eyes and was left speechless. Her eyes were so dark a brown they appeared almost black. Ben swallowed around the lump in his throat. "It's very nice to meet you, Miss Crawford."

Kate swallowed visibly. "Please call me Kate and it's very nice to meet you too, Ben." Kate looked into Ben's eyes and smiled.

Their mutual trance-like state was interrupted by Jake. "The reason we came by, Kate, was to see if you'd be interested in selling Ben your ranch. I'm sorry if it was a little presumptuous of me but I'd heard in town that you'd been thinking about it."

Kate broke eye contact with Ben and straightened. "Sorry, Jake and Ben," she smiled down at Ben again, "but I'm not leaving this ranch until they throw me off. Which if things keep going the way they have been around here won't be that much longer."

Ben narrowed his eyes. "Exactly what kind of things have you been having trouble with, Kate?" Ben shifted his stance a bit to make more room for his cock.

Kate looked out over the lush hay fields. "Typical stuff I guess. Tractors breaking down almost daily, leaks in my holding tanks, and my windmill on the south side of the ranch stopped working last week. I know breakdowns are a part of owning a ranch. I just can't figure out why it's suddenly happening daily."

Jake and Ben looked at each other. Jake put his hat back onto his head and sighed. "It doesn't sound like normal wear and tear, Kate. Do you have any enemies? Maybe someone else is trying to buy you out?"

Kate shook her head. "It's hard to make enemies when you never leave home. I only go into town when I have to and only for as long as I need to. Although with things breaking down the way they have I've been to Junctionville more in the last two weeks than I have in the last two years." She seemed to consider the rest of his question. "As for anyone wanting to buy the ranch the answer is no. Besides Ben no one has even asked about it."

Ben withdrew a card from his wallet and handed it to Kate. "Here's my card with my cell phone number on it. If you need anything or change your mind about selling please give me a call. I'm staying with Jake for now over at the Triple Spur."

Kate nodded and slipped the card into her back pocket. "Thank you for the offer, Ben, but this is my home. It may be getting too much for me to handle but it's still my home."

Ben and Jake thanked her once again and drove back to the Triple Spur. Ben turned to Jake, thankful his cock was only half hard now. "What do you suppose is going on with Kate's ranch?"

Jake shook his head and turned down the stereo. "You got me, Ben, but that little gal surely has had a rough time of it. When her folks were killed in a car accident she got saddled with a mortgage on a ranch that has been in her family for generations. Apparently her father took out the mortgage just before he died. It wasn't that big a

sum at the time. When her parents died without any insurance Kate had to take out a second mortgage to cover the funeral expenses and the inheritance taxes on the place."

"How much does she owe? Is she really in danger of foreclosure?"

Jake looked over at his friend. "I don't know, Ben. I've heard she's missed a couple of payments lately from Clint down at the bank but I can't say how much she still owes or how much longer the bank will give her."

Ben stared out the side window for a few minutes. "I'd like to help her. Do you think she'd let me?"

Jake laughed. "Didn't we just see the same woman? Kate doesn't accept help from anyone, Ben. She's got too much pride."

"Well, I'm gonna try."



## Chapter Two

The rooster sounded off again and Ben looked at the clock. It was only five-fifteen in the morning but like the rooster said, it was time to get up. Ben remembered the solution to Kate's financial problems and Ben's lack of a home problem came from sweet little Jenny Sommers.

It was a warmer than usual summer day when Ben went in search of Kate with his latest proposition. He found Kate in the barn mucking out stalls. "Good morning, Kate, how're you doing?"

Kate stopped what she was doing and backed up against the stall. Pitchfork held to her side in a tight-fisted grip. He could see the stress in her body language. "He-hello, Ben, what can I do for ya?"

Ben shifted his feet, suddenly feeling very nervous. "Well... I was talking to my friend yesterday and she suggested a solution to our problem. You see I need a place to call home and a clear purpose for what's left of my life and you love this ranch but are struggling financially to hold on to it. The solution Jenny came up with is perfect. She suggested that I buy half of the ranch from you. That way you have a good-sized injection of cash and I have something to do with my days." Ben stopped and looked at Kate for any sign of agreement. He didn't see any signs at all. Kate's face was totally blank, showing no emotions, good or bad

"I appreciate your offer and it does sound possible but there's a very big problem in your solution, Ben. There's only one house. Are you planning to live on the Triple Spur and commute to the ranch every day?"

Okay, thought Ben, she didn't turn him down. That was a good thing. Now he just had to convince her they could both share the farmhouse. "Well no. I wasn't planning on living anywhere but here. I thought I could pay to renovate the house and we could share it. I could have an addition added on to the back of the first floor for my bedroom. You could have the second story all to yourself. I could even renovate the floor plan if you'd like."

Kate looked at him warily. "I'm sorry to sound suspicious but what would be involved in living in the same house? I mean... Do we share kitchen duties? Do we eat together? I just need some very clear boundaries set up before I think about your offer."

Ben's eyebrows rose at her questions. "Well, I hadn't thought of all the boundaries but I'd appreciate it if we could share household chores. I would definitely enjoy eating meals with you. I've spent a good portion of my life eating alone and since I've been at the Triple Spur I've come to really enjoy the easy conversation at the kitchen table. Does that answer some of your questions, Kate?"

Kate took a deep breath. "Yes, all but one, what about sex? You won't expect it just because I'm a woman, will you?"

"No," Ben stated firmly. "I'll never approach you regarding sex. I'm looking for a home, Kate. Not a wife or a girlfriend."

Kate chewed on her bottom lip. "I'll give you an answer in a couple of days. Is that acceptable?"

Ben nodded. "It is." He tipped his hat and started to leave but stopped and turned back toward her. "Kate, would you like to come to Cree and Jenny's wedding this Saturday?"

Kate's eyes lit up. "Yes. I would like that, Ben. Thank you for inviting me." Kate chewed her lip again. "I know a little about the situation with Jenny but could you tell me basically what happened so that I don't stick my foot in my mouth at the wedding?"

Ben turned and sat down on a bale of hay. He motioned for Kate to take the bale across from him. "Well, Kate, it's a pretty long story but I'll give you the condensed version. Jenny's stepfather Buck, who also happens to be Jake's father, raped and tortured her when she was eighteen. Cree and Jake were away in the Seals at the time."

Ben picked up a piece of hay and stuck it in his mouth. "By the time they got out of the service Jenny had disappeared. A couple of months ago Buck found her again and again raped and tortured her. That time however he put Jenny into a coma. Jake was called by the hospital in Kansas City. Seems they'd found a picture with his name in her pocket. Anyway, Cree and Jake flew to Kansas City and when Jenny was well enough they brought her home. I came into the picture when Jake called and asked if I could spare some time to help protect Jenny. Buck was still on the loose and they were afraid he would try to take her again. That bastard managed to still hurt her even though she's been surrounded by ex-Seals. He shot her horse, he shot out the windshield of Cree's SUV and he shot Jenny in the side. All separate occasions, but the team caught up with Buck after he shot her and he was arrested."

Ben took the piece of hay out of his mouth and threw it on the floor. "I shot Buck during the gun play that injured Jenny. We found him unconscious in a cave on their ranch with a slight head wound. When the police took him to the hospital he managed to escape and kidnap Jenny from the hospital. He took her to the Double B. That was his ranch. My friend Gabe is planning on buying it now. When Buck took Jenny to the Double B he had every intention of killing Jake and Cree and making Jenny his wife. Buck knew they'd come after her. He knew that Jake and Cree wanted Jenny to be their wife. In his own sick and twisted mind I guess Buck thought if he got rid of them Jenny would agree to marry him. Like Jenny would ever love, let alone marry, a sick fuck like Buck Baker."

Ben stopped and took off his hat and rubbed his shiny head. "Jenny ended up turning the tables on old Buck and kicked him in the balls and branded his forehead. We got there just as she was done. Buck's now in some jail in Oklahoma." Ben shrugged his shoulders. "That's it and now Cree and Jenny are getting married Saturday evening."

I understand that Saturday night Cree and Jenny will both marry Jake in a private ceremony."

Kate's face was very pale by the time Ben finished his story. "I know I'd like to go to the wedding. Do you think Jenny might like some help from another woman the day of the ceremony?"

Ben reached over and held her hand. "I think she'd love it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ben ran his hand down to his stiff cock and squeezed. He'd been around Kate for almost three months now and it got harder every day. The renovating still wasn't done but at least his new room added to the back of the house was finished. Ben began a slow rhythm of pumping his swollen cock. Every minute he was around Kate was torture on the poor thing. He'd had to give up wearing underwear. When his cock got hard, as was the daily occurrence lately, underwear was painful. Ben had no choice but to jerk off every morning and night.

Kate seemed to feel the pull of attraction between them but was very skittish around him. As for him, he'd promised himself he'd never try to fuck her. It wasn't that he didn't want to, because the pulsing cock in his hand sure as hell wanted to. It was because he'd never hurt Kate. Ben had discovered when he was seventeen just what kind of damage a cock as big as his could cause a woman, especially a woman as petite as Kate, and the experience had permanently scarred him.

Since that horrible day he'd fucked only big, very, very experienced women. Besides the size of his cock Ben enjoyed his sex pretty rough. He wasn't into any kind of bondage or anything. He just liked to fuck a woman when and where he felt like it and to fuck her hard. The women of his past had put up with his sexual demands simply to get to his mighty cock.

Kate was a forever kind of woman. That he didn't have a problem with because he was more than ready to become a forever kind of man. It was the thought of bringing pain to such a sweet young woman that he couldn't stomach. He knew deep down that he was being irrational, but every time he looked at Kate and her tiny precious body the old fears returned. Once again he was thrust back to that night years ago when his girlfriend had called him a monster as she tried to stop the bleeding from her poor ripped pussy. He'd been young and inexperienced with women and had tried to force his cock into a too tight hole. Ben tried to shake off the painful memories and pictured Kate in his mind. Although petite, Kate's body was sexy as hell. Breasts made for a man's hands with a tiny waist and nice sized ass. He tried to picture her naked.

Ben's thoughts of his lovely sweet Kate helped bring him to a mind-blowing orgasm, his cum shot all the way up his chest to land on his jaw. Grabbing the washcloth he now kept beside his bed, Ben wiped his face and got up. He wandered into the shower to begin another day.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate woke that morning with sand in her eyes, or at least that's what it felt like. She couldn't seem to get comfortable with a man in the house again. It wasn't that she was afraid of Ben, far from it, Kate trusted Ben more than she'd trusted any man. He was just so damn big.

After getting bacon out of the fridge, Kate got out the cast iron skillet and turned on the new gas stove. She looked around her new kitchen and smiled. Besides Ben's room, the kitchen was the only room so far to get renovated. They'd decided to do away with the dining room and make the kitchen much larger. It was now the classic country kitchen she'd always dreamed of. White cabinets with soapstone countertops and a large marble slab built right into the corner of the counter. Perfect for making bread and rolling pie dough.

Kate chose to have the old linoleum ripped up and the old wide plank floors refinished. She picked a light fern green for the walls and white eyelet cotton curtains for the windows. Her favorite part about the kitchen was the long farmhouse oak table Ben found at a farm auction.

Kate smiled and finished the bacon. She'd heard the shower in Ben's room come on when she came down earlier so she knew he'd be ready to eat any time. She got the egg bowl out of the refrigerator and cracked six eggs for Ben. Kate shook her head. They would have to get a few more chickens to keep up with Ben's egg consumption. At six foot seven inches tall Ben had a big frame to fill and consequently was a big eater.

She thought about Ben a lot these days. He still made her a little nervous but it wasn't because he'd done anything to her, it was just the size of the man. It was a shame she couldn't get over the past. He was an absolutely gorgeous man. His gray eyes seemed to look deep into her soul whenever he spoke to her. The tiny lines around his eyes were the only sign of his age. Ben's totally bald head was a choice, not an act of nature. It looked good on him too. Hair would have detracted from his beautifully sculpted face. His hands had to be her favorite part of him. Very large with well-shaped fingers and those bulging veins that she loved so much. Just one of his fingers had to be at least two or three of hers. She'd never seen anything like it.

Despite his size, Ben was very gentle with all things. The horses loved and respected him as well as the cows. He'd even made a new best friend in Charlie, her blue healer. Charlie waited for Ben on the porch every morning and for the rest of the day you didn't see one without the other.

Yes, she sighed, looking out the window, he was a damned fine man. Too bad Clint had spoiled her for all men. Kate rubbed her left arm and then, realizing what she was doing, Kate mentally shook herself and got back to fixing breakfast.

Eggs, bacon, toast and coffee were on the table when Ben walked into the kitchen. "I'm sorry. I hope you weren't waiting for me to eat. I'm moving kind of slowly this morning." Ben pulled out a chair and sat down. He quietly bowed his head in prayer then took a drink of his morning coffee.

"I made you six eggs today. If it's still not enough please don't be afraid to say so. I'm not used to cooking for someone of your size." She realized what she'd said and bit her lip. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Ben chuckled and took the platter of eggs from her. "Don't apologize, Kate. Most people aren't used to cooking for someone of my size. Except maybe the caterer for the Denver Broncos."

Kate laughed and felt more at ease. "What've you got going today, Ben?"

Ben swallowed a mouthful of eggs and took another sip of coffee. "Well, first I need to get the fence fixed in the west pasture. I noticed it was down again last night. I did a temporary patch job but I'll go back this morning and fix it right. Then after lunch I need to go into town to the bank. Would you like to go with me? I thought we could set up a mutual ranch account for feed and supplies."

Kate visibly stiffened in her chair. "No. I don't go to the bank. I do all my business with them through the mail or online."

"Why would you do that when town is so close by?" Ben asked with genuine curiosity.

Kate looked everywhere but at Ben. She waved his concerns away. "It's just a complete dislike for one of the bank employees, nothing to be concerned about. It happened many years ago. He's probably forgotten about it but I never will. I promised myself that I may have to do business with that bank but I'd never step foot in it again and I haven't since the age of eighteen." Kate stopped abruptly, realizing she'd said too much. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Opening them, she rose from the table and started gathering the dishes.

Ben reached out a hand to stop her from taking his plate and Kate jumped and pulled back her hand. "I'm sorry, Kate. I didn't mean to scare you. I was just going to tell you it's my turn to do the dishes."

Kate's face turned red. "No, I'm sorry. You didn't do anything wrong. I'm just a little jumpy this morning that's all." She turned and set the dishes in the sink. "I'm going to go take care of the horses. I'll see you at lunch, Ben."

Ben nodded. "Okay, Kate, have a good morning." Kate practically ran out of the kitchen and out the back door. Ben stared after her. "What in the hell was that about?" he mumbled to himself.

Ben decided to stop and see Jenny on his way to the bank. She was always a wealth of information on the opposite sex. And it didn't hurt that she'd become quite friendly with Kate over the past several months.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ben pulled up to the Triple Spur ranch house and got out of his black quad cab truck. Jenny was sitting on the front porch snapping green beans. Ben smiled and climbed the porch steps. Bending over to give her a kiss on the cheek, he also rubbed his

hand on her protruding stomach. "Hi, Miss Jenny. How are my honorary nieces or nephews doing today?" Jenny was five and a half months pregnant with twins.

Jenny smiled and rubbed her belly. "Hi, Ben. The babies are playing soccer this morning I think."

Ben sat down on one of the wicker chairs. "How come you're up here and not helping Jake with the horses today? Are you feeling okay?"

Jenny blew out a frustrated breath and began snapping green beans a little quicker, clearly taking her frustrations out on the defenseless little beans. "My husbands have banished me from the corrals for the rest of the pregnancy. Can you look at me and tell how happy I am about it? You'd think a horsewoman had never given birth to twins before. They're driving me crazy already. I might just end up staying the next four months at your place." She looked serious until her lip twitched.

"You and those babies you're carrying are the most important things in the world to those two men. It's only natural they're going to smother you after all you've been through. Please be patient with them." Ben smiled and patted her knee. "They're only men after all."

"I get ya, big guy. So what brings you here this afternoon?" Jenny went back to her green beans.

Ben shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I wanted to ask you a couple things about Kate."

Jenny raised a single eyebrow. "What about Kate?"

Ben relayed the morning's breakfast conversation to Jenny. When finished he looked at her, puzzled. "Has she told you if I've done something to frighten her? I don't want to break her confidence in you but I can't stand the thought of scaring her again."

Jenny reached out and held Ben's hand. "I don't think you specifically did anything wrong, Ben. She hasn't come out and told me much but I get the feeling she's been physically hurt by a man. I know she was wary of moving into the same house with you because you're a man. It's not simply because you're so much bigger than most men in America, it's just that you're male." Jenny squeezed his hand a little harder. "If ever she gives you the opportunity to ask about her past, do it. Believe me. Unless she talks to someone about it she'll never be able to get over it. Other than that just be patient with her. If she pulls away please try not to take it personally. That'll only make her feel worse."

Ben leaned over and kissed her cheek again. "Thank you, Jenny."

"Well, well, well, isn't this cozy. Ben, why is it that I'm always finding you alone with my wife?" Cree stepped up onto the porch and came over to stand in front of him.

Ben smiled and shook his head. "Calm down, Conan. I was just asking a piece of advice from your lovely bride." Ben stood and released Jenny's hand. "Well, I've got to get to the bank." He started down the steps and stopped. Turning around, he looked at Jenny. "Who do you think she's avoiding at the bank?"

Jenny shrugged her shoulders, but Cree spoke up. "Clint. My money's on Clint Adams. His dad owned the bank before he died last year and Clint is vice-president. I heard some scuttlebutt when we first moved here about him. It seems he has a history of violence toward women but his daddy always bailed him out of trouble."

Ben tipped his hat to Cree and Jenny. "Thanks for the information, Cree. Thanks for the advice, Jenny." Ben stalked to his truck and roared out of the driveway toward town.

Jenny looked at Cree. "Do you think he's going to do something foolish?"

Cree looked at Jenny and kissed her. Looking at the dust being thrown up by the speeding pickup, he sighed. "Nothing that I wouldn't do. I've had my eye on Clint since I became sheriff of Junctionville. He's a good-looking guy but he's got an ugly soul. He won't be getting away with hitting on women anymore if I have any say in the matter."

\* \* \* \* \*

The closer Ben got to town the angrier he became. What kind of animal would hurt a sweet, beautiful woman like Kate? Ben didn't know Clint Adams very well but he'd always seemed kind of full of himself. Well, after today Clint would be put on notice in regards to his Kate.

His Kate? Where had that come from? Ben knew he was in trouble sexually where Kate was concerned but could he be in trouble emotionally as well? Ben had never been in love with a woman. The closest he ever got was Mary Sue Jenkins, his high school girlfriend back in Missoula, and that was just a very lusty kind of relationship.

By the time Ben got to the bank his hands were shaking. He walked in and walked into Clint's office. His secretary tried to stop him but one look from Ben and she sat right back down. The door was open to Clint's office so he went in. Ben walked over to Clint's desk and leaned down so his face was right in Clint's. "What did you do to Kate Crawford?"

Clint pushed back from his desk away from the irate giant in front of him. "What did she tell you? Whatever it was, she's lying. No one would believe her silly made-up story seven years ago and no one's going to believe it now." Clint stood up and straightened his tie. "Now if you'll excuse me I have a board meeting to attend."

Clint started to walk out but was brought up short when Ben reached out and grabbed his arm. "Don't ever let me hear or see you talk to Kate again. Do you understand me, boy?"

Clint pulled away and stormed out of his office. Ben stayed where he was until he could get his anger under control. No sense in scaring the rest of the bank staff. Hell, he lived in the community now. Ben finished his business at the bank and left.

He decided to stop on the way out of town and buy Kate some flowers. He entered the little flower shop on Main Street and looked around. Most of the arrangements he

saw seemed wrong for Kate. The older woman at the counter introduced herself as Melanie Donovan and asked if she could help him with something.

Ben looked around again quickly. "I want to buy a bouquet of flowers but everything seems too frilly."

"Can you tell me a little about this lady and perhaps I can come up with something?"

"Well, she's a confusing mix of tender and tough. She's an outdoors type of woman. She loves her land more than anything in the world and works it harder than any man but she's still a woman. She's soft and gentle with injured animals and stubborn horses." Ben shrugged his shoulders. "I'm sorry. I can't describe her in just words very well."

Mrs. Donovan looked at him and smiled. "Are you by chance buying flowers for Kate Crawford?"

Ben looked at Mrs. Donovan like she was psychic. "Yeah, how'd you know?"

She just smiled and nodded her head. "Because the words you just spoke are Kate Crawford to a T and I happen to have a great idea for the perfect bouquet."

Mrs. Donovan disappeared into the back room and came out ten minutes later with a beautiful arrangement of flowers. They were a combination of wildflowers, sunflowers and roses.

Ben paid Mrs. Donovan. "They are absolutely perfect. You've gained a lifetime customer today, Mrs. Donovan."

She gave him his change and smiled. "I hope so. I believe this is the first bouquet anyone has ever given Miss Crawford from my shop. I hope that lovely girl gets many more from now on. If anyone deserves a spot of sunshine it's that one. She's always been such a polite little thing. It's too bad what happened so long ago. It just closed her right up tight. We don't see nearly enough of her anymore."

Ben weighed the pros and cons of what he needed to ask. Finally he decided to just do it. "Mrs. Donovan, do you mind if I ask you what exactly happened to Kate? I keep getting conflicting stories."

Mrs. Donovan sighed. "Please don't let on to anyone that I told you this. It's purely speculation on my part, you understand, but when Kate was in high school Clint Adams started following her around town. She never gave that boy the time of day and for someone like Clint who was used to getting everything he wanted it was just too much. I don't know what happened on her eighteenth birthday but Kate was never the same fun-loving girl after that day. I saw her the day after at the doctor's office here in town and she had a black eye, split lip and a cast on her arm. Lord knows what else was done to her but that was all that was visible."

"I know she went to the sheriff that same day and tried to press charges against Clint Adams but the sheriff just happened to be his uncle and the president of the bank was his daddy. The same bank that had just given a mortgage on the Crawford ranch. Well, needless to say nothing was ever done to Clint Adams. Kate was the only one



who paid a price for that boy's sins. She locked herself up out on that ranch and has pretty much stayed there since."

Ben closed his eyes, his heart breaking for the eighteen-year-old girl Kate had been. He thanked Mrs. Donovan again and left for home. By the time he pulled into the ranch yard the sun was setting. A more spiritual sight he'd never seen. The sun was just slipping down over the pasture's horizon. The horses in the pasture were silhouetted against a canvas of a vibrant pink and purple color wash. Ben picked up the flowers and headed into the house.

Kate was in the kitchen setting the table. She looked up as Ben came through the door. "Just in time. Dinner will be in about ten minutes."

Ben pulled the flowers out from behind his back and handed them to Kate. "I'm sorry about breakfast this morning. I didn't mean to frighten you. I'm just a very touchy-feely person. I won't touch you again without your permission. Can you forgive me?"

Kate had tears pooled in her deep brown eyes. She shook her head. "It wasn't your fault, Ben. I've been kicking myself all day about it. I even felt so guilty I made your favorites for dinner. Pot roast with potatoes, carrots and homemade gravy. Please sit down and let's forget about this morning." Kate took the flowers and set them in the center of the table. She touched the silky petals of the various flowers. "No one's ever given me flowers before." Her eyes filled with tears and she wiped them away. "I truly thank you, Ben Thomas."

Ben swallowed around the lump in his throat. The fact that she appeared so touched by his gesture solidified his growing affection for her. "The flowers remind me of you." Ben started pointing out the various flowers. "The sunflowers are like you on a bright sunny day, standing tall and proud. The roses are beautiful with a delicate but pure smell. The individual petals are fragile but when held tight and wrapped around themselves they provide safety for its inner core." Ben looked at Kate who began to cry again at his descriptions. "The wildflowers are my favorite. They grow and adapt to their environment. They reach toward the sun and flourish. They can grow out of the smallest crevice in a rock's surface or out from beneath a log. They survive by their own will. The will to grow and face the sun." Ben slowly covered Kate's much smaller hand with his. "The wildflower reminds me of you the most. Whatever life seems to throw at you, you pick yourself up and raise your face to the sun."

Kate wiped her eyes with her free hand. She squeezed Ben's hand and brought it to her lips for a soft kiss. "That's the nicest thing anyone's ever said to me, Ben. I don't know if I deserve your praise though." Kate exhaled audibly. "I'm tough when it comes to the hard work required on this ranch but I've been living under the log you spoke of in my private life. I was hurt seven years ago and haven't given many people the chance to get close." She chewed her lip and nodded her head. "I think maybe it's time to see if I can grow out from beneath that log."

Ben looked at Kate. He felt a little uncomfortable. His cock was rock-hard from the innocent kiss she'd placed on his hand a minute earlier. He knew he needed to tell her

what he'd done and what he'd found out in town. Ben just hoped the confession wouldn't break the fragile relationship forming between them.

Ben cleared his throat and looked into Kate's eyes. "I have a confession to make. I spoke to Mrs. Donovan in town while I was getting your flowers. She told me a little about what went on seven years ago. Before that I'd talked to Jenny and then Cree."

He looked away uncomfortably. "I was afraid that I'd done something wrong at breakfast. I don't want you ever to be afraid of me and I didn't know what I'd done to put that look of fear on your face. Jenny told me about your fear of men. She didn't know why you were afraid of them but she'd picked up from what you'd told her that you were. I asked about the bank and Cree said if anyone at the bank was at fault it would be Clint Adams."

Ben looked at her sheepishly. "I was so angry that I went to town and walked right in to Clint's office. I told him never to talk to you again or he'd deal with me." Ben shrugged his shoulders. "I must have gotten my point across because he practically ran out of his office to an alleged board meeting."

He raised Kate's hand to his lips this time and kissed it gently. "I'm sorry if I've betrayed you in any way. I can't help wanting to protect you from whatever it is that still haunts you."

Kate gave Ben a watery smile. "No one but Clint, his father Bruce and I know the real story of what happened on my eighteenth birthday. Someday soon I'll be able to open up and tell you all of it but I need to work a few things out first."

Ben patted her hand and looked around the kitchen. "Sounds fine, Wildflower." Ben smiled and removed his hand. "Now how about some dinner? I'm still a growing boy who needs his meat and vegetables." He laughed and got up to get the iced tea out of the refrigerator.

Kate smiled and set the food out on the table. They talked of the day's work they'd accomplished and talked about what needed to be done tomorrow. After dinner they decided to watch a movie. Ben stretched out on the new couch he'd had specially made for him. It was big enough so he could stretch out fully and deep enough for the wide width of his shoulders. The couch was covered in nice buttery yellow leather with red southwestern designed throw pillows.

Kate took her normal chair beside the couch. Shortly after the movie started Ben looked over to find her sound asleep curled up in the chair. Ben looked at the tiny woman. She was his dream woman. Never once did she complain about the hard work involved in running a cattle and horse ranch. Kate just did what needed to be done and accepted it. He wished she would let him take over some more of her chores but she was firm on a fifty-fifty work load.

Ben watched Kate sleep and his cock began to stir. The way she was sitting caused a gap in her sleeveless blouse that perfectly showed one demi-cup bra-covered breast. The bra was lavender and if he looked closely he could see the pale pink nipple peeking out over the top.

He looked away and tried to get his cock under control. Ben tried to watch the movie but it was a different movie playing in his head that held his attention. Ben could see himself kneeling in front of Kate's chair, slowly unsnapping the remaining snaps of her shirt. Reaching out to take the heavy weight of her breasts in his hand, he could bend closer and wrap his tongue around her huge pink nipple. Swirling his tongue around the areola, he would nip and suckle her until her cries filled the room.

Ben shook himself and looked down at his jean-covered cock. His cock had come alive to the point of pain. A wet spot appeared on the leg of his jeans. He quickly looked over at Kate to make sure she was still asleep. Wrong thing to do, he told himself. Kate's soft pink pouty mouth was open slightly in sleep. Ben looked at her lips and could easily imagine them stretched around the girth of his cock. Groaning, Ben quickly got up and went to his private bathroom.

Once there Ben quickly pulled his jeans down and took his cock in a tight fist. He pumped his cock quickly trying to alleviate the pain. It only took about five tight, hard jerks before his cock erupted in a stream of cum that seemed to never end. Falling to his knees, Ben cursed his own cock. He wanted Kate, not just for sexual relief but for a lifetime companion. He could never have her sexually though. His cock was just too damn big for the tiny woman asleep in the chair. He would hurt her like he'd hurt Mary Sue. Ben would never forget the blood and cries coming from Mary Sue. He'd split her tiny pussy so badly the injury had required stitches. Ben had vowed to himself that day, at the young age of seventeen, never to hurt another woman. The women who came after were little better than whores. Well stretched and experienced. They seemed to take great joy in the length and width of his cock.

Ben swore and buried his face in his hands. "You can't have the only one you truly want. Now pick yourself up and go on." Ben cleaned himself up and went back to the living room. He clenched his fists at the sight of Kate. He needed to get her upstairs to bed but he didn't think he could touch her and not want her again.

"Kate? Wake up, Wildflower. It's time for you to go to bed." Ben looked at the still sleeping Kate and reached out to touch her arm. "Kate? Come on, it's time for bed." She was still asleep. Ben drew in a deep breath and reached down to pick her up. The feel of her soft body cradled in his arms nearly dropped him to his knees again. He started walking toward the stairs when she stirred and opened her eyes a fraction.

Kate seemed to tense for a moment and then relaxed into his arms. "I'm sorry if I fell asleep. It was a tough day for me. Both physically and emotionally." She lifted her arms and put them around Ben's neck and rested her head back onto his massive chest.

Ben's steps faltered. He held her more securely as he made his way up the stairs. Opening her bedroom door, Ben carried Kate over and carefully put her down on top of the bedspread. He let her go and started to back away.

Kate's arms continued to cling to his neck. She put her lips against Ben's and spoke. "Please hold me for a little while, Ben. You make me feel safe and protected. It's a feeling I've been without for years." She parted her lips and touched his mouth.

Ben didn't even think about what he was doing. He crushed his mouth against Kate's and swept the interior with his tongue. He stretched out beside her and pulled her against his length. How could someone so much smaller than himself feel so right?

Kate's long hidden passion seemed to come alive in his arms. She ate his mouth with a vengeance. Her hands began to wander down his chest. Rubbing and circling his nipples. She drew away from the kiss and looked into his eyes. "I never knew. Why have I never known it would feel so good to be in a man's arms?" Kate kissed his stubbled jaw and moved down to deliver open-mouth kisses on his throat.

Ben groaned and pulled her body even closer. His hands went to the snaps on the front of her shirt and pulled. The shirt opened fully with one tug. Ben closed his eyes at the beautiful sight and prayed for control. He slipped his finger under the front bra clasp and in seconds the heavy weight of her breasts spilled into his hand. "Magnificent. Wildflower, you're breathtaking." Ben lowered his head and took one beaded nipple into his mouth. He groaned and adjusted his cock. She tasted like strawberries and cream. He licked and suckled at her breast for what seemed like a lifetime.

Kate's fingers held his soft bare head and she arched her back in a moan. "Oh God, Ben...more please...it's not enough...never enough."

Ben reached down and unbuttoned her jeans. Opening the waist fully, he was able to get his large hand down her pants. Her pussy was smooth except for a small tuft of hair at the top. Ben groaned again and thrust his cock against her body. He swallowed as much of her breast as he could and bit down lightly.

Kate's breath hitched in her chest. "More, Ben." She raised her knees and opened her legs for him.

Ben pulled her jeans down and off. He left her breast and trailed his tongue down her flat stomach. He stopped at her bellybutton and smiled. Kate had a tiny gold hoop piercing her cute little navel. "Damn that's sexy."

Kate laughed. "If you think that's sexy just wait."

His curiosity got the better of him and he continued downward. He buried his nose in her pubic hair and inhaled. Even here she smelled of sunshine and flowers. Ben continued down until he was eye level with her pretty pussy. He spread her lips with his fingers, preparing to get a taste of her essence, and stopped. Ben looked up into Kate's eyes and then back down. She had a tiny hoop running through her clit. "My God, Kate, that's the hottest thing I've ever seen."

Kate smiled and ran her fingers over his soft head. "You're the first man to ever see it. Before tonight it was my private secret. I went to Santa Fe to have it done two years ago."

Ben swiped her pussy with his tongue. He moved to her clit and carefully wrapped his tongue around the small gold hoop and pulled gently. Kate's body immediately stiffened. Afraid he'd done something wrong, he pulled back and looked into her face. It was then that he realized she was in the grip of a powerful orgasm. Pleased with

himself, he went back down to drink up the fruits of his labor. Ben reached his tongue as far inside Kate as he could. He'd never get enough of the taste of her.

Kate's body relaxed back on the bed and she shifted her hips toward his face. "Make love to me, Ben."

The words snapped Ben back into the present. What was he doing? He stopped eating her pussy and crawled up and wrapped her in his arms. "Oh Kate, you have absolutely no idea how much I'd love that but it can never be. I'm much too big a man for a tiny slip of woman like you. I'd cut off my own arm before I'd ever hurt you, Wildflower, and it would hurt you." Ben placed a kiss on the top of her head and held her.

Kate lifted her head from his chest and looked almost embarrassed. "Ben. I've never been with a man but medically I'm no longer a virgin. I...uh...get lonely sometimes and take care of things myself. You wouldn't hurt me."

Ben reached down and unsnapped his jeans. Pushing them down past his knees, he gently took her hand and brought it to his erection. "Now do you see what I'm talking about, Wildflower? My cock isn't the normal size for a man. The only other woman besides you that I ever cared about was torn by this damned cock of mine. I'll never forget the blood or the screams as long as I live. After that I stuck to very experienced woman. Hell, Kate, most of them were little better than whores. I'm falling in love with you, Kate, but I will never make love to you with my cock."

Kate swallowed at the gigantic erection against her hand. Ben was built more like a horse than a man. "I think I'm falling in love with you too, Ben. We'll take the physical day by day. Maybe I could work on stretching myself like the other women in your past?"

Ben put his fingers to her lips quieting her. "Don't ever compare yourself to the women of my past. You aren't anything like them. You're my dream woman, Wildflower. I've never known a finer woman." He embraced her again and kissed her lips tenderly. "I know it's an irrational fear of mine that I need to get over and I'll try. We'll work it."

"Would you stay with me tonight, Ben? Wrap me in your arms and keep the bad dreams at bay?" Kate laid her head back onto Ben's chest.

Ben was flooded with a wealth of emotions at her questions. "I'd like to spend every night for the rest of my life in your bed, Wildflower. There's no need for bad dreams any longer either. I'll not let another man touch you as long as there's a breath left in my body."

Her hand still rubbing his erection, she kissed his chest. "Would you like me to take care of this for you? I've never tried it but I'd like to."

Ben chuckled and rubbed her back. "Maybe tomorrow, Wildflower. It's time for sleep now." He kissed the top of her head and continued to rub Kate's back until her breathing evened out and she fell asleep.

Ben closed his eyes happily thinking about the recent turn of events in his life. He smiled to himself. He couldn't believe Kate said she was falling in love with him. What had he ever done in his lifetime to deserve such a special gift? He inhaled her scent and drifted off to sleep.

## Chapter Three

In the wee hours of the morning the phone rang. Confused as to where he was, Ben couldn't find the phone. Kate's hand reached across his chest to the bedside table and picked up the phone.

"He-Hello?"

"Kate, it's Cree. I just got a call from one of my deputies. It seems you've got cattle out on the county road. I'm going to load my horse and I'll be over to help you both round them up."

Kate sat straight up in bed. "Thanks, Cree. We'll meet you there." She hung up the phone. "Our cattle are out on the county road. Cree's going to load General and meet us there."

Kate and Ben jumped up from the bed and began pulling clothes on. Even in their haste to get moving Ben noticed that Kate hadn't put on a bra. Oh man, was he in trouble. "Kate, I realize we're in a hurry but could you please put your bra on? My cock is already hard and it's damn uncomfortable to ride this way." He adjusted his hardening cock to get his point across.

Kate giggled and took her shirt back off. "Okay if that's what it takes to make you happy I'll gladly put on a bra." She gave him a wicked look and went to her dresser drawer and pulled out a black lace bra. Kate put the bra on and smiled at him.

The bra had big cutouts where her areolas were. Her pretty pink nipples standing right out of the bra begged to be tasted. Ben went to her and obliged. He gave the nipples one last taste and put her shirt on for her. "You are a truly evil woman sometimes, Kate."

She just laughed and stood on her tiptoes, pulling his head down for a passionate kiss. "I'm sorry, Ben. I've just got a lot of time to make up for. I'm like a child with a new toy."

Ben swatted her ass on the way out the door. "Come on, Wildflower. We've got cattle to round up."

Ben and Kate rode to the county road, Kate on her beloved buckskin gelding Ripples and Ben on his newly acquired Tennessee Walker, Too Tall. They met Cree on the road. Cattle were spread out across the road and on the other side eating grass. Kate and Cree took the job of rounding them up as Ben tried to fix a temporary patch on the barbed wire fence. As the cattle were rounded up and run back through the broken fence Ben kept them in by holding the wire across the opening. Every time more came back through he'd step out of the way and let them through then close up the opening

again. After nearly two hours all the cattle were back on their own side of the fence. Cree and Kate climbed down from their horses and went to help Ben with the fence.

Kate held a flashlight on the wire as Ben and Cree stretched it across the opening. Kate looked at the wire that had been damaged. "Hey, guys. It looks like this wire's been cut."

Ben finished with the strand of wire he was working with and went to investigate Kate's claim. He took the flashlight from her and shone it on the ends of the wire. "I think you're right, Wildflower. Cree, what do you think?"

Cree examined the wire and nodded. "Looks like a clean cut to me. Unless your cattle are carrying around wire cutters I'd say someone's a little pissed at one of you." Cree raised his eyes to Ben and smiled. "I bet we both know who that someone is."

Ben nodded, "What can we do about it legally?"

Cree shook his head and sighed. "Well, not much unless I can get a judge to give me a search warrant for Clint's house and car. If we could find the wire cutters involved a lab might be able to prove they were the ones to cut the fence." Cree shook his head. "Unfortunately I don't really have enough to ask a judge for a search warrant. I'm sorry, Ben, but unless he tips his hand some other way I'm afraid the law can't be of much help in this."

Ben nodded his head and pulled Kate against his side, wrapping an arm around her waist. Cree's eyebrows rose at the embrace but he just smiled and winked at his old friend. "Personally, I'll help you in any way I can. I'll just have to leave the badge at home."

Ben and Kate shook Cree's hand and he loaded his horse back onto the trailer. As his tail lights disappeared around the bend Ben looked down at Kate and kissed the top of her head. "We'll get through it, Wildflower." Ben picked her up and sat her back on her horse with no more effort than lifting a child would take.

He climbed back up on Too Tall and pulled up next to Kate. Stretching out, he cupped her cheek in his hand and kissed her. Kate opened her mouth to his invading tongue and returned the favor by invading his mouth. The kiss caught them like wildfire. Ben groaned and picked Kate right off her horse and deposited her in his lap. Ripples stood quietly next to Too Tall.

Kate adjusted herself more comfortably and straddled his pelvis. Wrapping both legs as far as possible around the huge man, she took the kiss to the next level. She broke the kiss and unsnapped his chambray shirt. Kate stroked his bronzed skin with her fingers and tongue. She circled his nipples and took joy in seeing the little nubs stiffen and protrude even more. She took one and then the other in her mouth and sucked.

Ben threw his head back and groaned. "You're going to kill me, Wildflower." He reached down and began rubbing the seam of her jeans against her clit. Kate's breath hitched and she began thrusting her pussy against his hand.



She sucked the tiny earring from his left ear into her mouth and moaned. "Oh God, Ben, I feel like I'm on fire." She quickly reached down and unbuttoned Ben's jeans. Reaching her hand down his pants leg, she held and withdrew his cock. Kate used both hands to pump the enormous cock. Running her palm over the top to catch some of the pre-cum she needed for lubrication, she set up a steady rhythm.

Ben unbuttoned Kate's jeans and managed to get his big hand in the small opening. He parted her pussy lips and thrust a finger inside her. "God, Wildflower, you're so wet for me." He pumped his finger in and out a couple more times then dared to put in another. Two of Ben's fingers were as big as most men's cocks. He realized that Kate was able to take both of his fingers and smiled with joy. "We might be able to do this, Wildflower. I don't know what kind of toys you've been playing with but maybe if I got you some new ones we could work on it."

Kate held on to Ben's cock and continued pumping. She pulled away from his kiss to bend her head down and swipe the tip of his cock with her tongue. She found the slit in the top and stuck her tongue in, sucking as much pre-cum as she could get.

It was too much for Ben and he raised her head quickly. "I can't hold it anymore, Kate, and I have a feeling it's going to be a big one." Kate kissed him, sharing his own taste with him as she did. Ben jerked and plucked the tiny hoop on her clit. They both came at the same time. Ben's orgasm was so powerful that they were both soaked when his cum shot up between them.

Ben slowly withdrew his fingers from Kate's pussy and put them into his mouth. "Mmm...kiss me and taste yourself, Wildflower. Nothing has ever tasted so good." Ben brought Kate's mouth to his and swirled his tongue around her tongue.

Kate moaned and held his face, her fingers still dripping with his cum. She looked at her hands and started to giggle. "Maybe we should get off the road before people start driving by on their way to work. Not to mention the poor horses standing here so patiently all this time."

Ben seemed to bolt upright, realizing where they were. "I can't believe I just did that to you where anyone can see. I apologize, Wildflower. Forgive me?"

Kate kissed his chest. "As long as we can ride back home like this I'll forgive you anything, Ben." She snuggled in against him and Ben grabbed Ripple's reins and headed for home via the pasture.

They got back to the ranch and brushed down the horses. Deciding to go ahead and take care of the morning chores, they began mucking out stalls and feeding the horses grain and flakes of hay. Once the horses were taken care of Ben climbed into the big ranch truck and set off to fix the fence properly. Kate fed the chickens and gathered the eggs before heading in to start breakfast.

Kate washed the fresh eggs and put them into the refrigerator. She got out bacon and sausage to cook for Ben this morning. He'd used a lot of calories since supper last night. Kate giggled to herself. She didn't know when she'd ever felt this happy. It seemed like she'd been lonely her entire life. The girls in school never wanted to hang

around her. Kate never knew if it was because of her looks or because she was more interested in horses than people. The boys played with her until she turned thirteen and started getting boobs. Then the boys wanted to play a totally different kind of game with her. Kate wanted no part of those games so she isolated herself on the ranch after school.

It was her senior year of high school when Clint Adams saw her again at the Junctionville Fair. He'd been away for the past few years at college and had come home for the annual fair. Kate was showing her prize black Angus bull Jolly. She also entered the barrel racing competition with Ripples.

Clint approached her after the barrel racing competition and asked her out. She remembered Clint from school. She was a lowly freshman when he was a senior. Kate remembered the way he seemed to treat his girlfriends and declined his offer.

Clint looked at her like she was joking. "What do you mean no? I'm a college guy." He looked Kate up and down and then concentrated his eyes on her breasts. "You do know who my father is, don't you, little girl?"

Kate cleared her throat and looked him in the eye. "I know very well who your father is, Clint, but I don't want to date him either. Now if you'll excuse me I need to brush down Ripples." She tried to move past him.

Clint reached out and grabbed her arm and pulled her face close to his. "This isn't over, sweet cheeks. You will go out with me before the week is over." He let her go and stormed off.

Kate didn't see Clint again until the following week on her eighteenth birthday. Her father had given her a new saddle and she was in the barn showing Ripples his new saddle. She heard footsteps and turned around to find Clint Adams standing in the doorway.

Kate closed her eyes, squeezing out the painful memory. She finished cooking the bacon and sausage and put some rolled biscuits in the oven. Kate reached over and turned the radio on. She needed to get her good mood back. Clint had taken enough years from her, she wouldn't give him another day. Kate turned the radio up and began swaying her hips to the music as she fried Ben's eggs.

Ben entered the back door and smiled. His wildflower was happy, it seemed, singing to the radio and dancing a bit as she finished cooking breakfast. He walked in and caught her attention. She stopped singing and dancing and smiled at him. "Don't stop on my account, Wildflower. I liked watching you move. As a matter of fact I think I'll join ya." He walked over and took the spatula out of her hand and turned off the eggs.

"Wait, Ben. Just let me get your eggs out of the grease and onto your plate." When that was done she put the spatula down and washed her hands. Turning toward Ben, she curtsied and reached for him. Ben found a slow song on the radio and began dancing Kate around the kitchen. The differences in their height didn't seem to bother

them. Kate rested her head on Ben's chest as he held her tightly and moved to the music.

When the song ended Ben bent over and lifted Kate up his body for a kiss. She wrapped her arms and legs around him and hung on. The kiss deepened and Ben played with Kate's ass. Breaking the kiss, Kate slid down the length of his body, noticing the hard ridge of his erection as she did.

She pulled the biscuits out of the oven and put them on a plate. They were a little dark but still edible. She brought the rest of the food to the table and sat down. "Thank you for the dance, Ben. I haven't danced since my daddy died."

Ben could see the memories playing out in her eyes. "There's a dance at the Lodge this Saturday. Would you like to go with me? I imagine Jenny will be there with Cree and Jake."

Kate's face lit up like the sun on a spring morning. "I'd like that, Ben." She chewed her lip in thought. "I'll need to go to town and buy a dress. I haven't bought a dress since the funeral. I'd say I'm due for some girl shopping." She came up out of her chair and kissed him. "Do you think Jenny would be interested in going into Santa Fe with me this afternoon?"

Ben chuckled and kissed her again. "I'm sure Jenny is up to shopping any day that Cree and Jake let her out of their sight. Why don't you call her and ask?"

Kate bounced to the phone to call Jenny. Ben shook his head and smiled. He'd never seen this side of Kate. She was as happy and free as a bird soaring through the canyon. Kate got off the phone and started immediately clearing the table.

"I'm glad I called early. Jenny happens to have a doctor's appointment this morning. She said if I went with her we could shop and have lunch afterwards." She started to run water into the sink.

Ben's hands stopped her and turned her around. "I'll clean up in here, darlin'. You go get ready for your girls' day." He lifted her up and kissed her. Setting her back onto her feet, he turned her and swatted her butt. "Go get ready."

\* \* \* \* \*

Jenny picked Kate up an hour later in her new minivan. They drove toward Santa Fe talking about nothing and everything. Just as they hit the Santa Fe city limits Jenny turned to Kate. "So tell me, my dear friend. What is happening between you and Ben? Cree mentioned to me that you two seemed quite close early this morning."

Kate blushed from her ears to her chest. "Well...I...um...well...I think I'm falling in love with him."

Jenny smiled and patted her hand. "That's terrific news, Kate. How does Ben feel? Do you know?"

"Ben says he feels the same way about me." Kate worried her lip with her teeth. "He um...he say's he won't have intercourse with me though." She put her hands over her face. "I can't believe I just told you that."

"Hey I'm the woman married to two men remember. Talking about sex doesn't bother me at all anymore. So why is it that Ben won't have intercourse with you? Are you still a virgin?"

"Well, I've never been with a man." Kate blushed again. "But I have indulged quite a bit with the battery-operated kind of man. To answer your first question no, that's not why Ben won't f-fuck me. You see he's built more like a horse than a man. I guess he hurt a girl badly in his younger days and since then he's only screwed well-stretched sluts." Kate buried her face in her hands once again.

"Wow. I wonder if Jake and Cree know about Ben's cock size? What are you gonna do about your situation, Kate?"

"I thought maybe later today after I buy something pretty to wear for the dance maybe we could find an adult shop. I'd like to upgrade my battery-powered friends. Maybe find something in a bigger size." Kate looked out the window and laughed. "God six months ago I would have never talked about this kind of thing with anyone."

"Don't be embarrassed about it, Kate. You're a twenty-five-year-old woman—it's time." Jenny pulled into the parking lot of the doctors' building. "Come up with me. I'd love you to hear the babies' hearts beat."

Kate got out and came around to Jenny's side of the vehicle. Her friend was almost six months pregnant and with twins she wasn't getting around as fast as she used to. Kate took Jenny's arm and they walked into the doctor's office.

The visit was just routine but they did let Jenny and Kate listen to the heartbeats. Jenny looked up at Kate with wonder in her eyes. Kate looked down at Jenny with tears in hers. "Why are you crying, Kate?"

Kate kissed her friend's hand. "It's just so beautiful. I've never heard anything so beautiful."

Jenny squeezed her hand. "Someday you'll be on this table and I'll listen to your baby's heart beat."

"One can only hope."

They left the doctor's office and headed to the minivan. When they got to the parking lot the van had a flat tire. Jenny looked at the tire and shook her head. "A flat. How can I have a flat tire on a brand new car?"

Kate shrugged and opened the back hatch of the van. "Maybe you ran over a nail or something. It's okay. I'm pretty good at changing tires. Why don't you go over and sit on that bench in the shade. It won't take me long."

Jenny was surprised at how fast Kate managed to get the tire changed. Like everything else she didn't complain when work needed to be done. She just gathered her waist-length blonde curly hair into a ponytail and got to work.

After they dropped the tire to be repaired Kate and Jenny had a nice lunch and then went clothes shopping. Kate found a beautiful pale green chiffon dress. It fit her snugly on top and fell to her knees in a bounty of fabric. Kate looked at herself in the mirror. "Jenny, do you think this dress is too formal for the dance?"

Jenny eyed the gorgeous woman in the mirror. "Well, maybe a little but I think you should get the dress anyway. Maybe Ben will take you out somewhere fancy one day. It would be nice to already have a dress. Let's keep looking for something a little more appropriate for the dance."

They settled on a short, off the shoulder pale pink dress made of jersey material that fit Kate's body like a glove. "Oh girlfriend. Ben's not going to know where to put his eyes when you come out in that."

They left carrying several bags each. Their next stop was the adult sex shop. Jenny was wide-eyed as she entered the store. Kate had almost become a regular to this particular store. "Hi, Kate," the young woman behind the counter waved.

Jenny raised her eyebrow at Kate who just shrugged. Kate went directly to the vibrator section. She looked at the selection and picked up a big blue one. Kate eyed the vibrator and put her hand around it, measuring it.

Jenny looked at her and laughed. "You've got to be kidding me. No way is that thing going to fit."

Kate smiled and looked at the vibrator again. "Mmm. That's what Ben says but I'm going to graduate up to it." Kate chose two more vibrators in decreasing size from the big blue one. "Okay I'm ready."

The women left the store and went back to the tire shop. Jenny asked the man at the front desk about her tire. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Sommers, but we weren't able to fix your tire. It looks like someone took a blade of some sort to the back side wall. If you can wait another thirty minutes we can have a new tire installed though."

Jenny agreed and went outside to call Jake or Cree. Jenny came back into the shop and asked the man if they could please put the damaged tire in the back of the van. Jenny looked at Kate and motioned for her to follow her outside.

When they got outside the shop Jenny turned to Kate. "I talked to Cree and he wants to see the tire. He thinks it might have something to do with your cut fence."

Thirty minutes later they were on their way home. Jenny glanced over at her friend. She could see the worry on Kate's face. Jenny decided to lighten the mood. "I'm soooo going to ask my husbands tonight about the size of Ben's cock. I mean when you pulled down that blue vibrator I thought I would choke on my own tongue. That just can't be natural, Kate."

Kate looked at her a little too thoughtfully. "It makes Ben very sad I think. I mean...that he's so much different from most men. He still carries the scars of hurting his first girlfriend. That's why I want to stretch myself for him. I need to show him that he can make love to me without pain. That it can be pure pleasure."

Jenny didn't say anything else until she pulled up to Kate's farm house. "Thank you for a lovely day, Kate. It's nice having a girlfriend to just hang around with."

Kate smiled back at Jenny. "Thank you for letting me hear the twins' hearts beating. You three will meet us at the dance, won't you?"

Jenny rolled her eyes. "I should say no after seeing you in that pink dress but I can see you only have eyes for Ben, so sure we'll be there."

## **Chapter Four**

Kate waved to Jenny as she disappeared down the drive. Kate took her bags up to her bedroom and went to look for Ben. She found him patching up one of the watering tanks. He was bent over and the seams of his jeans looked like they were straining. He had a skintight black t-shirt on with a black bandana on his head in place of his usual cowboy hat. What a sight he made. Kate smiled and whistled.

"Looking good, Mr. Thomas."

Ben lifted his head and smiled. He stood and wiped his hands on his work rag and shoved it back into his pocket. Ben strode over to Kate and picked her up for a welcoming kiss. "You're not looking so bad yourself, Miss Crawford." He kissed her soundly. "So tell me about your girls' day."

Kate didn't want to really talk about the flat tire so she tried to distract him. "Oh you know, the usual. Listening to babies' hearts beat and buying extra large blue vibrators. By the way, what kind of look are you going for today? Biker or perhaps a pirate? You know I've always loved pirates. Do you have any black leather pants?" Kate ran her tongue around his gold earring and bit.

"Ouch you little brat." Ben kissed her and smiled. "Now enough about my choice of wardrobe. Let's get back to the heartbeats and the vibrator. Did you enjoy listening to the babies' hearts beat and will I enjoy watching you with the blue vibrators?"

Kate put her finger to her chin in a show of contemplation. "Yes and yes. The visit to the doctor's office was very moving. I actually embarrassed myself by crying."

Ben squeezed her a little tighter. "Do you want kids of your own, Wildflower?"

Kate tensed a little in his arms. "When I was growing up I wanted about six kids. I knew I'd be living right here on the ranch and I wanted to fill it. After my eighteenth birthday I shut down all my dreams. I thought I'd be content to live and work by myself for the rest of my life. That's why I bought Charlie after my parents' accident. He was supposed to fill the empty void in my life."

Kate wiped moisture from her eyes. "But today at the doctor's office. I don't know, Ben. A feeling overcame me. I think I'd like my dream back. The happily ever after dream from my childhood." Kate stopped talking and just shrugged her shoulders. "I'm sorry. I'm just feeling a little melancholy right now."

Ben carried Kate over and set her on top of the corral fence. "Wildflower, don't ever apologize for having a dream. The thought of you even giving yourself the chance to dream again makes me want to fall onto my knees and thank God. I know I told you I was falling in love with you but I lied."

At Kate's sudden look of sadness Ben hurried to finish his statement. "No, Wildflower, don't look sad. Let me finish. I was about to say that I thought I was falling in love with you but what I should have told you was that I love you, Kate. I don't know how I let it happen but you burrowed into my heart the first day I met you. You were in the hay field putting up bales all by yourself and not complaining a bit. I knew then that you were going to become my everything." Ben licked Kate's lips and delved inside for a taste.

Kate pulled Ben closer and wrapped her legs around him. "Take me inside, mighty pirate man." She giggled when Ben picked her up and carried her to the house. They managed to get inside and down the hall to Ben's new room before all their clothes came off. Ben had taken her shirt off on the porch steps, she'd taken his off in the kitchen and both of them had their jeans unbuttoned on the way through the living room. When they crossed the threshold to Ben's room he laid Kate on the bed and finished stripping off her jeans.

He was pulling his own down when Kate held up her hand. "Ben, would you like for me to run up and get my new toys?"

Ben's nostrils flared as his cock sprang free of the confining jeans. "I'll save that little treat for after dinner." Ben positioned her at the edge of the bed with her legs draped over the side. "First I want a taste of your pussy. Then maybe your breasts and then I'm thinking a quick sandwich and then toys."

Kate sighed and spread her legs even farther. She loved the feel of Ben's tongue on her clit. It felt so much better than her fingers. "By the way if I forget to tell you later, this bed is amazing."

Ben licked her pussy and smiled. "Thanks." *lick* "I" *lick* "had" *lick* "it built" *lick lick* "specially." Ben spread her pussy with his fingers and fucked Kate with his tongue. He inserted one finger and tested her cunt and then quickly moved to two fingers pumping into her pussy. Ben continued with two fingers and sucked her clit into his mouth. Kate stiffened and screamed, her orgasm flooding his fingers with her sweet cream. When she was at the height of her orgasm Ben shoved a third finger inside her. Ben started to feel pretty excited about the odds that someday he'd finally be able to fuck her.

Ben removed his fingers and replaced them with his mouth. As he tasted the proof of Kate's orgasm a kind of peace overcame him. He licked his way up her abdomen to her nipples. He sucked and plucked them until she began writhing on the bed once again. Ben smiled and stood. He picked Kate up and repositioned them on the center of the bed.

Kate gave Ben a devilish smile and reached for his erection. "My turn to taste."

Ben's eyes rolled and he stretched himself out on the center of the bed. "Do your worst, Wildflower."

Kate didn't waste time on anything but getting straight to his cock. She grabbed the bottle of lube off Ben's bedside table on her way down to his thick, heavy erection. Kate looked at the huge penis in front of her face. She knew her mouth was in no way big



enough to suck him down her throat, but maybe she could think of something he'd like just as much.

With a gleam in her eyes Kate straddled Ben's thighs and sat up. She looked him in the eye and opened the bottle of lube. "I know you're too big for me to do your cock justice with just my mouth so how about a titty party."

Kate squirted the lube over her breasts, still maintaining eye contact with Ben. She brought her hands to her chest and rubbed the lube in between her breasts. With a greedy smile on her face, Kate bent over Ben's cock. She wrapped her big boobs around his cock and began moving up and down.

It didn't take long for Ben to moan and thrust his cock back and forth between her breasts. "Oh God Wildflower. That is so hot. I could come just from the image of your gorgeous breasts wrapped around me. Oh... It feels fantastic..."

Kate continued to hold her boobs around the straining, thrusting cock. She bent her head and swiped the tip with her tongue. Every time Ben thrust up into her chest she opened her mouth and let the head of his cock disappear in her hot, wet mouth. Ben's taste was wonderful. Kate had never tasted a man before and she wanted more. "Come in my mouth, Ben."

Kate's plea sent Ben over the edge. "Here it comes, Wildflower. Oh! Uh-uhhh..."

Ben shot his cum deep down Kate's throat. She tried to swallow the entire load but she was inexperienced and there was just too much of the white creamy liquid. Kate coughed and looked at Ben and shrugged her shoulders. "Guess it will take some more practice."

Ben laughed and hauled her up into his arms. He kissed her with a voracious appetite. Tasting himself on her tongue was so damned sexy. "I love you, Kate. Please don't ever leave me. I don't think I'll be able to let you go."

Kate kissed him back. "I love you too, Ben, and I don't plan on going anywhere. This is our home now."

Ben kissed the top of her head and tightened his embrace. "Thank you." They held each other until they both drifted off to sleep.

\* \* \* \* \*

The phone woke them an hour later. Ben reached over to answer it and Kate snuggled up to his side. Kate listened to Ben's side of the conversation. She had a feeling she knew who was on the other side of the call.

"Hi, what's up?... Yeah, it sounds like she had a nice day too... WHAT!... Okay, Cree, I'll do that... Yeah all right. Talk to you later."

Ben hung the phone up and turned his eyes on Kate. "Did you forget to mention something about your day, Wildflower?"

Kate snuggled closer and buried her head against his chest. "I didn't want to ruin a perfect day. I'd have told you about the tire eventually, Ben." She looked at the worry

lines around his mouth and smoothed them with her finger. His face was so beautiful for a man. It was like sleeping with an overly large warrior.

Kate knew Ben was a protective man by nature. Twenty-two years in the Navy tended to do that to a man, but nothing harmful had happened to her today. The flat tire was a nuisance, nothing more.

Ben sighed and kissed her head. "Cree said the tire was slashed on purpose. He thinks it was Clint and that he must have been following you and Jenny. He and I agree that until we find out what all this is about you shouldn't go anywhere without me, Cree or Jake. Maybe we should even skip the dance Saturday night?"

Kate sat up and shook her head vehemently. "No, absolutely not, Ben. Clint's actions seven years ago put me into a box on this ranch and I'm finally climbing out. No, Ben. I won't get back into that box."

Ben pulled her down into a tight embrace and kissed her softly, licking her lips and the tears from her cheeks she didn't even realize were there. "I want you to be safe, Kate, that's all I'm saying. You're everything important in my life, Wildflower. How can I not try to protect you?"

Kate ran her hand over his muscled chest. "Please don't try to protect me by putting me back in that box. Whether you've lined it with silk or satin, it's still a box. I've given it a lot of thought and I think Clint's been behind the problems here on the ranch for the past year. I'm not sure what he hopes to gain by making my life hell but I've given enough because of that man." Kate kissed the nipple in front of her face. "He cost me my self-respect and my parents, Ben. Help me to stand up to him. Don't ask me to hide from him."

Ben rubbed her back and thought about what Kate had just said. "What do you mean he cost you your parents? I thought they died in a car accident?"

Kate took a deep breath and closed her eyes. She hadn't meant to admit that to him but now she was going to have to explain. "I've never told anyone exactly what happened the day of my eighteenth birthday and what happened afterwards and I will tell you all of it someday. For now I'll tell you about my parents. I was an only child to elderly parents. My mom didn't think she'd ever have children until I came along. She was forty-two when she had me. I was the center of the universe to my parents. The ranch had been in my dad's family for generations but just like before him it was a daily struggle to make ends meet. We've never had a big enough operation on this ranch to make much of a profit but everyone including me had dreams for it. My dad's dream included Black Angus cattle. He knew that if he could just get a good breeding herd this ranch would make a profit. Dad took out a loan to buy the first fifteen heifers and a bull."

Kate looked at Ben and swallowed. "He got the Anguses two weeks before my eighteenth birthday. You should have seen him, Ben. He was like a kid on Christmas morning the day those cows arrived. After what happened on my birthday my dad took me to the sheriff's office to file a report. The sheriff was Clint's Uncle Gus. Gus decided

that it would be best for everyone involved if we called Clint and his father down to the station. When they arrived and heard the charges I wanted filed against Clint, his dad went ballistic. He told my father that as the owner of the bank he could find a loophole in his loan papers and demand payment immediately if I didn't drop my complaint against Clint."

Kate started to cry again, thinking of her father. "I'll never forget the look on Daddy's face as he stood there in Gus' office. In that one second he had to choose between a dream and his daughter. I could see the light dimming from his eyes and knew he was prepared to give up his dream for me. I held his hand and told him the success of the ranch would be like a slap in the face to the whole Adams family. I convinced him to just drop the complaint and worry about his new Black Anguses. I assured him that I would be all right."

Ben wiped her tears and kissed her head. "But you weren't all right, were you, Wildflower?"

"No. I wasn't all right. I went home and shut down. For the next two months I cried myself to sleep every night but worked beside my dad all day. My dad saw what the choice he'd made had done to me and became very depressed himself. One day he just wouldn't get out of bed. My mom called the doctor and he said to bring him in. I helped her load Dad in the car and waved them off."

Kate swallowed. Tears ran in rivers down her cheeks but she didn't feel them. "Mom hit a deer on the way to town. She lost control of the car and hit a tree at fifty miles an hour. They both died and I've been trying to keep Daddy's dream alive for this ranch every day since." Kate gave an almost hysterical bark of laughter before she continued. "I had to actually go into the bank and beg Mr. Adams for a loan to cover the funeral and the inheritance taxes. I swallowed my pride for this ranch, Ben. Now do you see why it means so much to me?"

Ben wiped her face and reached for a tissue beside the bed. He handed it to her and tried to regain some control while she blew her nose. "What I see is a sweet, beautiful woman who has been through far too much for her age. You've persevered, Kate. Despite everything this ranch will show a profit by the end of the year. I know now more than ever that you're like the wildflowers growing out on the ranch." He held her tighter and kissed her. "I love you, Wildflower. I'm part of your dream now. I won't let you down. We'll make this ranch profitable beyond anyone's dreams."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate finished her chores early on Saturday. She wanted to spend time pampering herself for her date with Ben. Kate drew a hot bath and filled the steaming water with lavender oil. She stretched out in the big claw-foot tub and closed her eyes. Thinking about Ben put a smile on her face and warmth in her heart. She could tell he was still worried about her but they'd finished the week without discussing Clint Adams once. As she soaked in the scented water she felt utterly content. Ben had worn his pirate

bandana more and more the last couple of days. Kate smiled. She knew it was because she'd commented on how much she liked it. Boy did she like it. It set off the little hoop in his ear and made him even sexier.

Kate drained the scented water and took a shower to wash her hair. The thick curly hair would take forever to dry but she had plenty of time. She dried off and put her robe on. As she was heading downstairs to get a glass of lemonade the phone rang.

"Hello."

"Hi, Kate, it's Jenny. I just wanted to make sure you were still meeting us at the dance? Although I'm not sure how much I'll be allowed to dance. Jake and Cree are just certain I'm going to hurt myself or the babies if I lift a finger. And boy howdy is my sex life suffering. All they want to do with me is kiss and pet. Not that I don't love that but a girl needs a little boom-boom now and then. The fact that I see their faces when they come back from the barn in the evening doesn't help either. It seems I'm the only one not getting any." Jenny took a deep breath and continued. "I'm sorry to vent to you about my sexual frustrations but what are girlfriends for, right?"

Kate laughed and sighed. "It's nice to have a girlfriend after all these years, Jenny. You can vent to me anytime and yes, Ben and I will meet you at the dance in two hours." Kate saw Ben enter the kitchen looking as sexy as ever. He washed his hands and face and turned to look at her. He walked over to her and opened her robe. Jenny was still talking about all the things Cree and Jake wouldn't let her do. While Ben got on his knees and attached himself to her breast. Kate arched her back, giving him more, and tried to calm her breathing enough to finish her conversation with Jenny. "Men can be really stupid when it comes to pregnant women, Jenny. Maybe you should take them with you the next time you see your doctor." Ben moved to the other breast and began playing with her pierced clit. "Uh...Jenny, Ben's got his fingers all over my pussy so I'm going to have to let you go."

Jenny's voice got dreamy and soft. "God you're lucky. Does it feel as good as I remember?"

"Better. I'll see you soon, Jenny, bye."

Kate hung up the phone and spread her legs even more. Ben was laughing as he attacked her pussy with his mouth. "More, Ben."

Ben twirled his tongue deep into her channel. Kate's legs threatened to give out and Ben helped her down to the floor. Spreading her out on the polished hardwood, he continued with his assault. He stuck his finger deep into her pussy and withdrew it only to replace it once again with his tongue. Ben lifted Kate's legs and put them over his shoulders. He raised her butt up and inched toward her asshole. He stuck his finger in and sucked her clit. Kate stilled at the invasion of her ass. She began squirming and fighting him. "No, Ben, no. I can't....you have to let me up, Ben."

Ben stilled and sat up. "What's wrong, Wildflower? Did I hurt you?"

Kate quickly got off the floor and gathered her robe around her, tying the sash tightly. She got her panicked breathing under control and looked at Ben, totally

embarrassed with her actions. "I'm sorry, Ben. I...uh...I can't let you touch me there. I guess I just kind of freaked out on you. I'm really sorry."

Kate started to leave the kitchen but Ben stopped her with a hand on her elbow. "Why, Kate? Why can't I touch you there?" Ben saw the pain in her face. He knew this had something to do with Clint and the night she turned eighteen but he needed her to tell him.

Kate shook her head and buried her face in his chest. "I can't, Ben. It's too ugly. You'll never look at me the same again."

Ben lifted her chin with one finger. He looked into her tear-filled eyes. "Listen to me, Wildflower. Whatever he did to you was his fault, not yours. I could never look at you any way but with love in my eyes. Do you understand?" At Kate's nod Ben continued. "You need to be honest with me, darlin'. I need to know and understand your sexual boundaries if we're going to make this work. Please trust me."

Kate opened her eyes and looked at Ben. "The night of my eighteenth birthday I was in the barn putting away the new saddle my mom and dad bought me. The saddle I've never to this day been able to use. I keep it in the barn to remind me what I'm fighting for."

She shook her head to clear her thoughts. "Anyway, I was in the barn admiring my saddle and showing it off to Ripples when Clint walked in. He was drunk. I remember I could smell it across the barn. He stalked toward me with fists clenched and anger in his eyes. I'd never backed away from anything so I stood my ground. He walked right up to me and kissed me before I knew what was happening. I reared back and slapped him. Told him to get out and never come back. Clint grabbed me by the hair and spat in my face. He screamed that 'no one made a fool of Clint Adams'. He said he was going to teach me a lesson in how to treat my betters. My beautiful new saddle was sitting on a hay bale and he dragged me over to it. When I tried to fight him he punched me in the face twice. One blackened my eye, the other split my lip." Kate put her fingers to her lips, remembering the feeling of the fist slamming into her mouth.

"Clint forced me down over the saddle and pulled my new birthday dress up over my ass. He ripped my panties and dug his cock out of his tight jeans. When I tried to kick out at him and yell for help he twisted my arm up behind my back so hard that I heard the crack as it broke. I nearly passed out from the pain. The whole time Clint was telling me what a whore I was. He said only whores got fucked up the ass. He shoved his cock in me dry and began thrusting in and out. I screamed so loud my dad heard me in the house. I heard the kitchen door slam and my dad yelling my name. Clint must have heard it too because he got off me and pushed me to the ground. He gave me a nice solid kick in the ribs and spat on me again before he ran out of the barn. My dad found me and took me into the house. He didn't know I'd been raped. I was too ashamed to tell him after what Clint had said."

She looked at Ben. Kate buried her face in his chest at the pity she saw in his eyes. "Daddy took me to the emergency room in Santa Fe to get my broken arm set. They stitched up my lip and taped my ribs. The emergency room doctors told me they

needed to call the police. I begged them not to, saying I'd go to town the next day and file a complaint with the police in Junctionville." Kate looked up at Ben and shrugged. "You know the rest."

Ben held Kate, but he wasn't with her at that minute. His mind was on murder. Where could he find that little fucker? The blood rushed so loudly through his ears that he didn't hear Kate talking to him. Finally, she shook his shoulders and brought his head down to hers and kissed him. He looked at her and almost fell to his knees. After all she'd been through she was the stronger one of them right now. "I'm going to kill him. I'm going to find him and rip his dick off and shove it up his ass and then I'm going to kill him."

Kate knew he meant every word. She saw the truth in his eyes. "No, Ben. I've lost two people I loved already to him and that night. I can't lose you too. Clint Adams isn't worth giving up the rest of our lives together. He's a self-important man who works at a small-town bank. He's not worth it." She kissed him, sharing her grief and hope with him in that single kiss. Kate rubbed his head, knowing it always calmed him down.

"I'll need to talk to Cree about this, Kate. He needs to know what kind of man Clint Adams really is. I know Cree's suspected a few things about Clint but nothing like this." He kissed her again. "Why don't you go get dressed, Wildflower? I have a date in an hour." Ben turned her around and swatted her ass. "Go. I'll take a shower and try to calm down by the time you're ready."

Kate was ready in forty-five minutes. She slipped the dress on over her head and pulled what there was of it down her body. The pink jersey dress hit about mid-thigh so she decided to forgo hose. She looked at herself in the mirror and decided to be even naughtier by taking off her panties. Kate drew the naughty line at a bra. Her breasts were just too big to go without one in public. She'd chosen her strapless ivory demi-cup because the dress was off the shoulder. Kate applied her makeup and decided to leave most of her curly blonde hair down. She chose a black onyx barrette that had been her grandmother's and put the front part of her hair up. Slipping her new three-inch pale pink heels on, she left the bedroom in search of Ben. She found him in the living room drinking a beer, which he proceeded to choke on when he spotted her.

Wiping his mouth with a handkerchief, he looked Kate up and down. "Damn." Ben shook his head. "Double damn. Woman, I don't know if I want you out of this house looking that good. I might lose you to some fast-talkin' cowboy."

Kate giggled and walked over to give him a hug. "You can't lose me, Ben, so forget it. I've known the people in town all my life and they've never had anything I wanted." Kate kissed him carefully. She didn't think he'd appreciate lipstick all over his face. "Let's go before we're too late to get a table."

They drove the fifteen miles to town in companionable silence. Kate looked over at Ben and smiled. "I think you need to talk to Cree and Jake about their sex life or lack thereof according to Jenny."

Ben swung his head toward Kate. "Men don't talk to each other about their sex lives like that, Kate. We only brag about the conquering part. Not the everyday maintenance involved."

Kate's eyebrows shot up. "So now I'm considered a job? Something you have to work to maintain?"

Ben started to get worried that he'd really stuck his foot in it, but he saw Kate's lips twitch. "You know you're not just a job, Wildflower. You're an adventure," he said and smiled at his funny joke.

Kate rolled her eyes and laughed. "Really, Ben, you need to talk to them. They're so afraid of hurting the babies they refuse to have sex with Jenny and from the sound of her complaints she's about to explode."

"They're probably just trying to be safe, darlin'. I'd be the same way if I were in their shoes."

"Well, Jenny knows they're still fooling around in the barn before they come into the house. Ben, I don't know how to make you understand this but she needs to feel like she's still sexy to them. Her body is changing so rapidly that she's having a lot of self-doubts and I think that's worse for her health than sex."

Ben rolled his eyes and sighed. "All right, Kate. I'll sneak the guys behind the building and tell them all about sex and women." He flashed his straight white teeth in an ornery grin.

They parked the truck and made their way into the dance hall. Kate spotted Jenny and waved. "Over there in the corner." She took Ben's hand and led him through the crowd, totally oblivious to the staring townspeople.

Ben noticed the looks though. Both men and women followed her every step. They reached the table at last. Jenny and Kate hugged, while he shook hands with Cree and Jake. Ben looked at Jake and nodded to the crowd. "What's with all the stares?"

Jake laughed and patted him on the back. "Are you blind, man? Your woman is H. O. T."

Ben smiled and nodded. "Believe me I noticed. Damn near choked to death on a beer when she came down the stairs dressed in that. So that explains the men but what's up with the women?"

Jake shrugged his shoulders. "Jealous I imagine or maybe it's the fact that Kate hasn't been to any kind of social function in years. Who cares, man? She's with you. That's all that matters."

Ben sat down and pulled Jake closer, speaking softly. "Thanks for the advice, cowboy. I've got a little advice I need to impart to you and Cree later regarding sex and the Mrs."

Jake backed up a little and narrowed his eyes. "I don't know that I like the sound of that, Ben. Let's get you and Kate something to drink then we can discuss it." Jake and Ben went to the bar to order drinks.

Weaving through the crowd, Jake noticed Ben garnering a few looks himself. Jake elbowed him in the side. "Don't look now but it seems you're the object of the eyes in the room now." Jake laughed and pounded Ben on the back.

Ben shrugged and smiled at Jake. "They've just never seen a giant in person before."

They got drinks and headed back to the table, handing out bottles of beer to everyone but Jenny who got a glass of ginger ale. Jenny held up her glass and frowned. "This pregnancy thing sucks." She looked at Cree and Jake. "The way things are going you might only get these two babies."

Ben saw it on her face. Kate was right—he needed to talk to his friends. "Kate darlin', why don't you and Jenny go see if they have anything good on the buffet table?" He gave Kate a knowing look.

Kate nodded slightly and turned to Jenny. "Come on, girlfriend, we must gather food for our men." Jenny laughed and took off across the hall with Kate.

Once the women were out of earshot Ben turned toward his friends. He noticed Cree's hand was under the table and Jake had a half-lidded look to his face. He watched as Cree leaned over and stuck his tongue in Jake's ear and whispered something to him. Jake groaned and took Cree's mouth in a deep kiss. Ben decided he needed to break up their little petting session if he was going to help Jenny.

"I don't have much time but listen up and listen good. God I can't believe I'm about to say this. Jenny needs to get fucked. Bad. Kate says she's feeling unwanted." Ben held his hand up to stop them from speaking. "Her hormones are on overdrive right now. Instead of trying to protect her why don't you try fuckin' her? She needs to know she's still sexy to you both. Besides she's well aware of what you two are doing in the barn." Ben gave them a narrowed look. "And under the damn table."

Cree looked at Ben with his mouth open. "Damn, Ben. We've been killing ourselves trying to stay away from her. Her body's been through so much already. We just wanted to make sure nothing happened to her or the babies. That's why we've been waiting until she's not around to fuck and stroke each other."

"She knows that, guys, but it doesn't make her body want you any less. I'm sure she wouldn't do anything to hurt the babies. At least talk to her about it. Maybe go to the doctor with her next time and ask him questions about what you can and can't do." Ben looked at Jake and Cree, who were staring at each other.

Jake got up from the table and pulled his cell phone out. "Next appointment my ass. I'm going to try to get a hold of her doctor now. As far as we're concerned this is an emergency." Jake walked out the front door to use the phone.

Cree looked at Ben and shrugged. "It's been a hard couple of months for us. In more ways than one."

Kate and Jenny returned to the table with trays loaded down with food. Kate handed Ben a plate with four pieces of fried chicken, half a slab of ribs, beans and potato salad. Her own plate only had a chicken breast, coleslaw and a roll.



Cree looked at the differences in their plates and laughed until he doubled over. "Good God, man, where do you put it all? You've got enough food on that plate to feed every one of my ranch hands."

Ben gave him a toothy grin. "I'm still a growing boy, Cree. Maybe if you ate as much as I do you wouldn't be such a tiny little shrimp."

Kate and Jenny rolled their eyes at the good-natured teasing going on between the two friends. Jenny leaned toward Kate and whispered, "Please tell me he burns all those calories up in the sack. I've got a feeling I'm going to have to live vicariously through you for the next three and a half months."

Kate giggled and winked at her. "The night is still young."

The group was joined by Jake who gave Cree a wink and a thumbs-up. They finished their dinner and waited for the band to start. The first song the band played was an old slow country and western song.

Ben pushed his chair back and stood up. "Could I have the pleasure of this dance, Wildflower?" He held his hand out and Kate put her tiny hand in his. Ben led her to the dance floor followed by Jake, Cree and Jenny. Ben looked over at the threesome dancing with Jenny in the middle between the two men. Ben smiled and shook his head. "You gotta love those three. They're so in love they don't care what anyone thinks."

Kate sighed and leaned her head against Ben's chest. "Pay more attention to the woman you're holding in your arms who's not wearing any underwear and less attention to the dancing threesome."

Ben stopped dancing and looked down into her eyes. "Are you kidding me, darlin'? Because if you're not we are so outta here."

Kate looked up at Ben and smiled. "I'm ready to go as soon as this dance is over and I slip into the ladies room." They danced the remainder of the song. Ben's cock was so hard Kate felt sorry for him. After the song ended she kissed him. "I'm going to the restroom. You, my man, are in no condition to wander around in here with all the ladies present. Why don't you go on out to the car and wait for me. Stop by the table on your way out and tell the threesome we're going home."

Kate turned and went down to the basement of the building where the restrooms were located. She finished in the restroom and was coming out the door when a hand reached out and pulled her back by the hair. Kate's hands went to her hair and she tried to turn around to face her attacker.

Clint Adams pulled her around the corner toward the supply closet. Kate kicked him and started screaming. Clint backhanded her across the right side of her face. The impact threw her into the wall. Kate slid to the floor with her hand covering her cheek.

Clint leaned down and came inches away from her face. "Look at you. You filthy whore. Struttin' yourself like you think you're better than everybody else. Well, I've got news for you, slut. Get out of this town. You'll never make a success out of the shithole you call a ranch and if you send that big gorilla after me I'll kill him." Clint looked up and slipped out the back door.

Kate could hear someone's shoes on the tiled floor. She tried to get up when hands gripped her arms. Kate tried to shrug the hands off.

"Easy, Kate. It's me, Jenny." Kate stopped struggling and let Jenny help her to her feet. Jenny looked at Kate and hugged her. "Was it Clint? Where did he go?"

Kate looked at her friend and closed her eyes. "Jenny, please get Cree. He needs to arrest Clint for assault before Ben sees me." Kate looked into Jenny's eyes. "Ben will try to kill him when he finds out what happened."

Jenny found a chair for Kate and set it in the restroom. She got Kate comfortable and went to find Cree. As she approached their table she spotted Ben. He'd obviously come back in to see what was taking Kate so long. Jenny made eye contact with Cree and crooked her finger at him. He must have seen the worry on her face because he tried to slip away unnoticed by Ben and Jake.

He reached for Jenny and pulled her to the side away from the crowd. "What's wrong, sweetheart?"

Jenny looked from Ben back to Cree. "Clint Adams assaulted Kate outside the restrooms. She seems fine other than a backhand to the face but she wants you to arrest him before Ben finds out."

Cree looked toward the stairs leading to the basement. "Where's she now?"

"I sat her in the ladies room on a chair. Please, Cree, find Clint. He went out the back door leading out from the basement."

Cree nodded and pulled Jenny with him to check on Kate. Seeing the byplay between Jenny and Cree, Ben turned away from Jake and followed. He had a bad feeling about what he was about to find. He went down the basement stairs and found Kate being held up by Jenny and Cree. Cree was talking to her in hushed tones. Ben stepped up and took Kate away from Jenny. "What the hell's goin' on?"

Kate didn't look up at him. She just buried her face in his chest. Ben looked at Cree and raised Kate's face. The entire side of her face was turning a bluish purple and her lip was bleeding. "I'll kill him."

Ben tried to hand Kate back to Jenny but Cree stopped him with a hand on his arm. "No, friend, you won't. This is a police matter now. Let me do my job, Ben. I can finally charge that little fucker with something. Don't jeopardize it." Cree looked into Ben's furious face. "Believe me. I know what you're feeling, Ben. I've been through it myself. Take Kate home and keep her safe until I can catch the little fucker."

"There are things you don't know about him, Cree. Things he's done to Kate." Ben ran his hands over his head. He finally nodded to Cree. "I'll take her home for now but you call me the minute he's in custody. We need to talk." Ben bent down and lifted Kate into his arms. "I'm going to take her out the back way. No use in giving the whole town a show." Ben looked back at Cree and Jenny. "Thank you, friends."

Ben carried Kate to his pickup and slid her into the seat. She was unusually quiet and subdued. "Are you all right? Do you want me to take you to the hospital?"

Kate shook her head slightly. "Take me home, Ben."

Ben kissed her forehead and shut the door. He climbed into the driver's seat and put his head down on the steering wheel. "I need to calm down a minute before I drive, Kate."

Kate reached her hand to his smooth head and rubbed. Ben turned his face to look at her. "What an ass I am. Here you are the one who was hurt and you're comforting me." Ben reached for her and pulled her into his arms. "God, baby, I'm so sorry I didn't protect you from him. I'll never forgive myself for it." Ben buried his face in her hair.

Kate kissed his shoulder. "Don't, Ben. It wasn't your fault. I know now it wasn't my fault either. He wants me to leave town. To leave the ranch." She looked into Ben's eyes. "I don't know that he'll stop until he gets what he wants."

Ben squeezed her tighter. "Well, tough. He's not getting rid of us. The ranch is our home." He looked at Kate. "I hope one day it will be our children's home. If anyone's going to get driven out of town it'll be him and you can take that to the bank, darlin'." Ben set Kate back into her seat and buckled her seat belt. He buckled his own and drove home.

He got Kate into the house and guided her to his room. "I'm going to hold you all night, Wildflower."

Kate took off her dress and bra and crawled into bed. She snuggled down into her pillows and sighed. "Thank you, Ben."

Ben undressed and sat on the edge of the bed. "Darlin', I'm going to go find some salve and an ice pack for your cheek. I'll be right back." By the time Ben got back to the bedroom Kate was sound asleep. He carefully applied the salve but opted for a cool, wet washcloth instead of the ice pack he'd fixed. He got into bed and pulled her back up against his front. Cradling her in the safety of his arms, he cried.

Ben cried for the woman in his arms who had been assaulted that night and for the scared eighteen-year-old girl who had been beaten and raped in the barn so long ago. He lay awake and waited for the phone to ring. Finally, at three-thirty in the morning the phone rang. Ben grabbed it on the first ring.

"Hello."

"It's Cree. I found him at his dad's old house. He's locked up for now. You'll need to bring Kate in to the station around nine this morning to fill out a formal complaint against him."

"How long, Cree?"

Cree hissed a breath from between his teeth. "I honestly don't know, Ben. It depends on Clint's attorney, the prosecutor and the judge. He could be allowed to post bond and be out of here Monday. I'll try talking to the judge. See if I can't persuade him to keep the little fucker awhile longer but it's out of my hands after that. I do think Kate needs to take out a protection order against him regardless."

"I'm going to call Gabe and see if he can come out for a while. I'd feel better if I knew she had a shadow at all times. When can I talk to you in private?"

"Why don't the two of you come over for lunch tomorrow afternoon? You can stop by after we finish taking Kate's statement."

"All right, Cree. Get some sleep and we'll see you at nine a.m." Ben hung up the phone and pulled Kate closer. He finally dozed off an hour later.

## Chapter Five

At six o'clock that morning Kate carefully extricated herself from Ben's arms and went to take a shower. She turned on the shower and looked into the mirror while the water heated. She gingerly touched her bruised cheek. There wasn't much swelling but there was no way makeup would be able to cover the vivid blues and purples. Kate stepped into the shower and gathered her strength like a blanket around her.

Kate knew she'd need to be strong for Ben. He wasn't dealing with this well. His natural instincts were to go after Clint, but he knew he couldn't protect her if he was in jail. Kate shampooed her hair and carefully took off her eye makeup from the night before. The bruise might not be swollen but it was sore. She turned off the faucet and dried herself. Instead of wasting time drying her hair Kate just pinned it on top of her head. She didn't bother with makeup and quietly went in search of her clothes. Kate didn't know what time Ben had finally gone to sleep but she remembered hearing the phone ring only a couple of hours earlier.

Kate dressed quickly and went to the kitchen to make a pot of coffee. While the coffee brewed she decided to start on her morning chores. She headed out to the barn to feed the horses. Whistling for Charlie, Kate entered the barn. Before her eyes could adjust to the dim recesses of the barn she tripped over something. She landed on her hands, just missing hitting her sore face. Turning around, Kate screamed. Charlie came running to her rescue immediately.

\* \* \* \* \*

By the time Ben made it to the barn he found Kate curled into a ball on the barn floor. He hadn't taken the time to dress properly but he had pulled on jeans and grabbed his gun. He slowly made his way into the barn with his gun at the ready. When he didn't see anyone he called out to Kate. "Kate darlin', what's wrong?" Charlie barked and Ben headed toward him. He walked over to where she was huddled with Charlie by her side and saw the saddle. It had been taken down from the storage hook and placed on a bale of hay in the center aisle. "Damn him." Ben went to Kate and picked her up off the dirt floor. Cradling her in his arms, he whistled for Charlie and carried her to the house.

He entered through the kitchen and carried her to the sofa in the living room. Gently putting her down, he covered her with a throw blanket from the back of the couch. Charlie curled up on his bed under the window. "I'll be right back, Wildflower. I'm going to get you some coffee to warm you up." Ben went to the kitchen and got down two cups. He filled them and headed back to Kate.

"Here, Kate. Drink this. It'll make you feel better."

She took a sip and set the coffee back down on the coffee table. Kate raised her eyes to Ben and the pain he saw brought him to his knees. He picked her up and sat on the couch, bringing Kate down to be cradled in his lap. "Baby? Please talk to me? Tell me what I can do to make you feel better? Damn it, Kate, I feel so fucking helpless." He kissed her forehead and started rocking her in his arms.

Kate was looking down at her hands when a teardrop landed on Ben's bare chest. She cleared her throat. "Ben, I don't know if I can do this again. I thought I was getting over it but every time I turn around the memories are there." She sighed and wiped her eyes. "He told me last night to leave Junctionville. I'm beginning to think maybe he was right. Maybe I should leave before I have a breakdown like Daddy."

Ben embraced her a little tighter. "Please don't give up our dream, Wildflower. We're going to the sheriff's office this morning to file a complaint about Clint. Cree also suggested a restraining order just in case they can't hold him in jail long enough. If you get the restraining order he can't come near you or talk to you at all. If he does Cree can put him back in jail. Please, Kate? Please be strong for me for a little while longer?"

Kate didn't look at him but she nodded her head. "Thank you, Wildflower. I'm going to call Jake to see if he can send one of his ranch hands over to do our chores this morning." Ben started to reach for the phone when Kate's hand stopped him.

"No, Ben. I need to do this. I'd like us to do this together." She stood and pulled herself together. Reaching over to get a tissue off the table, she blew her nose and dried her remaining tears. "I'm ready now."

Ben took her face in his hands, being careful of her bruised cheek. "Let me go out first and put the saddle away. Do you want me to get it out of the barn completely?"

Kate shook her head. "No. I want to see it on the storage hook where it's always been. Someday when all of this is over I'm going to ride in that saddle."

Ben kissed her, softly and sweetly. He put all his love and caring into that one kiss. "You're a brave one that's for sure. I'm glad I've got you on my team." Ben took her hand and walked toward the door. "Let's get the animals taken care of and go to town and see Cree. After we're done in town Cree invited us over for lunch."

\* \* \* \* \*

Filing the actual complaint was harder on Ben than it seemed to be on Kate. She related the events of the night before with perfect clarity. Kate then described her unsettling discovery in the barn that morning. When Cree was done typing up the official report he looked up at Ben.

"I'm going to fax this report to the judge's house along with another request for a search warrant. Maybe now the judge will be a little more inclined to grant it. My guess is that Clint drove straight from the dance last night to your ranch. He must've known finding that saddle, left like it was, would upset Kate. Clint's already seen his lawyer and the bail hearing will be slated for first thing in the morning." He looked from Ben to a quiet Kate. "He'll probably be released on bail by tomorrow afternoon. I've taken the

liberty of drawing up a restraining order on Clint." He looked at Kate, trying to read her emotions. "Would you like to sign it?" Cree cleared his throat and glanced at Ben. "We'll have to go before the judge tomorrow and state the reasons for the order to him but under the circumstances it shouldn't be a problem."

Kate chewed her bottom lip and nodded. "I'll do anything I can to keep that bastard off my ranch and away from me." She picked up a pen and signed the papers Cree had already drawn up. She plastered a fake smile on her face and tried to sound positive. "So sheriff, what's for lunch?"

Cree reached out and pulled her into his arms. He embraced Kate and kissed her on the cheek. At the intimidating growl from Ben, Cree laughed and kissed her again. "You owe me, Ben. How many times did I catch you having a heart-to-heart with Jenny?"

Ben gently pulled Kate away from Cree and into his own arms. "We'll meet you at the Triple Spur. I thought we'd stop and pick up some cool drinks on the way."

"Sounds good, buddy. See you there."

Ben and Kate arrived at the Triple Spur forty-five minutes later. They pulled up to the beautiful log and stone ranch house and Ben turned to face Kate. "Thank you for being so brave, Wildflower." He leaned across the seat and kissed her. Drawing away slowly, he looked deep in her eyes. "I love you, Kate. Thank you for sharing your life with me."

Kate's eyes pooled with tears. She smiled and kissed him back. "I love you, Ben. I've never met anyone I'd rather spend my life with."

Ben got out of the truck and went around to lift Kate down from the passenger seat. They walked hand in hand to the front porch. Blue was in his regular sleeping spot, the front porch settee cushion that Cree had forbidden the dog to get up on. Ben smiled and shook his head and knocked on the door.

Jake answered the door after several long moments. His lips were swollen and his eyes were still hooded from passion. "Hey, guys, come on in. Jenny's in the kitchen finishing up lunch. I'm sorry but things won't be ready for another half hour or so." He looked down at his bare feet. "We...uh...got a little distracted."

Kate smiled and started toward the kitchen calling over her shoulder. "It's about damn time Jenny got...uh...distracted." She waved goodbye to Ben and went into the kitchen to help Jenny.

Ben followed Jake out onto the front porch. Jake took a seat on the porch swing and pointed to the bag Ben held. "Please tell me that's beer? Jenny won't let Cree and me have it in the house anymore." He smiled and shrugged. "She said if she couldn't have any neither could we." He leaned toward Ben and whispered, "Jenny doesn't know it, but I've got a cooler stashed in the barn." He sat back quite proud of himself.

Ben handed him a cold beer out of the bag. "Better drink this six-pack fast then before it gets hot." Ben took a seat in the rocking chair beside the porch swing. "Where's Cree? I wanted to talk to both of you while the women are busy."

Jake took a long pull from the beer bottle and sighed. "Damn that tastes good. Cree should be here any minute. He decided to take the reports over to Judge Hathaway personally instead of faxing them."

By the time they were finished with their first beer Cree was climbing the steps of the porch. "Man that beer looks good." He took a seat next to Jake on the porch swing and wrapped his arm around him. Pulling Jake in, he gave him a deep kiss. He even went as far as quickly running a hand down to the bulge in Jake's jeans.

Jake thrust up into his hand. It seemed they'd both forgotten Ben was sitting right beside them. When Jake reached over to start unbuttoning Cree's jeans, he heard a cough coming from Ben. Startled, he looked over at Ben. "Sorry, Ben. Just can't seem to get enough these days. I think Jenny's hormones are infectious." He smoothed his hand down Cree's torso once more and buttoned his jeans. "Later," he said and licked Cree's lips.

Ben handed Cree and Jake a beer and took another for himself. "How's your prisoner today?"

Cree smiled and took a drink of his beer. "Pissed off. He's been talking to his daddy's lawyer all morning. He's furious he can't get out today. I explained the judge refused to hold a bond hearing on a Sunday but Clint seems to think he should make an exception for an Adams." Cree took another drink of his beer as he played with Jake's hair. "How's Kate holding up?"

Ben sat his bottle between his thighs and ran his hands over his head. "Very well considering the surprise Clint left for her in the barn this morning." At Jake's scowl Ben continued. "Let me back up for a moment. First I need to explain exactly what happened to Kate seven years ago at the hands of that little fucker." Ben told them the story Kate had shared with him. He could tell by the looks on their faces Cree and Jake were remembering what they'd gone through with Jenny.

When he finished relaying the events of seven years ago, he told Jake what happened that morning. Cree of course had already heard the story so he kept himself busy playing with Jake's hair and neck. "This morning Kate went out early to get the horses fed and tripped over a little present. It seems someone put the saddle she'd been raped on in the middle of the aisle on a bale of hay." Ben rubbed his head again and closed his eyes. "I thought she was going to break for good. She was ready to leave Junctionville and the ranch. I talked her into giving me another chance to protect her." He looked at his friends. "I can't let her down again. I'm thinking about calling in one of 'The Team'. What do you think?"

Cree nodded his head and put his empty beer bottle on the porch floor. "I think not only is Clint a bastard but so was his father and ex-Sheriff Adams. I can't officially do anything about the events seven years ago but I might just let a few things slip to Judge Hathaway. And with your permission to a few folks around town." Ben started to protest telling the town's people. Cree could see it in his eyes. Cree held up his hand to stop Ben's objection. "Maybe with a few well-spoken words we can make life a little



more difficult in Junctionville for Clint Adams. We'll let him get run out of town by the residents if the law can't take care of him."

Ben began to see the merits of what Cree was saying. "I'll have to ask Kate. It's her story. What about calling in one of the guys?"

Jake reached for the last beer with a pleading face. "Well, I talked to Gabe just yesterday and I can tell you it's not a good time for him. He's got some problems of his own right now. What about calling Nicco? I know his security company is busy but at least he's got a good business partner to take up some of the slack. I'll bet if you call him he'd be on the next flight out of New York City."

Ben nodded and reluctantly handed Jake the last beer. Just as Jake started to take a drink Jenny called through the door that lunch was on the table. Ben doubled over laughing at Jake's panicked face. "Drink fast, Jake, before momma catches you."

Jake opened his throat and poured the beer down. Cree looked at Ben and shrugged. "It's a gift he has." As they got up and walked toward the door Ben caught Cree smacking Jake's ass. "A damn fine gift, cowboy."

\* \* \* \* \*

After lunch Cree, Jake and Ben retired to Jake's office to give Nicco a call while Jenny and Kate looked at baby furniture catalogs in the kitchen. Jake handed Ben the phone. "You know, Kate could always stay here."

Ben looked at him like he was crazy. "Hell no she can't. I need that woman like I need air. Her place is with me at home." Ben dialed Nicco's cell phone.

"Nicco."

"Hey buddy, it's Ben. How've ya been?" Ben turned his back on the now kissing Cree and Jake. Jake was straddling Cree's lap and from the looks of it he was performing a tonsillectomy with his tongue.

"Hi, Ben, you know how it is. Every day gets a little shorter and the list of things to do gets a little longer. How's ranch life?"

Ben rubbed his earring and put his feet on the desk. "Great. I'm in love with my business partner."

Nicco choked on whatever he was drinking. "That's good, Ben. I'm happy for you. Is that why you're calling? To tell me you're in loooove."

Ben rolled his eyes at Nicco's teasing. "No that's not why I'm calling. I was wondering if you could do me a huge favor." He told Nicco about the problems Kate had in the past and then her present troubles. When he was done he waited for Nicco's reply.

"I'll talk to Mac and be there before midnight tonight. How long do you think it will take? I mean, I'm not going to leave until this thing is settled no matter what, but Mac and I were planning a vacation next week. If it's okay with you I thought I'd ask him if he'd like to take a little trip to New Mexico."

Ben put his feet on the floor and turned toward Jake and Cree, then snapped his head back around. Jake and Cree had obviously forgotten where they were. Cree had his face buried in Jake's naked ass and they were both stroking their cocks. Jake was pushing his ass against Cree's face and begging for Cree's tongue. "That sounds great to me, Nicco. I was just going to tell Cree and Jake but they're otherwise....uh...occupied at the moment."

Nicco laughed and told Ben he'd see him soon. Ben hung up the phone and backed out of the office, giving Cree and Jake a little privacy. He went to the kitchen and bent to give Kate a kiss on the top of the head. "Well, ladies, did you find the furniture you were searching for?"

Jenny's eyes lit up. "Yes as a matter of fact we did. Kate and I agree and we're planning a trip to Santa Fe Tuesday morning to get it. So do whatever protecting you need to do but we're going." Jenny looked behind Ben. "Where are my husbands?"

Ben cleared his throat. "They are...um...occupied in the office." Ben turned back to Kate. "Are you about ready to go home, Wildflower?"

Jenny put her hands on her hips. "Are they fooling around again? Ever since Jake talked to my doctor he can't seem to get enough sex." She looked at Kate and Ben smiling. "Not that I'm complaining. I just can't believe they started without me."

Kate and Ben inched toward the door. Kate waved at Jenny as they started down the steps. "Talk to you later, girlfriend."

## Chapter Six

Nicco's flight was delayed so he didn't get into the ranch until about three o'clock in the morning. Ben and Kate decided to let him sleep while they went to the barn to do their morning chores. They each picked up a pitchfork and Ben rounded up the wheelbarrow. They started on Too Tall's stall, mucking out the old straw and wood shavings. They worked in a comfortable silence, both deep in thought.

After they finished with Ripples' stall and spread out clean shavings and straw, Kate turned to Ben. "So Nicco is a friend of yours from the Navy?"

Ben nodded and put both of their pitchforks away. "Yeah. He worked under me in the Seal team that included Jake and Cree. You met him at Cree and Jenny's wedding, don't you remember?"

Kate walked over to the grain bin and filled a bucket. "Sure I remember him. It's hard to forget the guy who put a bullet hole between the eyes of a man right in front of me. I just wasn't introduced to him and wasn't clear on the relationship between you all."

Ben got the grooming brushes from the shelf and started brushing down Too Tall while Kate brushed down Ripples. "I'm sorry I forgot to introduce you to everyone. That day was kind of crazy. There were six of us. Nicco lives in New York City now. He's a partner in a personal security company. Then there's Gabe who bought Jake's father's ranch in western Oklahoma. Remy 'The Crazy Cajun' lives in and is part owner of a bar in Key West. And you already know Cree and Jake."

Kate finished brushing Ripples and put her grooming materials away. "Why don't you go and check the water tanks. I'll go start breakfast for our house guest."

Ben pulled Kate into his arms. "First I want some more of those wonderful kisses I got this morning." He parted Kate's mouth and stroked her tongue with his own. "God, Kate, you make me so hard I don't think I'll be able to ride Too Tall out to the pastures today. I'll have to take the truck." He unsnapped her shirt and pulled her breasts out of her bra and latched on.

Kate closed her eyes and arched her back. "Mmm...that's nice, Ben. After this morning I've no doubt that we'll work our way up to 'big blue'. I had no problem with the first new vibrator I bought. The second one was a little tight but you were so gentle with it that it wasn't painful. I think a few more sessions with it and I'll be ready for the big one. Next stop after that is this." Kate ran her hand down Ben's very large, very hard erection.

Ben led Kate up to the hayloft, dragging a horse blanket with him. He spread the blanket out and stripped himself and Kate of clothing. Taking her into his arms once more, Ben began kissing her like a man possessed. He pulled Kate on top of him and

positioned her so she was straddling his cock. "You feel so good there, darlin'. Slide back and forth for me. Let me feel your hot wet pussy on my cock."

Kate started a slow steady rhythm, sliding Ben's cock back and forth between the lips of her pussy. The movement rubbed against her clit and she shivered. "So good, Ben. You're so hard and thick."

Ben pulled her down toward his chest. He bent his head so he could get a breast in his mouth. He swirled her areola until goose bumps broke out on her skin. Kate's nipples grew even longer, silently begging for his mouth. He latched onto the nipple, giving it a little nip before sucking eagerly. Kate sped up her pelvic thrusts against his cock and Ben came with a shout to the rafters. He reached down and squeezed Kate's clit between his thumb and forefinger. With his other hand he drove three fingers up into her pussy.

Kate's pussy clamped on to Ben's fingers as she came. She collapsed on his chest, totally replete. Kate kissed and nibbled on Ben's nipples. She looked up at him and smiled. "You know we both smell like horses now, don't you?"

Ben smiled and kissed her forehead. "Yeah but it was well worth it. I'll sneak around back and wash down with the hose. You can take a shower before waking Nicco for breakfast. You might make extra. I wouldn't be surprised to see Cree show up anytime this morning." Ben smiled and kissed her again. "If he doesn't show up I'll just have to eat his share. With you around I seem to be burning a lot more calories than usual. I haven't been this active since my Seal days."

Kate got up and put her clothes back on. "How's Big Ben?" She motioned toward his cock. "Are you going to be able to take Too Tall to check the tanks?"

Ben looked down at his still half hard cock and grinned. "I probably could but my condition could pop back up at any time. I'll take the truck. It'll be faster. I'm starting to feel weak from hunger." He smiled and followed her down the ladder.

Kate showered and put on clean clothes. She opted for a pair of shorts since her work was done for the morning. She pulled on her old cutoffs and a red halter top. She put her hair up in a ponytail and went downstairs to cook breakfast.

She had the bacon and sausage done and in the oven to stay warm before Nicco woke up. She'd just started frying potatoes and making pancakes when she heard their house guest enter the kitchen. She went to the cupboard and got an extra large coffee mug down. "Have a seat, Nicco. Breakfast should be ready in about ten minutes." She set the coffee down in front of him and went back to her pancakes. She turned to look at him over her shoulder. "I'm making Ben some fried eggs too, would you care for some?"

Nicco shook his head and looked at the tiny spitfire in front of him. "Um...no thank you. I think the other mountain of food you've prepared will be plenty."

Kate turned and shrugged. "Ben tries to tell me he's still a growing boy and needs a lot of food."

Nicco gave a bark of laughter. "Hell, I hope the giant isn't still growing. Size-wise he's the most physically intimidating man I've ever met." Nicco smiled and took a drink of his coffee. "Excellent coffee, Kate, thank you."

She smiled sweetly and turned around to flip a pancake. "You're welcome. I should be thanking you for flying all the way out here."

Nicco held up his hand taking another drink of his coffee. "No need to thank me. Ben saved my ass more times than I care to count." Nicco's phone started ringing. He took the phone out of his pocket and looked at the caller ID. "Sorry, Kate, I need to answer this. It's my business partner Mac."

"Hey, Mac... Yeah I finally got in around two-thirty this morning. It was later than that by the time I rented a car and drove to Junctionville so I didn't want to call and wake you up."

Nicco continued to listen to Mac. He didn't notice Kate watching him out of the corner of her eye. Kate could see something different in Nicco's face that she'd never seen before, a sort of peace that softened his features. She didn't know Mac but she did know the look of a man in love. Kate just wondered whether Nicco knew it.

"I won't know until later on today, Mac, but it looks like we'll be spending our vacation in New Mexico... Okay I'll call you later today. Bye, Mac."

Nicco flipped the phone shut and shoved it back in his pants pocket. "That was Mac. He just wanted to make sure I got in all right. We've had a vacation on our work schedule for a year now so Mac's going to come in next week."

Kate brought the huge platter of pancakes to the table and sat down. "I'm sorry I'm messing up your vacation, Nicco. Where had you two planned on going?" Kate got up to set the table.

"Don't be sorry, Kate. We didn't have a destination in mind. We just usually get in a car and drive once a year. It's the best way to take a vacation. We were thinking about going up into the mountains and doing a little camping this year but as I look off into the distance I see you have some mountains right here in New Mexico. Maybe if we get this little fucker off your case we'll still have a few days to camp. Either way it doesn't matter. It's just being with each other without all the other stuff getting in the way that's fun for us."

Kate went outside the kitchen door and rang the big old-fashioned school bell. She came back in and grinned at Nicco. "It's like calling the hogs to the trough but don't tell Ben I said that."

Kate finished putting the food on the table and sat down just as Ben walked through the door. He walked over to the table and leaned down to kiss her. He looked at Nicco and smiled. "Good morning. Have you been keeping my little Wildflower company or are you trying to take her away from me?" He looked at Kate's confused expression and shrugged his shoulders. "Nicco has women falling at his feet wherever he goes. Between him and Remy no one else ever has a chance."

Nicco started to sputter a protest. "I've never led a woman on, Ben. I can't help that they see me as some Latin sex machine." He looked at Kate. "Honestly, Kate, I don't encourage them."

Kate smiled knowingly and took his hand across the table. "I totally believe you, Nicco." At Ben's low growl Kate rolled her eyes at Nicco and winked. "Besides you're not a big enough man for me. What are you, Nicco, about six-three or six-four? Why you're just a puny little thing." She patted his hand again and began filling her plate.

Nicco looked from her to Ben and broke into a fit of laughter. "I can see you've got your hands full with this one, Ben. She's a regular spitfire."

Ben smiled with pride. "She's my spitfire. Just remember that, Mr. Latin Lover." Ben filled his plate with five eggs, six sausage patties and eight pieces of bacon and then he got up from the table and got down an extra plate for the five pancakes he fixed.

Kate looked at Nicco knowingly. "I told you he was a growing boy." She patted Ben's hand as he gave Nicco a sheepish little-boy grin.

Nicco and Kate finished their breakfast and got up to do the dishes. A knock at the door alerted them to a visitor. Kate looked out the window and smiled at Ben. "Sorry, Ben, but it looks like Cree's here. You'll have to stick with the little measly breakfast you've already had." She left to let Cree in.

Ben eyed the rest of the bacon, sausage and pancakes. "Damn."

Nicco was still laughing when Cree and Kate came back into the kitchen. Kate gave Cree a cup of coffee. "I made extra for breakfast if you'd care for some? We've already eaten."

Cree shook his head and lifted the coffee cup. "Coffee's fine, thanks, Kate."

Ben's face looked like a kid on Christmas morning. "Oh good. I was still kinda hungry." He loaded his plate with the rest of breakfast.

Cree shook his head at his friend. "When aren't you hungry? I thought I was going to have to take another part-time job to feed you when you lived with us. I've never seen you eat like you have lately. Burning a lot of extra calories, Ben?"

Ben looked up from his plate and flashed his teeth in the biggest grin ever. "Shut up, Cree. Tell us what you know so far."

Cree took another drink of coffee and sighed. "Nothing new this morning, Ben. I came to take fingerprints off the saddle in the barn. After that I thought we'd head to town and file that protection order. The bail hearing is at one this afternoon."

Ben finished his breakfast and wiped his mouth. "Well, let's go take a look at that saddle." Ben pushed out from the table and rubbed his muscled stomach. "Damn good breakfast, Wildflower." He looked over at Nicco. "You'll stay in here with Kate, won't you, Nicco?"

Nicco carried Ben's dirty plate to the sink. "Sure thing. I'll just finish these dishes and take a shower if that's all right?"

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later Cree pulled out of the driveway in his sheriff's SUV, followed by Ben's pickup truck with Ben, Kate and Nicco inside. They arrived at the courthouse at nine o'clock and filed the necessary petition with the county clerk. She notarized the petition for a temporary protection order as well as the petition for the permanent protection order. The clerk took the paperwork to Judge Hathaway and asked them to wait in his outer office.

Kate's hands were shaking by the time she sat between Ben and Cree. Ben held her hand, trying to give her all the strength he had. "It'll be okay, Kate. You'll be called in to talk to the judge in a few minutes. He'll ask you why you need the protection orders. Just tell him the story you told me. You'll want to include the incident seven years ago as well as the events of the last several months. If he agrees to the temporary protection order he'll sign it and give it to Cree. The permanent protection order will then be scheduled for a hearing. Clint will be served papers on both the temporary order and the hearing date for the permanent protection order."

Kate looked shocked and turned to Cree. "You mean Clint will be in the same room with me during the hearing?"

Cree held her hand and nodded. "Under the law he has a right to defend himself to the judge. Don't worry, Kate, you'll have a room full of people to protect you from that slime."

Kate chewed her lip. "How come Jenny didn't get a protection order against Buck?"

Cree sighed and looked at Ben. "Jenny's situation was different from yours, Kate. Buck was already wanted by the police in three states. Clint Adams may not even be in jail after his bail hearing. If he gets out of jail we need a legal way to keep him away from you."

Kate looked at Ben. Tears welled up in her eyes and slowly ran down her cheeks. "I'm scared, Ben. What if he gets out of jail and comes after me for putting him in jail and filing the protection order?"

Ben enfolded Kate in his arms. "Oh baby, I know you're afraid. That's why I called Nicco. That way one of us can be with you at all times. Clint may be crazy but he's not crazy enough to mess with you with one of us on your arm. I need you to go in there and tell the judge all your fears concerning Clint. We'll be right here when you get out and Nicco and I will take you out to lunch."

Kate giggled and hugged Ben. Patting and rubbing his rock-hard stomach, she cooed, "Is my little Ben getting hungry again?"

Ben looked at Kate and then looked down at his swelling cock. "Your little Ben is always hungry, darlin'."

Kate looked into his eyes and blushed just as the door to Judge Hathaway's chamber opened. Kate took a deep breath and blew it out when the secretary told her the judge would see her now. She turned to Ben for one last quick kiss. "Wish me luck?"

"All the luck I have to offer, Wildflower." He kissed her forehead and turned her toward the judge's chamber.

When Kate disappeared behind closed doors Ben turned to look at Cree. "This better be worth it, buddy. She'll have to relive the whole nightmare over again in that room. I can't even think right now about how she'll get through telling her story during the hearing with Clint sitting there." Ben rubbed his head and began pacing the corridor.

Nicco looked at Cree and nodded his head toward Ben. "Right now I'm more worried about him than Kate. I've never seen him like this before. Usually he's the calmest one of the bunch."

Cree watched his friend pace up and down the hallway rubbing his head. "That's because no one's ever seen Ben in love before. We'll get them both through this one way or the other."

Thirty minutes later Kate emerged from Judge Hathaway's chamber. The secretary motioned for Cree to enter the office. Kate rushed to Ben's arms while Cree went to talk to the judge.

Ben held Kate close to his side as they sat and waited for Cree to reemerge. "How did it go, Kate?"

Kate nodded her head still looking at the floor. "Fine. It was fine, Ben. I just hated airing my dirty laundry to a stranger. Even if he is a judge."

Ben took her face in his hands, mindful of the still sore bruise on her cheek. "I know it was tough, darlin'. I'm very proud of you for sticking up for yourself."

Cree came out and walked up to Ben and Kate. "Well, the good news is he's signed the temporary protection order and set next Tuesday for the permanent protection order hearing." Cree stopped and ran his fingers through his long hair and released a frustrated breath. "The bad news is the judge gave me a heads-up on Clint's bail hearing. He's going to release him with a one hundred thousand dollar bail and instructions to stay away from you." He reached for Kate's hand. "I'm sorry I couldn't do more."

Kate gripped his hand harder. "You've done everything possible, Cree. No one could fault anything you've done. I'll just keep both of these big strong men around and hope for the best." Kate plastered on a smile and looked at Ben. "Did you say something about taking me to lunch?"

\* \* \* \* \*

After lunch Nicco, Ben and Kate drove home while Cree served the protection order papers on Clint. Kate fought the dirty feelings she always got when she discussed the events of seven years ago. As soon as they got into the house she turned to Ben and Nicco. "If you two will excuse me I'm going to take a shower."



Ben nodded his head and watched her ascend the staircase. He looked at Nicco. "Well, what's your take on the situation? How would you handle this if she were your client?"

Nicco rubbed his already appearing five o'clock shadow. "So far she's done everything I would have advised her to do. I can't figure this Clint guy out. I mean he got away with rape and assault seven years ago so why start stirring up trouble again?"

"I don't know, Nicco. Because he's a crazy mean sonofabitch? Kate told me after he hit her Saturday night he told her to leave town. Why would he care so much that she leaves town? Until I came along she didn't talk to anyone or even go into town more than twice a month for groceries and ranch supplies."

Pouring himself a glass of whiskey, Nicco turned around and looked at Ben. "I think I'll call Mac and have him do a little digging into Clint's life." Ben smiled and raised his glass. "Mac's the best at the digging-up-shit-on-someone part of the job."

Cree called at two o'clock to tell Ben that Clint had indeed been released on bond. "His assault hearing is set for next month, September twenty-seventh. Until then all I can do is keep an eye on him and hope he's learned his lesson." Cree sighed into the phone. "I don't know, Ben. He was pissed when I served him the protection papers. I'm thinking maybe we should call in Remy."

"No, Cree. I don't want to disrupt Kate's life any more than we have already. Emotionally she's on very shaky ground right now. I'll just try my best to keep her here on the ranch by my side."

"All right, buddy. Just call if you need me. I'm going home to enjoy my family. They've had way too much alone time the last couple of days."

Ben hung up and looked at Nicco. "Cree said Clint was plenty pissed when Cree served him the protection order. He thought maybe we should call Remy but I don't want to upset Kate." Ben walked to the bar to get himself a drink.

"I could call and see if Mac could come a little earlier. Kate already knows he's coming and this way he'll be able to do his investigation on Clint right here in town." Nicco stretched out on the couch and picked up the remote. "Do you get any sports channels out here in the boonies?"

Ben drank his whiskey at the bar. He was caught between wanting to go upstairs to make sure Kate was okay and wanting to give her the privacy that he sensed she needed right now. Nicco's questions finally registered. "Yeah go ahead and call Mac and the sports channels are twenty-seven and sixty-three. Don't ask me why they couldn't put them together. I've tried to figure it out since I've lived here." Ben finished his drink and put his glass on the bar. "I'm going out and check the fence. Stay inside with Kate and make sure you answer the phone. I don't think the little fucker is dumb enough to call her but you never know."

Nicco waved his hand as he became engrossed in a NASCAR race on TV. Ben left the room, shaking his head. He headed out to the barn and saddled up Too Tall.

Heading out into the pasture, Ben stopped and turned the horse around. He looked at his home. It was the first one he'd ever really had.

Ben grew up the only child of a single mother. His mom was married eight times before Ben graduated from high school. Each new husband was richer than the last. Vera Thomas cared about one thing—money. She died at the age of forty-one, a very rich, very lonely woman. Ben inherited his mother's fortune but it never meant anything to him. Now looking at his home Ben decided to put that money to good use. He would need to talk to Kate this evening.

He rode to the creek and dismounted. Taking off his boots and socks, he rolled up his pants legs and went wading in the stream just like when he was a kid and got to stay with his grandpa in Montana. His Grandpa Joe was the only stable thing in Ben's life when he was growing up.

His mom would send him to his grandpa's ranch when she was on the prowl for a new husband. Vera didn't usually tell the men she had a kid until after the marriage papers had been signed. Needless to say none of his stepfathers had anything to do with him but Grandpa Joe was always happy to see him. When he was fifteen his grandpa died and his mother never even bothered to tell him about it. He didn't find out until two months later when she started complaining she didn't have anywhere to dump him for the summer. Ben asked about going to Grandpa's and she'd sighed and said he'd died. His ranch had been sold by his mother and the money put in a trust fund for him. What his mother hadn't known was that he'd rather have had the ranch. He swore to himself that one day he'd own his own ranch.

Ben dried his feet and slipped his boots back on and whistled for Charlie. That's when he realized that he hadn't seen Charlie all afternoon. Ben had been so wrapped up in his own mind he'd completely forgotten about his buddy Charlie. He got back on Too Tall and rode toward the house.

He rode into the ranch yard and started whistling and calling Charlie's name. He didn't come. Ben jumped off his horse and tied him to the gate. Ben started in the barn and worked his way through all the other buildings on the ranch. He rounded the back of the house and stopped. He could hear a soft whimper coming from underneath the porch. He went inside the house and grabbed a flashlight. He ran back out and looked under the porch. Ben could see Charlie at the back of the porch breathing erratically.

He called to him but poor Charlie didn't even lift his head. Ben tried to scoot his way under the porch but he was just too big. He knew he had two choices—he could tear up the porch or he could go get Kate. If he'd had the time he would have gladly torn up the porch in order to save Kate from this but he didn't have the time. Ben stood and raced into the house. He found Nicco sound asleep on the couch. "Where's Kate?"

Nicco opened his eyes and sat up immediately. "She must still be upstairs. Why, what's happened?"

Ben headed for the stairs. "It's Charlie, he's under the porch dying and I can't get to him."

He found Kate sound asleep on top of the covers. "Kate darlin', I need you to wake up. Charlie's in trouble and he needs you."

Kate sat up. She registered what Ben said and grabbed a pair of shorts and a t-shirt out of the drawer. She didn't bother with panties or a bra. "Where is he? What's wrong with him?" Kate ran down the stairs while Ben told her what he knew.

They got outside to find that Nicco had pulled the truck up to the porch. He already had a blanket ready. "Kate, take the blanket with you. See if you can lift Charlie onto the blanket. It will be easier to pull him out rather than try to carry him out."

Kate nodded at Nicco and squeezed her way under the porch. Nicco and Ben both held flashlights for her. She made her way to Charlie and managed to get him onto the blanket. She crawled out, dragging Charlie behind her. When she got close enough to the edge Ben reached in and pulled Charlie the rest of the way out. He wrapped the blanket around him and was heading for the truck by the time Kate crawled out. She raced to the truck and got in. Ben placed Charlie on her lap.

They took off in a cloud of dust. They made it to the vet in less than ten minutes. Ben carried Charlie inside and let the vet take over. He turned to find a dirty, disheveled Kate staring after Charlie with her arms wrapped around herself.

Ben went to her and enfolded her in his arms. He rocked her back and forth, murmuring love words in her ear. She began to shake and he held her tighter. Damn, how much more must this one woman survive?

They waited for almost two hours before the vet finally came out to the waiting room. Kate ran up to Dr. Kennedy. "How's Charlie?"

Dr. Kennedy took a hold of her hand. "He's a very sick dog, Kate. It looks like he's ingested poison."

Kate shook her head. "I don't have any poison at my ranch. I don't even use it in the barn. It must be something else he's eaten."

"I'm afraid not, Kate. He had a stomach full of rat poison. I've never seen a dog eat so much and live this long. I've pumped his stomach and I've got him on an IV but I'm not sure if he'll even last through the night."

"Isn't there something else you can do for him?" Kate bit her lip. Her eyes pleading with the doctor.

"I'm afraid not, Kate. Right now we just have to wait and see whether he lasts until morning. If he makes it until then he'll be fine but I just don't know."

Kate thought about what the vet said. "I want to take him home with me. If he's going to die then I want him home with me where he belongs. If he's still alive by morning I'll bring him back so you can check on him."

Dr. Kennedy looked at Kate for a few minutes. "He'll need to finish out his IV before you take him. It should be about another half hour."

"That will be fine, Dr. Kennedy," Ben replied still standing with his arm around Kate.

They took Charlie home forty-five minutes later. He was so weak he couldn't even open his eyes. Kate cradled the big dog like he was a puppy. "It's been me and Charlie against the world for so long I don't know what I'll do without him."

Ben reached over and smoothed her hair back from her face. "Shhh, darlin', don't talk like that. Just pray that he makes it through the night."

Kate looked at Ben and chewed her lip. "I want to sleep with him tonight. If that bothers you we can sleep in my bed."

"It doesn't bother me at all, Wildflower. I'd do the same thing if I were you." Ben pulled the truck up in front of the house. He got out and took Charlie from Kate. Ben carried the big dog inside and on back to his bedroom. He placed Charlie on the bed and turned to Kate. "I'm going to go make us some supper. Why don't you take another shower and change?"

Kate kissed him. "Thank you for understanding, Ben. I love you."

Ben held her tight and kissed her. "I love you too, Wildflower."

## Chapter Seven

Ben went down to start supper only to find Nicco in a pretty pink apron stirring what smelled like red sauce on the stove. "Well, don't you look sweet? Like the perfect little homemaker."

Nicco looked at him and grimaced. "Stuff it, Ben. I figured you two would be hungry when you got home. How's Charlie?"

Ben got a beer out of the fridge and sat down at the kitchen table. "Not good I'm afraid. The vet said he had a stomach full of rat poison. He pumped it out but he doesn't know how much had already been absorbed into his system. He said if he makes it through the night he should be okay. Kate insisted on bringing him home with us. If he's going to die she wants him to die here. So it looks as though I'm going to have another bed partner tonight."

Nicco put down the spoon and started the pasta water. "Where'd Charlie get a hold of rat poison?"

Ben took a long drink of his beer. "That's the million-dollar question. Kate said she doesn't keep any poisons on the ranch. What do ya want to bet the little fucker's been out here sometime today and left it out for Charlie?"

"Damn, that would be bold of him. We've been here all afternoon. Sounds like he's starting to get desperate but why?" Ben shook his head. "I called Mac. He'll be out on Wednesday afternoon. I told him I'd pick him up at the airport."

"How'd you get hooked up with a Green Beret for a business partner anyway, Nicco?" Ben asked, getting up for another beer. He offered Nicco one. He knew Nicco hated beer but he thought he'd offer.

Nicco shook his head no to the beer and made a disgusted face. "Mac and I grew up together. Our fathers were both in the Marines stationed at Quantico. They were instructors at the Officer Candidates School." Nicco shook his head. "Harder men you'd never hope to meet. Anyway, Mac and I've been buddies since we were around nine years old. When we graduated from high school Mac did what was expected of him and joined the Marines." Nicco got up and stirred the sauce and added the penne pasta to the already boiling pot of water. "I guess I was the rebellious one because I opted for the Navy." He shook his head. "To this day I'm still trying to make it up to my father."

Ben looked at Nicco. There was a world of information in that one sentence. He wondered how a Marine instructor father would handle his only son's decision to join another branch of the military. Maybe that's where the pain came from that he'd seen in Nicco's eyes since they met on the first day Nicco was assigned to his team.

Ben could see that Nicco was lost in his own thoughts so he got up and stirred the pasta. He tasted a piece and determined it was ready so he got the colander out of the cabinet and drained the pasta. While it was draining he got the plates and silverware out of the drawer and set the table around Nicco.

When a plate was placed in front of him Nicco snapped back to present day. "I'm sorry, Ben. I didn't mean to blank out on you. Why don't you call Kate to supper and I'll fix the drinks."

Ben nodded at his friend and went to find Kate. He entered the bedroom and found her kneeling beside the bed, softly petting Charlie. She was talking in a soft, calm voice to him about getting better so he could help with the chores that needed to be done.

Ben watched her for a minute, not really listening, just watching her. She was so beautiful. He'd never imagined he could get so lucky as to have a woman like Kate love him. Hell, his own mother didn't love him. Why would this beautiful wounded woman take a chance on such a big man? Ben smiled to himself and decided not to look a gift horse in the mouth. He'd just make sure he was worthy of her trust.

"Kate, supper's ready. Nicco made you some of his famous red sauce." Ben went to the bed and pulled her to her feet.

Kate wiped the tears from her eyes and turned to face Ben. "What's red sauce?"

Ben chuckled at her confused face. "It's just a fancy word for spaghetti sauce without meat. Nicco's sauce is the best. You'll love it." He led Kate out of his bedroom. "How's Charlie doing?"

Kate shrugged and slipped her arm around Ben's waist when they got to the living room. "I can tell he knows I'm there and understands that I'm talking to him but he still won't open his eyes for more than a couple seconds at a time."

Ben squeezed her shoulders a little tighter as they entered the kitchen to find Nicco still lost in thought. Kate looked up at Ben quickly then back to Nicco. Ben shrugged and pulled out the chair for her. "Looks good, buddy."

Kate smiled when Nicco looked over at her. "Yes it does. Thank you for fixing dinner. Ben just told me wonderful things about your red sauce."

Nicco put his hand on Kate's. "How's the dog?"

Kate turned her hand over and squeezed Nicco's fingers. "Charlie's still fighting. That's all I can ask of him. At least he doesn't appear to be in pain anymore. So I'll just keep praying that he'll make it through the night."

They ate their dinner in friendly conversation, no one bringing up Charlie again nor mentioning Clint. After dinner Kate got up to start on the dishes when Nicco stopped her.

"I'll clean up, Kate. You go be with Charlie."

Kate chewed her bottom lip. "I can't let you do that, Nicco. You made such a fabulous meal you deserve to go sit in front of the television."

Nicco chuckled and steered Kate toward the door. "I'm glad you liked my sauce, Kate, but you're not cleaning the kitchen. I'm going to recruit Ben to dry anyway. Maybe I'll even talk him into a game of chess afterward."

Kate looked at Ben. Ben nodded and kissed her cheek. "Go, darlin'. I'll be in later."

Nicco started filling the sink with hot soapy water. Ben started clearing the table, sitting the dirty dishes beside the sink. "So you never finished telling me how you managed to go into business with one of those bossy Green Berets?"

Nicco could tell by the tone of Ben's voice that he was kidding. "Mac was hurt in Afghanistan four years ago. He walked too close to a booby-trapped building and almost got himself killed. As it was he got torn up pretty badly. The right side of his body was pretty much opened up by flying debris. He spent almost a year at the military hospital in Germany. I visited him when I could get leave. When Mac was released to come back to the states I opted to get out of the Seals." Nicco shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. "Mac still wasn't a hundred percent and his father had passed away while he was in the Berets so I came back to help take care of him. He would have done the same for me."

Nicco washed while he continued talking. Ben had the feeling that Nicco had never talked to anyone about this. He always seemed to be so shut down emotionally that Ben figured if Nicco was willing to open up a little he was going to listen. He decided to ask the question that came to mind. "Why didn't your father help Nicco? It sounded like both of your families had been pretty close." At the snap of Nicco's head in his direction Ben shrugged. "I mean most people would gladly have stepped in and helped a fellow soldier."

"My father hates Mac with every fiber of his being." Nicco seemed to think a long time before he continued. "Mac is fairly open about the fact that he's gay. He was willing to suppress his sexual orientation while in the Marines but most people knew." Nicco scrubbed a plate until Ben was afraid the pattern would come off. "Mac was like a second son to my father until he learned of his sexual orientation. He cut Mac out of his life completely. Every picture in our house was altered so that Mac no longer existed to my father. He thought Mac was a disgrace to the Marines."

Nicco handed the last of the clean dishes to Ben to dry. "Anyway, I quit the Navy when my tour was up and came home to take care of Mac. We decided to move to New York City once his physical therapy was over. The security business just came naturally as a vocation to both of us. I usually do the fieldwork if any is involved that our four employees can't handle. Mac takes care of the business side of things."

Ben followed Nicco into the living room and started setting up the chess board. "Do you still see your father?"

Nicco looked up at Ben like he'd grown two heads. "Of course. My father is one of the finest men I know. He still hasn't fully forgiven my error in judgment regarding the Navy but I've worked long and hard to make up for it."

Ben was really confused now. "What about the way he treated Mac? Aren't you angry with him over that?"

Nicco shrugged and made his first move on the chess board. "That has nothing to do with me. That's between my father and Mac."

Ben looked at Nicco for a long time. Nicco was even more screwed up than he had thought. He decided not to rock the boat anymore and just be Nicco's friend. Nicco would figure out sooner or later that his father was not the man he thought he was. Ben moved his chess piece.

After Nicco whipped Ben's butt in chess Ben yawned. "I'm going to bed."

Nicco looked at his watch then looked up at Ben. "I was thinking maybe I'd sneak on over to Clint Adams' house and keep an eye on him for a little while tonight."

Ben nodded. "That's a good idea. Make sure you get back here in time to get a few hours' sleep. We've got a lot of chores to catch up on tomorrow." He winked at Nicco and headed toward his bedroom.

Kate was sound asleep when he stripped and climbed into bed. She had her arm around Charlie and her face in his fur. Ben snuggled his large body in behind hers. He threw his arm over her and rested his hand on top of hers in Charlie's fur.

Ben woke in the same position the next morning. Man he must have been really tired. He felt something wet on his hand and looked over Kate. Charlie was licking his hand like it would make a good snack. Charlie was licking his hand. The meaning finally hit him and he sat up, shaking Kate. "Wake up, Wildflower. It looks like Charlie made it through the night with flying colors."

Kate opened her eyes. She felt Charlie now licking her hand and laughed. "Oh my goodness, Charlie!" Charlie turned over so Kate could rub his belly. "Oh that's my good boy. Are you hungry? Do you want mamma to get you something to eat?" Kate jumped out of bed and started for the door.

"Um...Wildflower, you might want to put some clothes on first. Don't forget we have the Latin Lover in the house." Ben smiled and reached over to grab her robe for her.

Kate came back to the bed to get her robe from Ben. She sat on the bed and rubbed Ben's head. "I don't think you need to worry about Nicco looking at me."

Ben's eyes opened wide in disbelief. "Are you crazy? You're a beautiful woman with boobs any guy would drool over. Yes. I do think I have something to worry about."

Kate laughed and kissed him on top of the head. "I don't know how to tell you this but Nicco's in love with Mac. Although I'm not sure he'd admit it to anyone."

Ben's mouth dropped open. "Why do you say that?"

Kate shrugged and stood up to put her pretty pink robe on. "I guess it's a woman thing. I can just tell by the way he talks about him. The way he says his name."



Ben thought for a minute and slowly nodded. "It makes sense. It kind of brings more pieces of the Nicco puzzle together. I don't know why I never saw it before but I think maybe you're right."

Kate patted his cheek. "Well, while you think on it I'm going down to get Charlie some bread and milk. Do you think he needs to go out and potty? Could you carry him outside for me, Ben?" She batted her eyelashes at him.

Ben smiled and put his jeans on. "Anything for you, Wildflower."

She rolled her eyes and left the bedroom. Kate passed Nicco sleeping on the couch fully dressed as she went through the living room. "Good thing I put my robe on," she mumbled to herself as she entered the kitchen.

Ben took Charlie out to take a piss and then took him into the kitchen for a bowl of bread and milk. "Why bread and milk?"

Kate shrugged, "I don't know. It's what my mom always fed small or sick animals."

Ben came up behind her and slipped his hands through the opening of her robe. "Mmm...do you think we have time for a little bit of play before Nicco wakes up?" He moved his hand to her nipple and gently squeezed.

Kate leaned back against him. "I think so. He looked pretty out of it when I passed him a while ago." She turned to face Ben and stroked the length of his erection. "Why do you shove your cock down the leg of your jeans?"

Ben lifted an eyebrow at her question. "Because if I didn't it would stick up out of my waistband every time you're around. Showing you my cock all day is fine for me but not so good when we have company or I'm doing chores."

Kate giggled and put her hand over her mouth. "Well, why don't we go to the bedroom and let that monster out of his cage?"

Ben picked her up and swung her over his shoulder caveman style. He tiptoed through the living room to his bedroom and threw her on the bed. He untied the sash of her robe and pulled it off. Next he went to work on his boots, socks and jeans. He hadn't bothered with a shirt so that was one less thing he had to worry about. Ben jumped on the bed, barely missing Kate. "The beast is free and happy."

Kate laughed. She didn't think she'd ever laughed as much as she did with this man. It amazed her that he could be so big and strong yet act like a goofy teenage boy when they were together. She sat on top of his groin and wiggled. "The beast is so strong and mighty this morning." Kate leaned down to lick the side of Ben's face. She worked her way to his mouth and nipped his lower lip. She soothed the nip with her tongue. She looked into Ben's eyes with her lips still touching his. "Make love to me, Ben?"

Ben closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around her even tighter. "I want nothing more, Wildflower, but I don't think you're ready."

Kate sat up and looked down on him. "I've already proven I can handle your cock's circumference. The only question left unanswered is can I take your length. Would it

really be so bad for you if we tried now and I couldn't take all of you? I-I mean if you're unable to come like that I can always figure something else out."

Ben groaned and stopped teasing her breasts to look at her. "I'm about to come just listening to you talk about it. That's not why I don't think it's a good idea, darlin'. I'm afraid if I hurt you..." He stopped talking and closed his eyes taking a few calming breaths. "I'm afraid I'll hurt you and you'll leave me."

A tear slid down Kate's cheek. "Listen to me, you unbelievably thoughtful man. I. Will. Never. Leave. You. I love you more than anything in this world. I just want the chance to feel you inside me. So maybe we have to keep stretching me out with the vibrators. If that's the case okay, I'm willing to do anything to be with you. I just want to try, Ben. Let me try having your cock in me. If it hurts I'll be sure to let you know so you can stop. Okay?"

Ben looked into her blue eyes for a long time. Kate thought he was trying to figure out how to tell her no when she heard one softly spoken word. "Okay."

Ben reached into the bedside table and withdrew a bottle of lube. "If you promise we can use lots of lube and you'll take only as much of my cock as you can without pain."

Kate sat up and looked down into Ben's eyes. "I promise, Ben." She crossed her heart, of course it didn't help Ben's libido that her fingertips skimmed over her nipples when she did it. "Where do you want me, on top or bottom?"

Ben poured a generous amount of lube onto his fingers and started readying Kate for his cock. "Stay where you are, darlin'. It will be easier if you control how much of me you can take in."

He ran his finger up and down her slit, stopping to play with her pierced clit. He moved his fingers back down and entered her channel with first one and then two fingers. Stopping only long enough to pour more lube on them, he continued stretching Kate's channel. When she seemed perfectly comfortable with two fingers he moved to three. When the third finger entered her, Kate tensed on his hand and came. It was so sexy watching her come. "You'd better hop on now, darlin', or there won't be anything left to ride."

Kate repositioned her body. She took his cock into her hand and lined it up with her dripping pussy. Ben put so much lube on his cock she was having trouble keeping hold of it. It was like an oiled-up python. She slowly lowered herself onto the beast, holding her breath as she did. Slowly his cock head entered her passage and she continued to lower herself until about half of his cock was inside her. Kate looked at Ben. It looked like his eyes were crossing. "There's no pain at all so far. I'm going to keep going." Kate laughed to herself and then she laughed out loud. "Listen to me. I sound like an explorer."

Ben's breaths were starting to come faster and faster. "Kate darlin', you feel better than anything has a right to but I'm about to come. So if you want to continue exploring you'd better do it quickly."

Kate nodded her head. She sank down farther until it began to really hurt. Her body just simply wasn't long enough to accommodate such a long cock. "I think that's as far as I can go for now, Ben."

Ben smiled and looked down where the two of them were joined and then back up to look at Kate. "Look down, darlin'. Do you see what I see? You're only about an inch and a half from fully taking me. I think a few more workouts with those vibrators and you'll be able to take all of me."

Kate gave him a pouty face. "Why do I have to practice with the vibrators when there's a perfectly good cock in my bed every night?" She wiggled her ass and rose back up the length of his cock and then slid back down.

Ben reached down and pulled the tiny ring in her clit. She came screaming his name. Ben was a goner when her pussy started milking his cock. He thrust upward and came. He came so hard his teeth hurt. It was like every ounce of his energy transferred to Kate through his cock.

By the time Kate's breathing returned to normal she looked down at Ben and found him passed out. She didn't know if he'd fallen asleep or fainted but the sight made her giggle. "Yeah you're such a big strong man, honey." She climbed off, deciding to let him sleep. She took a quick shower and dressed in jean shorts and a yellow halter and went to make breakfast.

When she entered the kitchen Nicco was standing at the coffee pot. "Good morning, Nicco. How was your night?"

He raised an eyebrow and lifted one side of his lip, trying his best not to smile. "From the sounds of it not nearly as good as your morning. All I got this morning was a wet Charlie kiss."

Kate turned red from the top of her head to the soles of her feet. "Sorry about that. It was our first time. I guess we just got a little excited. As a matter of fact I think Ben may be passed out." She smiled and shrugged her shoulders.

Nicco's jaw dropped. "What do you mean it was your first time? Haven't you two been sleeping together for a while now?"

Kate chewed her lip and got out the bacon and sausage. "Have you ever, um...seen the size of Ben?"

The light finally went on in Nicco's head. "Yeah. Oh. Okay now I understand. Ben thought he was protecting you before, huh?"

Kate nodded and put the breakfast meat on to fry. "He didn't want to hurt me. I finally had to wrestle him down and take what was mine." She giggled and covered her face with her hands. "I can't believe I just told you all that."

"Don't sweat it, Kate. Your secret is safe with me." Nicco sat down at the table with his coffee. "I'll be glad to help you with the chores this morning if sleeping beauty doesn't wake up."

"I'd appreciate that. Ben said something about Mac coming in tomorrow. Are you going to pick him up at the airport?"

A smile spread across Nicco's face like sunshine after a rainy day. "Yeah. I'll leave here around eleven or so tomorrow morning. Why? Did you want to come with me?"

"No it's not that. It's just that I would like to run into Junctionville today sometime and get a new set of sheets for the extra bed. Do you think you could run me in this afternoon?"

Nicco nodded. "I don't see a problem with that if Ben doesn't need us for anything."

Kate turned around and looked at Nicco. "Is that a politically correct way of saying 'if Ben says it's okay'? Because I have to tell you, Nicco, I've made my own decisions for quite some time now."

Nicco spread his hands in a defensive gesture. "We're just trying to keep you safe, Kate. I'm sorry if it makes us seem all 'he-man-ish' but we have to do what we feel is best."

Kate put the bacon and sausage on a platter and put it in the warming oven. "How many eggs would you like, Nicco? I forgot to do my egg gathering this morning so at least you'll know they're fresh." Kate grabbed the egg basket and waited for Nicco's answer.

"You mean you're going to get eggs right now? And then you're going to cook them?" Nicco seemed totally shocked and disgusted by the whole concept of chickens laying the eggs he'd be eating.

"Haven't you ever seen a chicken coop before, Nicco? I thought you stayed on the Triple Spur for a few weeks. That's how most country folk get their eggs. Do you want to come with me?"

"No I haven't seen a chicken coop close up. I did stay at the Triple Spur for a few weeks but I pretty much stayed indoors. And no I don't want to come with you. If it comes to me getting my own eggs or not eating I'll choose door number two."

Kate shook her head and laughed on her way out the door. "What a city boy you are, Nicco. I'll be back in ten minutes."

Kate went to the chicken coop and filled a bucket with cracked corn. She filled the feeding trough and filled the chickens' water. When the chickens left their nests to eat she snuck in and began picking up the eggs. She was halfway through the row when she felt something heavy touch her foot. Kate looked down when she heard the rattle.

Right next to her foot sat a rattlesnake with a full belly. He was eyeing Kate's white sneaker like it was another egg. She knew she couldn't move or the snake would strike. She looked around for something to hit the snake with. She spotted Nicco coming toward the chicken coop and prayed he wouldn't make any sudden noises or movements. Kate slowly put her fingers to her lips and pointed toward her foot. By the time she looked back up at Nicco and down at her foot again the snake was dead. Nicco's knife was sticking through the snake's head into the dirt floor of the coop.

Kate's knees threatened to give way and she started to sag down. Nicco was there in a heartbeat, holding her up with an arm around her waist. "That was amazing. I've never seen anyone so quick with a knife before. Sometimes I forget just how skilled you all are but what a way to remind me. *Wow!*"

Nicco picked up the egg basket and started to head back inside until Kate stopped him. "Not yet. I have to finish gathering the eggs." At his startled look she smiled. "Why don't you just stand over there by the door. I'll be done in a minute."

When she finished gathering the eggs the two of them went back in to the kitchen. Ben was just coming in from a shower apparently. He smelled like soap and Ben. She walked over to him and gave him a quick kiss. "Morning, sleepyhead. Nicco left a present for you on the floor of the chicken coop. Better get it soon though before the chickens peck it to pieces."

Ben swung his head toward Nicco. "What did you leave for me in the coop?"

Nicco blew on his fingernails and polished them on the front of his red t-shirt. "Oh just a rattlesnake with a knife sticking out of his head."

"A what? Did you say a rattlesnake?" Ben turned toward Kate, looking her over for snake bites.

"Calm down, Ben, I'm fine. I saw the snake at my feet and Nicco threw his knife and killed it. It was all very simple really." She tried to brush off the whole incident.

Nicco chuckled and pointed toward Kate. "Yeah and your little spitfire here insisted on gathering the rest of the eggs."

Kate quickly fried all the eggs in her basket and they sat down to eat breakfast. "I asked Nicco if he would go with me into Junctionville today. I want to get a set of sheets for the other spare bedroom before Mac gets here. He said I had to ask your permission." Kate looked pointedly at Nicco.

"Well, I'm going to work on the fences in the south pasture so I don't see why you can't run to town with Nicco." Ben looked at Nicco with a warning in his eyes. "Don't let her out of your sight for a minute."

## Chapter Eight

Nicco drove Kate to town around eleven o'clock. They'd decided to have lunch at Mabel's before driving back to the ranch. Nicco pulled up in front of the only department store in town and got out. He came around to Kate's door and opened it for her. Bowing as he did so. Kate looked at him and rolled her eyes. "Smart ass."

They went into Jefferson's department store and went directly to the linen section. Kate picked up several sets and turned to Nicco. "What's Mac's favorite color?"

Nicco seemed amused at her question. "Well, that would depend on what you're referring to. In clothes he always wears shades of blue. It makes the blue of his eyes stand out." Nicco looked down like he couldn't believe he just said that. "His apartment is done in shades of gray, black and white with red accents. His sheets at home are plain white." Nicco's face began to color slightly. "I'd go with a simple white, Kate."

Kate grinned and selected a set of white sheets with a crocheted lace edge. "Is there anything you need while we're here? Any special food you or Mac like?"

Rubbing his chin, Nicco thought over what Kate asked. "Well, I might like to stop by a liquor store and pick up a couple bottles of red wine. I'd like to go to the grocery store too. I thought I'd make Mac's favorite dinner for him. Lasagna with homemade garlic bread."

Kate had to bite her cheek to keep from giggling at the thoughtful gesture. This strong, silent warrior was so in love with his best friend it made Kate's heart soar. She wished she could talk to him about it, but she sensed it was a subject he wouldn't welcome from anyone. Kate took her purchases over to the sales counter and set them down.

The sales clerk, Janie Cosgrove, had gone to school with Kate. "Hi, Janie. It's nice to see you again."

The clerk raised an eyebrow and rang up her purchase without even acknowledging her greeting. "That'll be thirty-eight dollars and forty-seven cents."

Kate looked at Nicco and shrugged. She gave Janie two twenties. "How have you been, Janie?" Kate tried once again to engage the old classmate in a conversation.

Janie gave Kate her change and put the sheets into a bag for her. When she handed Kate the bag she narrowed her eyes. "I don't care to engage in conversation with you, Kate. Now you've made your purchase is there anything else you need?"

Kate shook her head and took the bag. "No. I don't need anything else from you or this store." Kate walked out of the store fuming. When Nicco opened the car door for her she threw the bag inside and stood in front of him. "I'm too pissed off to ride, Nicco. Let's walk to the grocery store. We can stop at the liquor store on the way out of town."

Nicco nodded and closed the car door. He took off down the sidewalk at Kate's heels. "What was all that about anyway?"

Kate spun around and faced him. "I have absolutely no idea. I mean Janie and I were never friends in school but that was a long time ago. I've spoken to her here and there around town and in the store since I graduated and she's always been cordial to me. It's like I've done something to her and I don't even know what it is."

Nicco turned Kate back around and started walking. She followed but he could tell the clerk's behavior was really bothering her. They got to the grocery store and he held the door open for her. He grabbed a cart and went in search of the ingredients he'd need for Mac's dinner. Nicco noticed that everyone they passed in the small store seemed to look away or blatantly stare at Kate. He had a bad feeling he knew what was going on in Junctionville.

When they got to the checkout counter Kate once again tried to engage the older cashier in idle conversation. "Hi, Mrs. Campbell."

Nothing. The woman continued to ring up the groceries with a scowl on her face. Finally Nicco had enough. "Is there some kind of problem here?"

The older woman shot him a look that would kill most people. "I don't like trouble makers, that's all."

Nicco looked around him and behind him. "I'm sorry...Mrs. Campbell isn't it? I don't see any trouble makers in here. I see a hard-working woman trying to buy groceries from a grocery store and a rude cashier. What do you see?"

The cashier clucked her tongue at him and shook her head. "Everyone in this town knows Miss Crawford here is trying to sully the name of a good man just because he's spurned her advances."

Nicco started laughing, almost doubling over. He finally stopped laughing and wiped the tears from his eyes. "Oh you are a stupid one, aren't you?"

Kate pulled on his sleeve. "Let's just go, Nicco."

Nicco batted her hand away and brought his face closer to the old woman. "Listen up and listen good. Clint Adams is finally going to pay for terrorizing this young woman. He hurt her seven years ago and has been stalking her for the past year. If you don't believe me maybe you'll believe Judge Hathaway. He's the one who signed the temporary protection order against, and I repeat against, Clint Adams. Maybe you should get your facts straight before shooting off that mouth of yours."

Mrs. Campbell looked from Nicco to Kate. "That'll be sixty-three dollars and twenty-one cents."

Nicco looked at her and pulled Kate along. "Keep your groceries, lady. We'll get ours in Santa Fe until Kate gets an apology from you and this grocery store." Nicco was so furious he practically dragged Kate to the car.

Once they were seated and buckled in he turned to Kate. "I'm sorry about that. I know I probably overreacted but there's nothing I hate more than a town gossip. There

was one on the base where I grew up and she made my life hell." Nicco tried to slow his heart rate. "Maybe I should go back in and apologize?"

Kate took Nicco's hand and grinned. "Absolutely not. I've waited twenty years to see that old woman get put in her place. I wouldn't have missed the last fifteen minutes for the world." She patted his hand. "Good job, Nicco."

They stopped off at the liquor store on their way out of town but Kate opted to stay in the car. "I'm afraid if I go in there with you we'll have to start driving all the way to Santa Fe for Ben's beer." She grinned and waved Nicco out the door.

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate woke the next morning with the sun shining in her eyes. She stretched her sore muscles and looked at Ben. His face looked so peaceful. The morning light combined with the absolute perfection of his face reminded her of a painting she'd seen once. She ran her fingertips over the planes and angles of his face. Kate softly touched and outlined his lips, marveling at the definition. Kate's finger was suddenly devoured by the mouth beneath the lips.

Ben smiled around the finger in his mouth and sucked as Kate pulled the finger out and then thrust it back in the warm wet depths of Ben's mouth. She finally replaced her finger with her tongue. Tasting and sucking, Kate ate his mouth like a woman possessed.

Ben broke the kiss to catch his breath. "Good morning, Wildflower. I hope you slept well after our stretching exercises last night?"

Kate stretched again. "I slept wonderfully until the sun woke me up. I'm going to have to get you some new curtains."

Ben hugged Kate to his side once again and ran his hands down over her butt, stopping occasionally to squeeze her cheeks. "I don't usually have a problem with the sun. That damn rooster of yours wakes me up before the sun's high enough in the sky to come through the window." Ben finally registered what he'd just said. He quickly turned to Kate. "Why didn't the rooster wake us up?"

It finally dawned on Kate what he was saying. She sat up and pulled her shorts and yellow halter top on from the day before. "Something's wrong, Ben. Special K always wakes me up in the morning." She looked down at Ben who was still stretched out on the bed. "I'm going out to check on him."

Ben sat up and pulled his jeans on. He didn't bother with a shirt but grabbed a clean pair of socks and his boots. "Wait a minute and I'll go with you."

At Ben's slow progress in getting dressed Kate finally couldn't wait anymore. "I'm going out. Just come when you're dressed." She practically ran out the bedroom door.

Kate picked up the egg basket on the way out the kitchen door. She ran to the chicken coop and dropped the basket. The scene before her was too much to stomach and she ran for the side of the coop, dropped to her hands and knees and threw up.



When she'd completely emptied her stomach two large arms wrapped around her middle and pulled her up. She turned in Ben's arms and buried her face in his chest.

She hung on to Ben as hard as her tired muscles could. "They're all dead. I've never seen anything like it, Ben. How can they all be dead and we didn't hear anything?"

Ben kissed the top of her head. "I don't know, Wildflower. My guess is more poison. I didn't see any blood so I don't think it was a coyote or other predator. It's like they just died where they stood. Have you found Special K?"

Kate shook her head. "To be honest I haven't really looked for him. I came out and saw the entire coop littered with my dead chickens and got sick." She headed toward the front of the chicken coop again. "My guess is he's dead too."

Ben noticed Kate turn even a paler shade of white than before as they rounded the coop. He was afraid Kate would faint so he steered her toward the kitchen. Taking her hand, he led her into the kitchen and sat her in a chair. "You sit there. I'll make some coffee and wake up Nicco."

When the coffee was ready and Nicco was sitting at the table Ben filled a cup and put it on the table in front of her. "I think you should run to the airport in Santa Fe with Nicco this morning while I call Cree and get the chickens cleaned up."

Kate took a sip of her coffee, rinsed it around in her mouth and placed the cup back on the table. She kept her hands wrapped tightly around the cup to keep them from shaking. "No, Ben. I need to help do this. It's part of ranching."

Ben exploded from his chair in a fit of anger. "What the hell part of ranching is some little fucker murdering your chickens? Kate, stop trying to be so strong. It's okay to let someone help once in a while." He got down on his knees and took her face in his hands. "It's okay to let me help you. Please, Kate. Let me help you." Ben stood up and went to the sink. He held onto the counter and put his head down. "I feel so useless. I've done nothing to protect you from the little fucker. The least I can do is spare you from this."

Kate got to her feet and ducked beneath his arms, putting her body between his and the counter. She ran her hands over his head, trying her best to calm him. "You mean more to me than any protection, Ben Thomas. Clint's sneaky. That's not your fault. How can you protect me against someone that conniving and sneaky? Clint's not man enough to come after *me* with you here. Isn't that the main objective? Keeping me safe? I may not have any animals left by the time he's through with me but I'll still have my life thanks to you."

Kate leaned in and kissed his lips softly just barely touching them. "I need to help you take care of the coop. I need it for me. If I run away even for a day Clint will have won. Does that make sense to you?"

Ben pulled her close and buried his face in her hair. "I love you, Wildflower, and I just want to take care of you."

Kate pulled back to look at his face. She grinned and kissed him a little deeper, aware that Nicco was still in the room. "That's the thing about wildflowers. They don't

need a lot of pampering. They just need someone to watch them grow and enjoy the results."

Ben chuckled and slapped her butt. "Okay. I can see I'm not going to win this argument so I'll just shut up. You have to promise me though that you'll let me know if it gets too much for you. I won't have you throwing up again."

"Promise," Kate held her hand up in a Scout's honor gesture.

"Smart ass," Ben said and laughed. Ben turned toward Nicco. "So what do you suggest for breakfast since we're out of eggs?"

\* \* \* \* \*

Nicco drove into Santa Fe after a breakfast of bacon and waffles. He still couldn't get over the amount of food Ben could consume. Kate must be doing something right because there still wasn't an ounce of fat on the man. He smiled and pulled into the airport parking lot. He sat in his car for a minute and watched the planes take off and land. Nicco realized his palms were sweating and wiped them on his jeans. He couldn't put a reason to it but he'd worn Mac's favorite pair of jeans, the old light blue ones with the rip in the knee and a small worn place on the back pocket. Nicco looked at himself in the mirror. His black hair was in dire need of a haircut.

He got out of the car and tucked his white polo shirt in again. Smoothing the shirt down his chest, he headed for the terminal. When he got inside he looked at the arrival screen and saw that Mac's flight was on time. Nicco looked at his watch. He had another thirty minutes before the flight came in. He looked around and spotted a bar. Nicco decided to get a glass of red wine while he waited. The bartender gave him his drink and he found a little table that looked out onto the tarmac. Sitting down, he let his eyes roam around the room. The room was filled with mostly couples and business men, a few of whom looked back.

Nicco shook his head slightly and took a drink of his wine. He was having a hard time figuring out why he felt such anticipation at Mac's arrival. They'd been apart before when he'd had to go out of town on business, so what was different now? He was afraid of the answer his heart was giving him. Seeing Kate and Ben together was having a direct effect on his willpower where Mac was concerned. Nicco had been fighting his attraction to Mac his entire life. He knew his feelings were wrong—it was not the way Colonel Bellinzoni raised him. Despite what everyone thought, he just wasn't attracted to anyone else, women or men. Nicco tried dating women when he was younger and then again when he got out of the Navy but the satisfaction he gained from sleeping with women wasn't worth witnessing the hurt in Mac's eyes.

Nicco took another drink and looked at his watch. Ten more minutes and Mac would be in New Mexico. He reminded himself to stop by the rental car agency and exchange vehicles. He thought a Jeep would be better if he and Mac had time to go into the mountains camping. Nicco sighed and rubbed his forehead. He wished he had the strength to defy his father and be with Mac, but the Colonel was the only family he had

in the world. Nicco's mother left both of them when Nicco was barely two. The Colonel told him she'd died in a car accident when he was eight. Nicco was allowed to grieve for his mother for two hours. That was the time limit set by his father. He always told Nicco that tears were for girls and fags, neither of which had any business in his home. Nicco finished his wine and headed for the gate. He stood toward the back of the crowd gathered there.

Finally the passengers disembarked and one by one Nicco witnessed hugs of welcome and friendly pats on the back from the arriving passengers. He caught a flash of blue and a big white smile and held his hand in the air so Mac could see him. Mac looked damn good today. His shoulder-length deep brown hair was left loose for a change. His golden eyes shone like amber in the airport lighting and that one deep dimple in his right cheek that never failed to make Nicco smile was visible as usual.

Mac came right up to Nicco and gave him a hug. From anyone else's point of view it would have looked like a simple friendly hug between two good friends. Only the two of them knew it was something more. "I've missed you, Nicco." Mac let go and stepped back to look into his friend's dark brown eyes.

Nicco couldn't handle the honesty in Mac's words and he closed his eyes, his long black eyelashes fanning over his high cheekbones. He slowly opened his eyes to look into Mac's golden eyes. "I missed you too, Mac." Nicco turned toward the baggage claim area. "Let's get your bags and we can hit the road."

They started down the corridor and Nicco looked over at Mac and smiled. "I hope you remembered to bring the camping stuff."

Mac chuckled and slapped Nicco on the back. "When do I ever forget anything? Although I had to leave the sleeping bags at home. No way would they fit in my suitcase, but I did remember plenty of bug killer."

Nicco laughed, "Good. I'm so sweet those little buggers love me." Nicco took off so Mac's hand hit only air. Nicco laughed again and circled back around Mac. "Getting slow, old man."

Mac looked at Nicco with raised brows and shook his head. "Let's just get the bags, wise guy."

Forty minutes later after getting Mac's luggage and exchanging vehicles with the rental agency Mac and Nicco were on the road toward Junctionville.

Nicco had the radio on and the top off the Wrangler. He started singing to an old Bon Jovi song and Mac leaned in and turned the radio down. "Who are you and what have to done with my extremely serious and sober friend Nicco?"

Nicco turned the radio back up a little and smiled. "I don't know, Mac. I think that little spitfire Kate has rubbed off on me." As soon as he said it Nicco watched Mac's face fall. The uncertainty in his eyes almost killed him. Nicco reached across the stick shift and put his hand on Mac's thigh.

When Mac turned back to look at him Nicco winked. "No worries, Mac. The lady is very much spoken for. It's just her spirit that's made me different. The woman is only,

like, five foot two and maybe a hundred and ten pounds, but she's not afraid of anything or anyone." Nicco continued to fill Mac in on all the events of the past few days. When he was finished he squeezed Mac's thigh. "Now do you understand what I mean by spitfire?"

Mac's hand came to rest on top of Nicco's and squeezed. He felt Nicco tense a little and let go. "I can't wait to meet her and your friend Ben."

## Chapter Nine

That evening after a wonderful dinner of lasagna and garlic bread Nicco poured everyone an extra glass of wine. "What did Cree say about your chickens?"

Ben helped himself to his third giant piece of lasagna and looked from Kate to Nicco. "He took Special K with him to drop off at the vet. He's hoping the vet can determine exactly what kind of poison they ingested. In the meantime I wanted to talk to you about a little tail detail. Cree and I think it would be easier to follow Clint and catch him the act than to sit back and wait for the attack. I'm sorry, did I just say his name? I meant for you to follow the little fucker and catch him in the act."

Nodding his head, Nicco took another sip of wine. Everyone else at the table had finished eating quite a while ago. Ben, however, probably wouldn't stop until the pan was completely licked clean.

Ben reached for another piece of garlic bread. "I think Cree said he's been staying at his late father's house instead of in town in his apartment."

Nicco got up to take his plate to the sink. "Mac's going to start digging into Cli...the little fucker's past tomorrow." Nicco looked at Mac and smiled. "He's damn good at that. If there's something to find he'll find it." Nicco put a couple of apples and bottles of water in a bag. "I'll catch up with you guys in the morning. Maybe I'll even bring home donuts, Ben."

After Nicco left, Kate and Mac started clearing the table. Ben rolled his eyes. "I guess this means I'm done." Kate leaned down and kissed him. "I'll let you two do the dishes. I need to take some hay to the cattle in the south pasture. I meant to do it earlier."

Kate washed and Mac dried. Handing him a plate, Kate couldn't help asking Mac about Nicco. "Why aren't you and Nicco together? I mean as a couple. It's clear he's in love with you. So why aren't you both together?"

Mac took the plate and began to dry it. "The Colonel wouldn't approve."

Kate's eyebrows drew together. "The Colonel?"

Mac nodded, "The Colonel is Nicco's father. He's the biggest homophobe you'd ever meet. He heard a rumor from a woman on the base once that Nicco was gay and the Colonel beat Nicco so badly he was out of school for a week. That's what prompted Nicco to join the Navy instead of the Marines. Something happened to Nicco though. It was when he was overseas with his Seal team. When Nicco got out of the Navy he was obsessed with making it up to the Colonel. Everything Nicco does now he asks himself first 'would the Colonel approve?' If not Nicco doesn't do it."

Kate wiped the counter and table off and then refilled her glass of wine. "Even though he loves you he won't do anything about it because his father wouldn't approve?"

Mac nodded and sat down beside Kate. "Exactly. I've been in love with Nicco since we were teenagers and I think he's been in love with me just as long, but that's it. He won't do anything about his feelings because he's afraid he'll lose his father. I don't understand it but I know what it's like to lose a father. Just because he'll lose his for a reason other than death doesn't make it any less painful. In the meantime I take what I can get from him. I'll never love anyone but him. Maybe someday things will be different but for now at least I have part of him."

Kate patted the top of Mac's hand. "You're a good man, Charlie Brown." She winked and got up from the table. "What would you say to a friendly game of poker?"

"I'd say it better not be strip poker," Ben said from the doorway. When he saw that narrow-eyed look Kate gave him that meant he'd been rude he laughed and winked. "Unless I'm invited of course."

Kate shook her head and led the men to the living room game table. She dug the cards and chips out of the cupboard and set them on the table. "Ben, you can play for clothes if you'd like, but Mac and I are playing with chips."

\* \* \* \* \*

Mac was making coffee the next morning when Nicco walked through the door. Mac could see his friend was dead tired. "Morning, Nicco. Did you find out anything?"

Nicco stretched and yawned. He reached for a coffee cup and replaced the half full pot with his cup. He waited while the electric coffee maker slowly filled his cup and then replaced it with the pot once again. Nicco sat down at the kitchen table coffee cup in hand. He took a big drink and closed his eyes. "I saw enough to know the little fucker is up to something else. I followed him to Judge Hathaway's house and took a few pictures of him taking pictures of Judge Hathaway through the window. After he left I snuck up to the window to see what the little fucker was taking pictures of and about lost my eyesight." Nicco stopped to yawn again and take another drink of coffee. "It seems the esteemed judge likes to dress up in women's clothing and get spanked by a guy who looks like he belongs in a motorcycle gang."

Nicco got up and pointed to the camera. "Give that to Cree. I've got a feeling the little fucker is going to try to blackmail the judge." Nicco squeezed Mac's shoulder on the way toward the door. "I'm going to bed. Wake me if you need me."

Mac ate a quick breakfast of toast and jelly and took off in the Jeep. He decided he'd start at the local newspaper office and go from there. He also wanted to check out Bruce Adams, the little fucker's deceased father, to see if he could find anything that would explain Clint's behavior toward Kate.

Kate woke with a smooth shiny head between her legs. Ben's tongue was lapping up her morning juices like they were milk. He ran his tongue from hole to hole, paying special attention to her anus. Kate tensed when she realized where his tongue was.

Ben sensed her fear and lifted his head to smile at her. "Morning, darlin'. I hope you don't mind but I started without you." He licked her anus again. "I know your feelings on this part of your anatomy but I want to help you get beyond your fears. This little rosebud is a very erotic pleasure point. You're denying yourself a great deal of satisfaction because of the events of seven years ago and I aim to change your mind."

Kate shifted uncomfortably. "I don't know, Ben. I know my problem is more mental than physical but it just makes me feel dirty somehow. No, that's not true. I know why it makes me feel dirty. Clint...um...the little fucker told me that whores took it in the ass. Which is why he fucked me there." Kate chewed her bottom lip and looked at him for understanding.

Ben closed his eyes and crawled up beside her. He ran his hand down the side of her face and kissed her. "Oh darlin', I'm so sorry he did and said those things to you but he was wrong. I hate to say this but I've been with a few whores in my time and you're far from being a whore. You're a one-man woman and you're mine." Ben ran his hand down her back until his fingertip rimmed her anus once more. "This is mine too. Let me ask you something. Do you think Jenny is a whore?"

Kate looked shocked at his question. "No of course not. Jenny is one of the sweetest women I've ever met. Why would you ask me a question like that?"

Ben sighed and continued to rim her asshole. "I happen to know that Jenny gets fucked in the ass almost daily. Does that make her a bad person?"

Kate closed her eyes and shook her head. "I understand what you're telling me, Ben, and I know you're right. Please give me a little time to think about it."

Ben kissed her again and slid his finger toward her clit. He flicked the piercing and Kate moaned. "I think I can think of one or two other things to explore during the meantime." He devoured her mouth in a voracious kiss. As he kissed her he slid three fingers into her warm wet channel. Ben pumped his fingers in and out of her while he feasted on her nipples. Pulling and sucking them into his eager mouth.

Kate arched her back and reached for his cock. She wrapped both hands around him and began stroking the solid hard length of his manhood. Her pussy began to quiver and her breathing became unsteady as the first of many orgasms consumed her. She pulled Ben's cock, aiming it for her pussy. "Fuck me, Ben."

Ben levered himself over her and plunged his shaft into her warm pussy. He gave her a moment to become accustomed to his size and then began a steady rhythm in and out of her welcoming channel. Kate moved her legs to his shoulders and thrust upward. "Harder. Fuck me harder, Ben."

Ben smiled and began a more vigorous rhythm. He couldn't believe Kate could take his full length after just a few days of fucking. Her sexual appetite matched his in almost every way but he still hadn't talk to her about his kink for strange places. Ben

liked sex whenever and wherever he felt like it. He had decided originally he'd forget that side of his sexuality but he was beginning to think he wouldn't have to.

He continued to pound his cock deep and hard into Kate. She tightened around him and he could feel another orgasm explode from within her, setting off his own. Ben buried his cock as deeply as it would go and pumped his seed into her womb. The thought of her pregnant with his child nearly made him hard again. He collapsed and rolled to the side, taking her with him.

"I love you, Ben," Kate said, scratching his head softly with her fingernails. She kissed the hollow of his throat and followed it with a lick up the side of his face. "I love your cock too."

Ben smoothed the hair away from her sweat-dampened face. He followed the slope of her nose with his finger and outlined her lips. "I need to talk to you, Wildflower. I'm not really sure how to broach this subject so I'm just going to come out with it. You already know how much I like sex but what I've been holding back on you is my dominant side." He held his hand up to stop her from objecting. "I'm not saying anything about ropes or spankings. I'm talking about the fact that I like sex on demand. If I come into the barn and see you and get hard I'd like for you to blow me or let me fuck you then and there." He looked into Kate's face, unable to read her expression. "Am I scaring you, Wildflower? Because I don't mean to. If you're uncomfortable with this side of my sexuality I can try to control it."

Kate shook her head and reached for his hand. She brought it to her lips and kissed his palm. "Unless we're in a room full of people I think I can live with that side of you. It might take me by surprise the first couple of times but who knows? It could become my new obsession."

Ben parted her lips with his tongue and kissed her deeply. "Damn, woman. You are so perfect for me, darlin'. This is not how I wanted to do this but..." Ben got to his knees and pulled Kate up to her knees. "Kate... I love you more than anything in the world. I want you beside me in work and in bed. Would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?"

Kate took a deep breath. "If you're asking me to marry you the answer is absolutely yes. Besides we've had quite a bit of unprotected sex lately and I imagine eventually there will be a little—God I hope it's little—Ben Jr. born."

Ben stilled, suddenly a spark lit up his eyes. "You think, Kate? You think you might be pregnant?"

Kate giggled and shrugged. "I didn't say that, Ben. I'm just saying that the sooner we get married the better." She threw her arms around his neck and kissed him.

"Well...well, we need to get married right away then. How soon can you put a wedding together? I'll have to call 'The Team' and see if they can all come. Oh and I can ask Nicco to be my best man and you could have Jenny as your matron of honor."



Kate started laughing so hard she fell back onto the bed. "I've never seen a man so excited about getting married. If you weren't such a man's man I'd say you were giddy."

Ben stuck out his lips in a mock pout. "I am not acting giddy. Just happy. I've never really had a family. I feel like all my dreams from my childhood are finally coming true, that's all. So when can we have a wedding?"

"Well, I've already got the dress. I thought I'd wear my mother's and I already know it fits. I'm ashamed to say I tried it on a couple days ago. I'd say we can do it as soon as we can get a minister and your friends out to the ranch. I don't have anyone to invite that you're not already inviting so I'd guess just grilled steaks for the food and a keg of beer. I could even run into Santa Fe and get a ready made wedding cake."

Ben shook his head and held her face. "I want this to be special for you, Kate. Don't rush yourself on my account."

Kate smiled and shook her head, placing her hands on top of his. "I've never been one of those girls to dream about a big fancy wedding. I'll be happy with a few friends and good food and of course the man I love."

Ben bent his head and kissed her ring finger. "What kind of wedding ring do you want, Wildflower? Because it could take some time if we have to special order it."

Kate kissed him back. "My mom always said she could spot a woman who married for love easily. She would be the woman with the simple gold wedding band. I'm marrying you for love, Ben. Not for the diamond. I'd like a simple gold band, which you can pick up in almost any department store in Santa Fe."

Ben was practically vibrating he was so excited. "If we can get the license and the guys here by Sunday is that too soon?"

"That sounds perfect, Mr. Thomas. In the meantime I've got a lot of work to get done. So let me go and come take a shower with me." She pulled herself from Ben's arms and ran for the bathroom.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Ben and Kate made it into the kitchen they found a note from Mac and a roll of film. Ben picked it up and read the note describing what Nicco had told Mac about the little fucker's activities the previous night. Ben showed the note to Kate and got a cup of coffee. "I think I'll go on over to Cree's and give this to him and invite them to the wedding. Would you like to go?"

Kate took a drink of coffee and started pulling sandwich fixings out of the fridge. "Sounds good to me. Would you like a BLT for breakfast?"

Smiling, Ben reached out and pinched Kate's nose. "I think I'd like about four of them, thank you."

Kate laughed and started frying the bacon. "In that case you can slice the tomatoes. You know we might think about adding a few pigs to the ranch. Otherwise we may go broke buying bacon."

"No. I hate pigs. They'll stink up the whole ranch. I'd rather just find a pig farmer and trade a butchered steer for a big butchered pig." Ben took his coffee and sat at the table watching Kate fry the bacon.

He noticed the short shorts she was wearing looked like she'd had them since she was a teenager. Kate had another halter top on, this one in pink. He loved the way the top bared her sun-bronzed shoulders to his view. Ben's cock started to thicken in the leg of his jeans. He rubbed his cock through the material. Noticing a wet spot had formed in his jeans, he unzipped his pants and pulled the painful erection out into his fist. He began stroking himself and watching Kate's beautiful ass as she cooked the bacon.

Kate noticed Ben wasn't cutting up the tomatoes and turned around to scold him. "Hey, why aren't you..." She saw the look in his eyes first, needy and wanting she could tell. Kate lowered her gaze to the huge erection Ben was pumping under the table. She licked her lips and took the bacon out of the frying pan.

When Kate walked toward him in that sexy way of hers he turned his chair and spread his thighs. "Someone needs a little attention before breakfast. I want you to suck it. I want to come down your throat, darlin'." He pumped his cock a few more times as Kate lowered herself to her knees between his legs.

Without a word Kate reached out and put both hands around the steel pole in front of her. She lowered her head and swiped her tongue across the head of Ben's cock as she continued her two-fisted assault on his erection. Kate enveloped as much of his length as she could into her waiting throat.

Ben began thrusting upward. His hands wrapped themselves in her long blonde curls and he began moaning. "Ah...that's it, Wildflower...suck that cock." He reached behind her neck and released the tie of her halter top. The ties fell and so did her top. Huge boobs came spilling out into his hands. "I love your breasts. They fit my big hands perfectly."

Kate continued licking and sucking Ben's cock but moved one hand down to his sac. She began kneading it. It felt so good to her she wanted to taste it. She pulled her mouth off the head with a pop and ran her tongue down the heavily veined length of his cock. When she reached the base she held Ben's cock against his abdomen and licked his scrotum.

Ben shook and thrust up into her face. "Oh hell yes. Suck 'em deep into your hot little mouth, darlin'."

Ben's balls were too big to get both of them in her mouth so one at a time she licked and sucked the testicles into her mouth. Kate's fingers wandered even farther back and rimmed his asshole. Kate held her hand toward Ben's face without even taking her mouth off the sac in front of her.

Ben licked her fingers thoroughly, knowing exactly what she had in mind. He released her fingers and slid even farther down in the kitchen chair. He spread his thighs wider and presented her with the sensitive pucker of his ass. "Do it, Wildflower. Fuck my ass."

The heated pleas from Ben were taking Kate's level of arousal by storm. She took her fingers and one by one slipped them into his tight hole. When she had three fingers inside him she began to move them in and out.

Ben started moaning and groaning thrusting his hips upward. "Suck my cock, darlin'. I'm gonna come."

Kate moved her mouth back to his cock and swallowed him as far as she could and sucked as hard as she could, all the while slamming her fingers in and out of his ass.

Ben cried out her name and came down her throat. Thick, long bursts of seed saturated her throat and mouth with a musky flavor that she knew she was becoming addicted to. Kate licked him clean and pulled out of his hole.

Ben reached down for her and drew her up onto his lap. "That was hot, darlin'. I could get used to this new arrangement we have." He unbuttoned her shorts and slid his hand to her pussy. "Damn, Wildflower, I thought you were in need of some good strong finger fucking but your pussy is already soaked. Did getting me off get you off too, darlin'?"

Kate licked the side of his face. "I came long before you did. You were right, that was hot." She kissed him passionately and got off his lap, buttoning her pants on her way to the sink. She washed her hands, got out a clean dishrag and ran it under the hot water. She handed the rag to Ben and turned back to the stove. Kate turned the burner back on and heated the grease, adding the bacon back to the skillet when it was hot enough. She looked over her shoulder at Ben. "Time to cut the tomatoes, stud."

Ben chuckled and stuffed his now soft cock back down into the leg of his jeans. He took the dishrag he'd used to clean himself up and tossed it into the laundry room.

Kate smiled at him as he strolled back into the kitchen. "Do you want to go to Santa Fe after we drop this film by Cree's? I thought we could get the rings and order the cake at the same time."

Ben went to the counter and started cutting the tomatoes. He stopped cutting and looked over at Kate. "Why don't you want to get the cake and the rings in Junctionville?"

Kate busied herself getting down a couple of paper plates. No sense washing dishes this morning. She remembered she'd never told Ben about her confrontations in town a couple days ago. She turned to him and cleared her throat. "Um...let's just say the people in the grocery store and department store like to talk too much about things they don't understand."

Ben strode toward her and wrapped his arms around her waist. "What happened, Kate? Was it the day Nicco took you to town?"

She managed a smile, remembering how Nicco had taken care of the busybody in the grocery store. "Yes Nicco was with me." Kate went on to explain everything that had transpired.

When she was finished Ben took her face in his hands and kissed her. "I understand why you'd want to shop elsewhere but Junctionville is your hometown. You can't let the little fucker run you away. I say the two of us go into town after we leave the Triple Spur and put all these rumors to rest. Stand up to those who believe the lies he's spreading about you. Our children will be raised in this town, Kate. We owe it to them to nip this thing in the bud now." He tenderly kissed her closed eyes and then her lips.

Kate nodded her head, never opening her eyes. "You're right, this is my hometown. It's time I stopped feeling ashamed for what Cl... the little fucker did to me seven years ago and hold my head high in town." She looked at the bacon that was now fried to a crisp. "I hope you like your bacon well done."

Ben chuckled and looked at the black strips of bacon. "Well, maybe I'll just have a couple of sliced tomatoes on toast. We can stop in at Mabel's and have an early lunch."

## Chapter Ten

After doing the morning chores, Kate and Ben pulled up in front of the Triple Spur ranch house. Kate looked dreamily at the beautiful log and stone house. "I love this house. Cree did such a beautiful job designing it, don't you think?"

Ben opened her door for her and grabbed her hand. "Yeah, Cree's talented. This house is big while still feeling homey. There's a trick to that you know. I've lived in enough mansions to know that big usually feels cold."

Kate was surprised by his statement. "You grew up living in mansions? I just realized I don't know anything about your childhood or your family. How can that be, Ben, when I feel as though I've known you my entire life?"

Ben shrugged and started walking toward the porch. "Not much to tell really. My mom moved from husband to husband. Getting all she could from one before moving on to greener pastures. I never knew my real father and none of the men my mom married were interested in having a stepson so I learned to rely on myself. I think I was always the burden my mom begrudgingly put up with." Ben shook his head, releasing the thoughts that threatened his newfound happiness. "None of that matters now because I have you. You and the children we'll have will become my family."

Kate squeezed Ben's hand. She felt sorry for the lonely unloved little boy she could see just under the surface of Ben's strong face. "We'll give you so much love you'll feel like you're smothering." Kate grinned and gave him a quick wink. "Papa Ben."

"Thank you," Ben said and climbed the steps of the porch. He looked at Kate one more time before knocking. "That's all I ever hoped for." Ben knocked on the door and looked over to smile at Blue lounging in Cree's favorite padded wicker sofa.

The door opened and Jenny smiled and threw her arms around Kate. "I'm so glad to see you two. Come in, the boys are in the kitchen eating breakfast."

Jenny walked them into the kitchen but when they got there they found Jake on his knees giving Cree a morning blowjob.

Ben looked from them to Jenny and laughed. "I can see they're having the same thing for breakfast I did. Let's step back out and let them finish."

Jenny put her hands on her hips and stomped her foot. "Hey, guys, you've got two minutes to finish then we're coming back in."

Cree snapped his head in their direction and smiled. "Oh it's not gonna take that long, baby."

The three of them went back around the corner to Cree's moans of pleasure. Jenny rolled her eyes. "Sorry about that. Neither one of them can seem to get enough sex lately."

Kate smiled and winked at Jenny. "It must be something in the air."

Cree called for them to come back into the kitchen. When they arrived Jake was sitting with a smile on his face and a coffee cup in his hand. "Sorry, guys, we got a little carried away."

Ben grinned and patted Kate's ass. "I totally understand, Cree. The reason we stopped by was to give you this roll of film Nicco shot last night of the little fucker. It seems he was taking pictures of Judge Hathaway in a dress being disciplined by a big biker dude. I don't know if Nicco got any pictures of the judge but he did get pictures of the little fucker with his camera pointed in the judge's house. Nicco and Mac think he's planning some kind of blackmail."

Cree whistled and looked at the roll of film. "Do you have any idea how embarrassing it's going to be for me to tell the judge about this?"

Ben spread his hands out in front of him. "Sorry, Cree, I'm just the delivery man." He smiled and pulled Kate tighter in his arms. "We also wanted to stop in and invite the three of you to our wedding this Sunday. That is if we can get a license and a minister by then."

Cree, Jake and Jenny all got up and came over to congratulate the pair. Jenny kissed Ben's cheek and then pulled Kate into her arms in a hug. "I'm so happy for you both." Jenny's belly began kicking Kate's stomach and the two women laughed. "Even the babies are excited and happy for you."

They all sat down at the table and talked about what would need to be done by Sunday. Kate reached out and took Jenny's hand. "I was hoping you would be my matron of honor."

Jenny looked down at her ever growing stomach. "I'd definitely have to make a trip into town to get a dress. The only thing I've been able to fit into are Jake's jogging shorts and t-shirts but I'd be very honored to stand up with you, Kate."

Ben turned to Cree. "We're on our way into town now to pick out a cake and get the rings. How about if we all go and have lunch at Mabel's afterward? I was also hoping to get to the courthouse to apply for a marriage license."

Cree clapped him on the shoulder. "Sounds good to me. What about you, Jake? Can the ranch stand to be without you for a couple of hours?"

Jake nodded. "Only if I get a big piece of pie at Mabel's."

They all loaded into Jenny's minivan and headed toward Junctionville. Ben called Nicco and Mac and they both agreed to meet them for lunch. They pulled up to Jefferson's department store and Kate began to get nervous. She squeezed Ben's hand and closed her eyes for a minute gathering her strength.

Ben squeezed back and kissed her forehead. "Are you okay with this, darlin', because if it's going to upset you we can always go to Santa Fe?"

"No I'm fine. I was just building up my courage." Kate followed Jenny into the store. Jake went with Jenny to try on dresses while Cree ran down to the drugstore to

have the roll of film developed. Ben tugged Kate to the jewelry counter. Kate looked into the display case and saw what she wanted right away. She tapped on the glass counter. "That's the one I want, Ben." It was a thin gold band with filigree etched into the surface. A matching man's ring sat next to it in the white velvet box.

Ben smiled and looked for a sales clerk. When he came back with Janie in tow Kate held her breath. Ben pointed at the set of rings in the case, "We'd like to buy this set of wedding bands please."

Janie, who still hadn't acknowledged Kate's presence, looked at Ben. "Wouldn't you like to see engagement rings also, sir? Most women would prefer a diamond or is that too much money? I heard the Crawford ranch was about to go belly up."

A red flush appeared on Ben's high cheekbones. "Could you get the manager for me please?"

Janie squirmed in her apparently expensive high-heeled shoes. "I'm sorry, sir, there's really no reason to bring the manager into this. I apologize if I've embarrassed you. Now which set was it that you wanted to see?"

Ben put his hands on the glass counter and leaned down until he was nose to nose with Janie. "What I want to see is the manager and I'd suggest you shut your ill-mannered mouth and go fetch him or her. Unless you'd like me to make a scene and call you all the names you truly are?"

Jake and Jenny came up while Ben was nose to nose with Janie. Jenny elbowed Kate in the side and pointed toward the scene. "What the hell is that all about?"

Kate cleared her throat. "Janie suggested that Ben was too poor to purchase me a diamond engagement ring instead of the gold bands I picked out. Seems word around town is that the Crawford ranch is about to go belly up."

Jake started laughing. "I'll go find the manager." He left and came back a few minutes later with a very nervous Mr. Kline, a short middle-aged bald man wearing a very bad toupee.

Mr. Kline stepped behind the counter beside Janie. "What seems to be the problem here?"

Ben looked at the short little man and pointed toward Janie. "Twice this week this young lady has insulted either myself or my fiancée. Today she had the audacity to suggest that I was too poor to buy a proper engagement ring for Kate. Obviously she has absolutely no idea what the hell she's talking about. I've got enough money in my bank account to not only buy this entire store but the entire town." Ben took a calming breath as the manager's brow began to sweat. "I want this employee fired or I will talk to the owner of this department store myself."

Jake rolled his eyes and waited for the manager's reply. *Cree had always said he thought Ben had a secret, now I guess we know what it is. Ben must be rich. Damn, who would have thought it? He sure doesn't act like a rich man.*

The now sweating manager turned toward Janie. "You're fired. Clean out your locker. You can collect your final check at the end of the day." He turned his back on

Janie and looked at Ben. "I'm terribly sorry for any inconvenience, sir. What can I help you with?"

Ben looked at Kate and she nodded. "We'd like to buy this set of rings. I'll pay extra to have them sized by Saturday."

Mr. Kline took the small box from under the counter and handed it to Ben. "I'll have to get your finger measurements."

Kate held out her hand and slipped the band onto her ring finger. It was only about a size and a half too big but Ben's ring would barely fit on the tip of his pinky finger.

The manager looked at the size of Ben's finger. "My my, you have large fingers. I'm not sure that we can size this ring up to that extent and still retain the filigree design."

Ben shrugged his shoulders. "Do what you have to do. If you need to special order one that's fine, I'll pay whatever it costs to get it here by Sunday noon."

Mr. Kline wiped his forehead and nodded. "I'll do my very best, sir."

Ben paid for the rings and the four friends left the store, heading toward the bakery located in the back of the grocery store. Kate prayed that Mrs. Campbell wasn't working today. Janie losing her job was one thing but Kate knew that even though Mrs. Campbell was a busybody she needed her job to supplement her Social Security. She put a restraining hand on Ben's arm. "Please go easy on Mrs. Campbell."

Ben winked at her. "I'm always easy, Wildflower."

They managed to order a simple two-tiered round cake with what she hoped would look like wildflowers draped over ivory icing. Kate felt almost giddy by the time they entered Mabel's to meet Nicco, Mac and Cree for lunch.

The waitress showed them to a big round table in the back corner of the café. Kate sat between Jenny and Ben with Mac across from her. Nicco of course took the chair next to Mac and beside him sat Jake. Cree came in a little later and sat beside Jenny.

Cree looked at Nicco and nodded. "Good work with the surveillance, Nicco. I've had the pictures developed and have a meeting with Judge Hathaway this afternoon." He leaned over and kissed Jenny and then leaned over the table to give Jake a deep kiss.

Nicco looked from Jake to Cree. "Don't you two feel a little odd doing that stuff in public?"

Cree looked at him like he was crazy. "What? Showing affection to the two people I love most? Absolutely not. For the most part this is a very liberated town. Junctionville used to be somewhat of an artist commune back in the late sixties and early seventies. Everyone who lives here knows I'm married to Jenny and Jake. To hide my love would be a shame."

Kate looked down at her lap when Nicco suddenly looked very uncomfortable with the conversation. She saw Mac reach under the table and apparently offer comfort to Nicco because he looked up and smiled at him. They ordered their entrees and drinks and Jake began telling the department store story.



Nicco nodded his head. "Good for you, Ben. That little uppity bitch had it coming for the way she treated Kate on Tuesday. I wish I could have been there to impart my own choice words to her manager."

Their food came and the group began discussing plans for the wedding. Ben told them he still needed to call Remy and Gabe to see if they could make it to town by Sunday.

Jake nodded and pushed his plate away, rubbing his nonexistent belly. "I haven't spoken to either one of them in a week or so but I'm sure they'll do everything possible to make it. Although they'll both be shocked as hell that you finally found a woman who could stand you for more than a night, I'm sure they'll love Kate." He winked at Kate and looked at the pie selection on the menu.

They finished their lunch and all fought over the tab. Finally Jake chuckled and handed the bill to Ben. "Word is you can afford to take your buddies out for lunch. Speaking of which, why didn't you ever tell us you were loaded?"

Ben shifted in his chair looking a little sheepish. "I've never really thought of the money as mine. My mother sold her soul time and time again to acquire those millions of dollars. I guess I always thought of it as dirty money but maybe I should find something worthwhile to do with it. It's just been sitting in the bank since her death."

The group nodded. Understanding a little more of what made Ben tick. Kate squeezed his thigh in a show of support. Ben reached down and held her hand on top of his thigh. "Well, if everyone's done I've got some chores to get done at home. Kate, are you going to help me bale that alfalfa this afternoon?"

"Sure, if Mac or Nicco wants to cook dinner?" She looked at the two men with raised eyebrows and a smile.

Mac smiled, showing his deep dimple. "I'm sure we can rustle up something together but first I'm going over to the courthouse to look at the public record of Bruce Adams' will. I think there might be something fishy there. I noticed that the little fucker is his only living relative so it started me wondering why he isn't in possession of the Adams estate and holdings. That's the reason we stopped by the Triple Spur and picked up Ben's truck. I didn't figure you all would feel like waiting on me to dig around in a dark basement."

That reminded Kate of something. "Oh my God, Ben, I can't believe we almost forgot to get the marriage license." Kate got up from the table and started dragging Ben toward the front door.

Ben laughed at his overexcited fiancée. "Okay, Wildflower, I'm coming. You don't have to pull my arm out of its socket."

Cree stood up with the rest of the group. He kissed Jenny and Jake and told them he'd see them after he talked to Judge Hathaway. He looked over at Mac. "Come on, Mac, I'll walk over to the courthouse with ya."

Mac nodded and turned to Nicco. "Why don't you go by the grocery store and pick up something for us to cook tonight. I was thinking something simple like steak and salad."

Nicco slapped him on the back. "Okay, see you later." He turned toward Jenny and Jake. "What are you two going to do while you wait for Ben and Kate? If you want you can run to the grocery store with me then I'll drop you back by the Triple Spur on my way to Ben's."

Jake looked at Jenny and nodded. "That's sounds great, just let me call Cree and let him know."

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As Kate and Ben were exiting the courthouse Kate stopped short, causing Ben to run into the back of her. Luckily his reflexes were quick and he grabbed her around the middle before she tumbled down the stairs. He started to ask what was wrong when he saw the direction of her gaze. Clint was standing across the street just staring at them. Ben started down the steps toward him until Kate grabbed his shirt.

"No, Ben. He can't do anything to us and he knows that. Let the protection order do its job."

Ben looked at Kate and then back to the little fucker. "I hate him, Kate. Let him try to say one word to you and his ass is mine. Fuck the law."

Kate steered him toward the bench beside the courthouse where they were to meet up with Cree. Kate sat Ben down and sat on his lap. Ben wasn't sure if she was just being overly friendly or if she was trying to keep him from going after Clint. Ben decided with her ass resting on his cock he didn't much care what the reason was, just that it felt damn good. "You little vixen. You know I won't fuck you in public. Is this your way of torturing me?"

Kate gave her ass a little wiggle. She looked around and didn't see anyone, so she wiggled again and Ben groaned. She giggled and kissed him. "After we drop Cree off maybe I can help you with the little problem you seem to be having with the fit of your jeans."

Ben smacked her ass. "There's nothing little about my problem. That's the problem. I'm going to give Cree quite a show." No sooner had he said it than Cree strolled around the side of the building to where they sat.

He took in the scene before him and smiled. "Ready to go I gather?"

Ben lifted Kate off his lap and stood. Cree took in the front of his jeans and swore. "God damn, Ben. How do you manage to lug that thing around all day?" Cree laughed and headed toward the minivan parked in front of the department store. "Jenny and Jake got a ride with Nicco, and Mac has his own vehicle so we're set to go."

Ben waited until they got in the van before asking the question that was on everyone's mind. "So tell me what Judge Hathaway had to say?"

Cree shook his head and sighed. "Well, he was more than a little embarrassed I can tell you that. At least he knows about Jake and me, so he felt a little more comfortable with me talking to him than if I'd sent someone else. He told me to keep the pictures and he'd wait to see if the little fucker did indeed try to blackmail him. I honestly think he's hoping he will. Then we'll have even more to put him away for."

They drove in silence for a few minutes. "The little fucker was standing outside the courthouse across the street when we came out. He gives me the creeps, Cree. I can't help but think he's planning something."

\* \* \* \* \*

That night at dinner Mac filled everyone in on what he'd discovered at the courthouse. "Bruce Adams' will had to go through probate so there's a public record of it at the courthouse and you won't believe what I found. Everything he owns goes to Clint, even a presidency position at the bank, with one stipulation."

Mac looked at Kate. "Clint Adams can't get his hands on any of it until he runs Kate Crawford out of Junctionville and off the Crawford ranch. It seems you threw a challenge in Bruce's face seven years ago and he wasn't too happy about it. I'm not sure if that's the only reason behind it but it's the only one listed."

Ben slapped his forehead while Kate sat open-mouthed. "Damn. Kate, didn't all your problems begin after his death? That little fucker has been trying to get rid of you for the past year. He didn't step up his game until I showed up and bought half the ranch." Ben looked over at Mac. "Did you talk to Cree about the stipulation in the will?"

Mac swallowed a drink of wine. "Yeah he said for me to make copies of the will and for Kate to present them to the judge during her protection hearing on Tuesday."

Kate nodded. "Then that's exactly what I'll do. I can't wait to see his face when he finds out we're on to him."

## Chapter Eleven

Sunday morning Kate woke up alone in her own bed. She hadn't slept well the night before. She had become so used to Ben's strong arms wrapped around her that she had felt cold and alone all night. Kate had no one to blame but herself she knew it but it didn't make her sleep any better. She had been the one to insist on separate beds the night before the wedding.

Kate sat up and stretched her arms over her head. It finally dawned on her what had awakened her. She heard it again. "A rooster," she said aloud, "but I don't have a rooster anymore." Kate jumped out of bed and threw her robe on and rushed out the bedroom door and down the steps. She flew through the kitchen door to find Ben, Nicco and Mac unloading crates of chickens into the coop.

Kate covered her mouth and tears began to trickle down her cheeks. "What have you done, you big wonderful man?"

Ben looked up, surprised to find her. "You're not supposed to see this. It's my surprise wedding gift to you."

Kate put her hands on her hips and shook her head. "It's kinda hard not to find out there are chickens in the yard when your rooster woke me up." She giggled and went over to the coop. There must have been thirty chickens already let loose in the small coop. "How many did you buy, Ben?"

Ben carried another crate over to the coop and let the hens loose. "Fifty. I figured I eat so many eggs fifty was a good number."

Kate rolled her eyes. "Ben, there's no way we can eat the eggs of fifty chickens. I love the gesture, really I do, but maybe you should see if Jake needs a few. The most we should really keep are twenty-five and that's if we hurry and start having big boys like their daddy. Beside there's no way the coop is big enough for fifty."

Ben looked a little sheepish. "I'm sorry, Wildflower. I just wanted to give back twofold what the little fucker took away from you."

Kate walked over to Ben and put her arms around his waist. She hugged his body to hers, burying her face in his chest. "God I love you. This is the sweetest thing anyone's ever done for me but it's just too many chickens. Unless you want to eat half of them. In which case you'll have to do the killing."

Ben turned toward Nicco and Mac still unloading crates. "That's all, guys. We'll have to see if Jake wants the rest of them. If not Jake maybe Gabe would be interested. He's supposed to be here with Cotton and that plant dude anytime."

\* \* \* \* \*

Kate was just getting her makeup on when Jenny rushed through the bedroom door. "Sorry I'm late, Kate. The guys needed a little TLC this morning." She stopped and covered her mouth giggling. "Actually they needed a lot of TLC but it's better than the alternative, isn't it?"

Going to her friend for a hug, Kate rubbed the growing protrusion of Jenny's belly. "You'd better enjoy it while you can." She turned back to the makeup mirror. "I'm really almost ready. I've just got to finish my makeup and put Mom's dress on."

Jenny looked at the ivory lace gown hanging on the door. "Oh Kate, it's beautiful." She touched the delicate lace sleeves and high neck of the gown. "Is there anything else I can do for you or get for you?"

"Ben was in charge of my bouquet. Could you do me a favor and see if he got it and if his ring has been delivered yet?" Kate started putting her hair up in a loose bun, allowing small curly blonde tendrils to escape around her face and neck.

Jenny waved on her way out the door. "I'm on it."

Kate smiled and walked over to the hanging dress. She took the dress off the hanger and stepped into it. She turned to look at herself in the mirror. "Oh Mom, I wish you could see me today. I wish Daddy could walk me down the aisle the way he was supposed to. I'm marrying a wonderful man. Daddy would have liked him. We're going to make his dreams for the Crawford ranch come true, Mom." There was a quick knock on the door and then Jenny was coming back in with bouquet and ring in hand.

"Oh Kate. You're mesmerizing. It's like you stepped out of a history book." Jenny sat the ring and flowers on the bed and began buttoning the back of Kate's dress.

Kate bent over the bed and picked up the beautiful bouquet of wildflowers, sunflowers and roses. A tear slid down her cheek as she touched her face to the soft flowers. "He remembered."

Finishing the last button, Jenny turned Kate back toward the mirror. "What did he remember?"

Kate wiped her cheek with a tissue, careful to not mess up her makeup. "Ben brought me a bouquet just like this not long ago. It was the first time in my life anyone had given me flowers. He said they each represented a part of my personality. The rose was soft and smelled sweet like me, the sunflower was bright and happy and the wildflowers persevere no matter what nature threw at them. That's why he calls me Wildflower." She wiped her eyes again. "Because no matter what life throws at me I continue to thrive and grow."

Jenny touched Kate shoulder. "You're a very lucky woman to have found him, Kate. According to Cree and Jake, Ben's been a loner most of his life. Always searching for something. It seems he's found what he's been searching for in you. You deserve each other. You both deserve all the love and happiness that life has to offer."

Slipping on her low-heeled shoes, Kate turned and took Jenny's hand. "Did Remy make it in time?"

"Don't worry about anything else. Everyone is here and the cake was delivered by Mrs. Campbell personally with an apology to you for her behavior the other day. It seems Mrs. Donovan from the flower shop set her straight on a few things. Right now though I think your groom is getting a little impatient. Are you ready, Kate?"

At Kate's nod Jenny picked up her small bouquet of wildflowers and went to help Kate down the stairs. Outside the house a tent had been set up with a dozen white chairs. Most of the chairs were full, Kate noticed. The empty ones would be occupied by the wedding party during the wedding meal. Kate peeked through the door and saw Ben standing beside Nicco at the end of the white runner that had been rolled out.

Ben was wearing a tuxedo, which surprised her. She figured he'd just wear a suit or even jeans. She noticed Ben shifting from one foot to the other. Apparently she wasn't the only nervous one. Kate nodded to Jenny who nodded to Cotton. She'd asked if Rex Cotton, Gabe's foreman, could play a wedding song on his guitar while she walked down the aisle toward her beloved.

The music started and Jenny walked down the aisle holding her flowers in front of her stomach. When she got almost there Kate stepped out of the house and walked down the white runner. The closer she got to Ben the more tears gathered in her eyes. She never thought she'd be this happy.

When she reached Ben she noticed moisture in his eyes as well. He bent his mouth to her ear. "You take my breath away, Wildflower." He kissed her forehead and turned them toward the minister.

After they recited their vows the minister gave permission for the kiss. Instead of bending down to kiss Kate, Ben picked her up and cradled her in his arms and kissed her.

The kiss went on so long that the audience started heckling the bride and groom. "Enough already, you two." "Get a room." "Save a kiss for the rest of us, Kate." At that last remark Ben turned around and narrowed his eyes at his friends.

Ben turned with Kate still in his arms and thanked the minister. He turned back around and carried Kate back down the aisle to the kitchen. He set her on the counter and looked into her eyes. "I've never seen anything so beautiful as you coming down that aisle, Kate. I honestly thought my heart would stop beating. Thank you for coming into my life, Kate Thomas."

Kate leaned in and kissed him. "If I remember rightly it was you that came into my life and saved my ranch and my heart."

Nicco stuck his head in the kitchen door. "Sorry to interrupt but the photographer would like to get a few pictures of the happy couple."

Ben kissed her once more and lifted her off the counter. He held out his elbow for her, "Shall we, Mrs. Thomas?"

Kate took his arm, "Yes, Mr. Thomas, we shall."

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that evening after the gang had taken what was left of the keg of beer and gone to the Triple Spur to continue the party Ben and Kate came down after their first round of exhausting sex.

"It just keeps getting better and better," Ben said as he brushed the hair from Kate's face. He trailed his fingers along the contours of her face. "So beautiful."

Kate sucked one of his fingers into her mouth. She swirled her tongue around it until he moaned. "What did Gabe drag you into the library about earlier?"

Ben took his wet finger and reached down to run it around her clit. "Just some boring business stuff. I'll tell you about it tomorrow when I don't have fucking on my mind."

"Speaking of fucking. I've been giving it some thought and if you're still interested I think I'd like you to fuck me in the ass."

Ben was so startled by her statement he went still. "Are you sure? Because you have to understand it will take quite a while to get you prepared to take the size of my cock. Maybe as long as a month of constantly wearing a butt plug. Are you prepared for all that, Kate?"

Taking Ben's nipple into her mouth, Kate moaned. "Whatever it takes, Ben, I'm willing to do it. I want to be with you in every way possible. I'm not afraid anymore."

Ben bent to her mouth and devoured it, thrusting his tongue into the welcoming depths of her. His cock was already starting to revive itself and he began thrusting toward her still dripping pussy. He broke the kiss and licked his way down her body to her throbbing blood-filled clit. He ran his tongue around the tiny diamond he'd given her for a wedding present. Kate thrust her pelvis toward his hungry mouth.

"Fuck me. Fuck me with that tongue." Kate squirmed and thrust until she came. Ben's tongue eagerly lapped up her cream.

Ben continued his assault on her pussy as he gathered juices from her dripping cunt and ran his finger back toward her puckered entrance. He flicked his tongue against her clit again and sucked it into his mouth, milking it with his tongue and teeth. He pushed one finger into her back entrance. When she didn't tense up on him he pushed in farther. He started pumping his finger in and out of her hole as he sucked her clit. At her scream of pleasure he lifted his head and looked into her eyes. "Mine. You're mine, Wildflower."

She came again, shouting his name. Before she could come down from her orgasm he crawled up her body and spread her legs back onto her chest. He plunged his hungry cock into her weeping channel. Kate immediately climaxed again.

Ben showed her no mercy and continued to pound into her hard and fast. He seemed to reach depths he never had with another woman. It was like Kate's pussy had formed itself to fit him like a glove. Sweat began pouring down his face as his hips

snapped forward one last time before he seated himself to the hilt and pumped his seed deep into her womb.

Ben collapsed on top of Kate and then thought better of it and rolled them over. Kate was still trembling in his arms after the multiple orgasms she'd just experienced. Ben kissed the top of her head. "Damn, Kate, we're so hot together I could almost swear I smell smoke."

Kate shot up and looked at Ben. She raised her nose to the air and sniffed. "Fuck, Ben, you do smell smoke."

Ben jumped out of bed and pulled a pair of jeans on. He stuck his feet into his boots and went to the door. He put his hand on the door and pulled it back quickly. He was cursing himself for making his bedroom soundproof. They'd been so wrapped up in each other they hadn't even noticed the faint smell of smoke, but from the heat emanating from the bedroom door Ben would guess the whole first level of the house was on fire.

He turned back to Kate and grabbed some sweats and a t-shirt from his dresser. He brought them over to the bed. "Quick put these on, darlin'. We'll have to go out the window." He snatched up his cell phone and Kate's wedding dress and headed for the window.

He opened it and climbed through, reaching back in to lift Kate out. He handed her the wedding dress and pulled her out of the burning house. Ben called 9-1-1 and then put a call in to the Triple Spur.

"Who dat be so late calling?"

"Remy, it's Ben. Wake everyone up and get over here. Our house is on fire. Tell Cree I've already called 9-1-1."

Ben hung up the cell phone and shoved it into his pocket. He picked Kate up and carried her to the front of the house. He whistled for Charlie. Relief flooded him as Charlie came running around the side of the burning house. It was just as he suspected, the entire first floor was in flames, rapidly spreading to the second floor. He kissed the top of Kate's head. "We can't save the house, Wildflower, but with your help we can try to save the coop and the barn."

Kate nodded and he put her down. "Be careful with your feet, I forgot your shoes. Go around to the barn and bring me the hose and turn it on. I'll get the coop soaked down first. The chickens I think should be okay in the coop. I just want to make sure a spark doesn't ignite the roof of it." While Kate ran to get the hose Ben managed to clear everything flammable between the house and the chicken coop and barn. He was carrying a load of last year's firewood away from the house when Kate came running back, stretching the hose behind her.

"That's good, darlin', now run into the barn and put the horses into the pasture and bring back some gunny sacks." While Kate was still trying to get the horses out of the



barn with Charlie by her side, two SUVs drove up and the gang piled out and ran to Ben's side.

Nicco took the hose from Ben and continued to spray down the chicken coop. "Get the others lined out on what you need. I can handle this."

Ben nodded and slapped him on the back. "Thanks. When you get it nice and wet, wet it again. Kate's chickens are still in there. They are more important to me than saving the barn if it comes to that."

Ben strode to the rest of the gang. "I think the best thing to do would be to pull everything out of the barn of value. It's one thing to lose the structure but the contents hold Kate's heritage. Some of those tools and saddles have been in her family for generations. Once we get everything out of the barn we can wet down gunny sacks and try to keep the errant sparks at bay. The fire department should be on its way."

The group worked as the team they were and cleared the barn in nothing flat. They piled everything on the far side of the ranch yard away from any of the wooden structures. The fire trucks came roaring down the ranch road and pulled up in front of the house.

The fire captain got out and started giving orders to his men. After the firemen went about their various assigned jobs the captain came over to an exhausted Ben. "There's no way we can save the house but at least we should be able to keep the fire from spreading to the other buildings."

Ben thanked him and crossed his fingers that the captain was right. He found Kate with a wet gunny sack slapping at flying sparks before they could land on the chicken coop. He pulled her away from the chicken coop and took her over to Remy's rented SUV. He opened the door and lifted her onto the front passenger seat away from the fire. "Darlin', if you could stop this fire I'd let you but the fire department's here now. Let them do their job. The best thing for you to do right now is to go to the Triple Spur. I'll feel better knowing you're safe. Besides, I bet Jenny could use the company."

Kate put her head to her chest and nodded. Ben lifted her chin with his finger. "I know how you feel, Kate, it was my home too but at least you and I and Charlie are safe."

Kate looked into his eyes. "For how long, Ben? How far is Clint going to go to drive me out of Junctionville? He's already tried to kill Charlie. Are you next? Am I next? When will it end, Ben?" Kate began to sob and held on to Ben.

He wrapped his arms around her and kissed her tear streaked face. He looked into her eyes and nodded. "Tonight, Kate. It ends tonight." He kissed her once more and called Cotton over. "Cotton, I've got something I need you to take care of. Can you drive Kate over to the Triple Spur for me?"

Cotton nodded and ran to the driver's side of the SUV. "Sure thing, Ben. She'll be there when you get done takin' care of your business."

Ben nodded and brushed his fingers down Kate's cheek. "I'll be there as soon as I can, Wildflower." Cotton drove off and Ben went to find Cree. He found him talking to the fire captain. "Can I have a private word with you, Cree?"

Cree nodded and moved to the far side of the driveway. "I think I already know what you're going to say but let me say this. The fire captain thinks the burning pattern of the house looks suspiciously like arson. He thinks some kind of accelerant was used, gas or possibly kerosene. My chief suspect is Clint Adams and as the sheriff it's my duty to hunt him down and arrest him on suspicion of arson."

Ben began rubbing his hands together. "Can I help you hunt the little fucker down?"

Cree shook his head and then looked at Ben for a while and nodded. "Okay but you can't ride in the sheriff's car with me. I'll get the rest of the team to help too. You can ride with some of them." At Ben's nod Cree went to round up the rest of the guys. The fire department had the house fire under control so he thought it was safe for them to leave. Cree already informed the fire captain of his plan to arrest his chief suspect, so they were all free to leave and help in the search for Clint.

As the convoy spread out, one car going to Clint's home and two cars going to Bruce's home, Cree got a call from the dispatcher. "Sheriff Sommers, the hospital in Santa Fe called and they have Clint Adams in the emergency room there. It seems he's got second and third degree burns on his hands."

Cree smiled and picked up his mic. "Ten-four on that dispatch. Tell the hospital I'm on the way. Ask them to take skin samples to try to determine if there are any trace amounts of accelerant on his hands."

"Ten-four, sheriff. Dispatch out."

Cree picked up his cell phone and called Jake who was on his way to Clint's house and then he called Ben. "Ben, I'm turning around and heading for Santa Fe. The emergency room called the sheriff's department. It seems they have the little fucker in the ER with second and third degree burns on his hands. This could be our big break. I asked that the ER doctors to take skin samples looking for an accelerant. If we can match the accelerant on his hands or clothing to the accelerant used at your house we probably have enough for a conviction. Mr. Adams will most likely be charged with arson, stalking and attempted murder to say nothing of the blackmail scheme against Judge Hathaway. Why don't you head on back to the Triple Spur and share the news with your new bride."

Ben hung up and whooped with joy and hit the back of the seat so hard poor Mac was almost pushed into the windshield. "Oh sorry, Mac, I got a little excited." He proceeded to tell Mac and Nicco about Cree's information. "Take me to the Triple Spur. I've got a wife to comfort."

## Chapter Twelve

Tuesday morning dawned with an impressive display from Mother Nature. Thunder boomed and lightning lit up the sky. Kate sat at the breakfast table surrounded by the entire "Team". Gabe, Cotton and their friend Boone had stayed on, as did Remy, for her hearing with the judge this morning. Clint had been arrested at the hospital in Santa Fe by Cree on Sunday night but not jailed until Monday afternoon. It seemed his burns were pretty serious. *Good*, thought Kate. *Let him pay for his own crimes a little. Lord knows I've paid enough.*

Cree put down his coffee and looked over at Kate. "Um...Ben suggested I talk to you about designing you a new home. Does that sound like something you'd be interested in?"

Kate's spirits lifted for the first time since the fire. "Really? You'd design a house for us?" She looked over at Ben. "Can I tell you everything I've ever wanted in a house and you can see if it will all fit in one home?" At Cree's nod she jumped up from her chair and went and wrapped her arms around his neck. Kate kissed him on the cheek, noticing as she did so that she was being growled at by both Jake and Ben. She shrugged her shoulders and sat back down. "Sorry, guys, I didn't mean to make anyone jealous. I'm just excited."

They started eating breakfast with jokes and insults being shared across the long country farm table. Kate noticed that Ben was picking at his food instead of eating. She put her hand on his thigh. "What's wrong, Ben?" she whispered in his ear so no one else could hear.

Ben said nothing but he did reposition her hand to rub on his semi-hard cock. After a few strokes it became a full-blown hard-on. She turned his face to hers and asked the question again.

Ben spread his legs a little farther and shrugged. "I'm just not hungry that's all."

Everyone at the table stopped what they were doing and looked toward the end of the table at Ben. Jake's mouth opened and then snapped back shut. He looked at Cree and raised his eyebrow.

Cree cleared his throat. "The hearing will go fine today, Ben. Even though it's only for the permanent protection order the judge will allow Kate to present documentation to support her case. That documentation being the copy of the will and the report from the fire captain I received yesterday indicating arson was the cause of the fire that destroyed your home. We can't link the little fucker yet because that will have to wait until he comes up for trial but Judge Hathaway and anyone else in the room will be able to see the bandages protecting the burns on the little fucker's hands."

Ben squirmed in his seat. His erection had deflated at the thought of Kate being in the same room as Clint. He was relieved at least that the team would be there to surround her. "I'm just not hungry. Get over it." Ben got up from the table and walked toward the kitchen door. "I'm going to wait out on the porch. Come out when you're finished eating." He walked out, letting the screen door slam in his wake.

Kate closed her eyes. "He'll be all right once this is over." She looked at his friends. "At least I pray he'll be all right. I don't know how long he can last without food." She smiled, trying to lighten the mood. She pushed her chair back and followed Ben out the door.

She found him sitting on the porch swing scratching Charlie behind the ears. Blue slept in his customary spot. She approached the swing and sat beside Ben. She reached out and took the hand that wasn't scratching Charlie. Kate didn't say anything she just waited. Finally Ben squeezed her hand and lifted her onto his lap.

Ben buried his face in Kate's hair and inhaled deeply. "I'm so sorry you have to face him today, Wildflower. I wish I could do it and keep you safely locked away until all of this is over."

Kate felt wetness and looked down. A tear had landed on her arm. She hugged Ben closer. "You can't keep me from all the ugliness in this world, Ben Thomas. But you can stand beside me through and through. You can share your strength and your love with me when I need it most. That's all I'll ever ask of you. Just help hold me up when I start to falter and I'll do the same for you."

Ben nodded and nonchalantly wiped his eyes. "I love you, darlin'. I still haven't figured out how I got so lucky but I'm not about to look a gift horse in the mouth." He kissed her, putting all the love he felt into it.

The rest of the gang came out onto the porch and Cree cleared his throat. "Um...we'd better get going if we're going to get there on time."

Ben nodded and set Kate back on her feet. They took the minivan and Remy's SUV. Ben and Kate rode in the backseat with Nicco. Remy and Mac rode up front. The five of them were fairly quiet for the entire ride into town.

When they pulled up in front of the courthouse and got out of the SUV Remy looked at Ben and pulled Kate into his arms. "We gonna be right behind ya, *cherie*. Give dat little fucker what he got comin'."

Remy stepped back and Nicco and Mac both took one of her hands. Nicco patted her hand. "It'll be fine. He's not getting out now."

Kate let go of Mac's hand and wrapped her arms around Nicco's waist. "Thank you for everything. You've become more than just a protector to me. You've become a very dear friend. I just wish you didn't have to go back to New York."

Nicco got a surprised look on his face and hugged her back. He kissed the top of her head. "I've never had a sister but if I did I'd want her to be just like you, spitfire."

At Ben's hand on her shoulder she released Nicco and stepped back. Kate squared her shoulders and thrust her chin in the air. She turned to Ben and nodded. "I'm ready. Let's go take care of the little fucker."

They entered the courtroom as a group. Kate sat at the table in front of the spectator seating. Ben came and sat behind her, close enough for him to put a reassuring hand on her shoulder. Kate spread the documents out on the table in front of her. Her stomach was churning so badly she thought she might throw up.

Judge Hathaway entered the courtroom and gave instructions on how the hearing would proceed. "I'll ask them to bring in Clint Adams in a few moments and then I'll ask you, Mrs. Thomas, if you have anything to present to the court. I'll look at any and all documentation you have to support your case for a permanent protection order. This should include a verbal recounting of any past events that may pertain to the defendant. Then I will ask Mr. Adams if he has anything to say or any documentation to support his innocence. Do you understand, Mrs. Thomas?"

Still standing, Kate nodded to the judge. "Yes, Your Honor. I understand."

Next Judge Hathaway sent for Clint Adams to be ushered into the courtroom. Kate held her breath as a deputy from the Sheriff's Department led a handcuffed Clint Adams into the room. The deputy sat Clint in a chair behind the table across the aisle from her. His handcuffs were removed but the deputy stayed next to him.

The judge banged his gavel and spoke. "I would first like to hear from Mrs. Kate Thomas. After you testify against the defendant Clint Adams, I will ask you to present any documentation you have against him. Is that clear to you, Mrs. Thomas?"

The judge looked toward the bailiff. "You may now be sworn in. Be advised that as long as you are in this courtroom you are to tell the truth."

Kate nodded and was sworn in, then rose and took the seat next to the judge. She recounted in detail the events of seven years ago, stopping several times to compose herself. Kate then proceeded to tell the judge about the occurrences on her ranch in the past year including being struck and threatened the night of the dance. She ended her testimony with the fire that destroyed her house.

When she was finished the judge asked for any documentation she would like to present to the court. Kate walked back toward the table, noticing the steely looks of hatred aimed Clint's way from the team. She picked up the sheets of paper and walked back to the bench.

Kate held up the first document. "This is a report from the emergency room the night of my eighteenth birthday seven years ago." She held up the second document to the judge. "This is an official report from Fire Captain Randolph stating the cause of the fire that burned down my home was arson." Kate swallowed and looked at Ben. Ben nodded, sending her strength. "This, Your Honor, is a copy of Bruce Adams' will. It states that his only living heir Clint Adams is to inherit his entire estate and a presidency position at the bank." At a confused look from the judge she continued. "If you'll please notice, Your Honor, there's a stipulation in the will that must be met

before Clint Adams can inherit. That stipulation is that I, Kate Crawford, be run out of Junctionville and off the Crawford Ranch before Clint Adams can inherit a penny. I believe..."

Kate didn't get any further. Clint Adams exploded out of his seat like a wild man. "You fucking bitch. Isn't it enough you humiliated me in front of my father? Now you're going to do it in front of the town? I should have killed you when I had the chance." He pushed the deputy off him, grabbing his gun in the process.

He turned and fired at Kate before Ben could get to him. Ben saw Kate fall as his fist plowed into the little fucker's face. Clint went down and Cree grabbed the gun out of his hand. Ben turned and rushed to Kate. She was sitting up on the floor, holding her arm in a daze.

Ben bent and scooped her up off the floor and into his arms. He looked over and saw Clint Adams still passed out cold surrounded by seven angry-looking men as well as the stunned deputy. "Are you okay, Wildflower?" He turned toward the gathering crowd. "Did someone call for an ambulance?"

Kate put her head down against his chest. "I'm okay, Ben. The bullet just grazed my arm, that's all."

"That's all?" Ben yelled. He looked back toward Clint and then to the judge. "Can I take her out of here please?"

"Yes of course you can. The protection order is granted," the judge decreed so it would be entered into the books.

Ben carried Kate out of the courtroom. "I don't think we'll have to worry about Clint for a long time. I imagine he'll get a nice cell with a nice roommate named Bubba."

## **Chapter Thirteen**

*One year later*

Ben held his wife's hand in front of their new home. The past year had been a crazy one for the two of them. Kate became pregnant shortly after their marriage and now they had a beautiful little girl named Lilly who had curly blonde hair like her mother. The trials of Clint Adams had kept them both busy as well. He'd been tried separately for the arson and attempted murder stemming from it and the attempted murder at the courthouse. He would not be getting out of jail. Also his father's will had been declared invalid and the entire Adams estate had been awarded to the various charities also listed in the will.

Ben held Kate closer and kissed the top of her head. "Cree did a beautiful job, didn't he?" They had agreed on a Spanish-style hacienda. They even had the old barn torn down and rebuilt in keeping with the Spanish theme of the rest of the ranch. The buttery yellow stucco home with a red tiled roof was a masterpiece. Kate insisted on an open courtyard in the center of the house. The rest of the house opened onto the courtyard with French doors in almost every room. Kate still had plans in the works to add a pool and hot tub area in the back of the house where the large patio already was. She didn't want the pool in the courtyard with children running around. Ben looked down at his wife. She was the best mother in the world. He knew she would be after seeing her help Jenny take care of the black-haired twins Cash and Carson.

Kate leaned her head against Ben's arm. "The house is absolutely beautiful, Ben. I feel like all my dreams have come true in the past year. I'll be glad to move in to our new home tomorrow but I'm going to miss the Triple Spur." She laughed and looked up at Ben. "Although I won't miss having to shield my eyes every time I walk into the kitchen. Who knew that Cree, Jake and Jenny could consider the kitchen an extension of the bedroom? I've seen enough of both of those men's cocks to last a lifetime."

At Ben's raised eyebrows and low throaty growl she ran her hand down the front of his jeans. "There's something I need you to do for me before we move in though. I've got one last demon that I need exorcised."

At Ben's questioning look she pulled him toward the new barn. As she opened the big barn door Ben stopped and looked at her. "Wildflower, what are you doing with that saddle down off the hook?"

Kate ran her fingers over the fine grained leather of the saddle her daddy had given her eight years ago. "I need you to fuck me over this saddle, Ben. I need you to create a new memory on this saddle in our new barn. There are no ghosts in this barn but there's still one riding that saddle."

Ben pulled her to him and started kissing her, thrusting his tongue as deep into her mouth as it could go. "God I love you, Wildflower." He untied the top of her halter and let the straps fall. Her milk-swollen breasts spilled out to fill his hands. He kneaded them as he lowered his mouth around one extended nipple. He suckled Kate's breast as he slowly unzipped her jean shorts and pushed them down.

Kate threw her head back and held on to his head. Ben had taken to wearing a bandana instead of his old cowboy hat. He knew how much the pirate look turned her on. She tore the bandana off his head so she could touch the bronzed skin underneath. When he stuck two fingers deep into her pussy she cried out his name. "Fuck me, Ben!"

Ben released her nipple and wiped the milk from his chin. "I need to prepare your ass first, darlin'." He ran his fingers, slick with her own juice, back toward her hole. He spread the juices around the rim and inserted first one and then two fingers. He bent his head and took her clit into his mouth and sucked hard. When her climax came he spun her around and bent her over the saddle. He quickly dropped his jeans and lined his heavy swollen cock up with her stretched hole. Thankfully for Kate this wasn't the first time he'd taken her here.

His cock slid in fairly smoothly and he began to thrust in and out of her opening. Ben's cock felt surrounded by Kate's heat. She was still so tight here he felt like he could come any second. Kate slammed her ass back against his cock and soared into another climax. The walls of Kate's ass milked his cock like a vise. He managed to slam into her two more times before his seed was pumping into her channel.

Ben collapsed on top of her and bit her shoulder. "Damn, darlin', that was incredible." Kate kissed his hands where they gripped the saddle on either side of her.

"I hereby declare this saddle exorcised." Ben let her stand and took her into his arms. She reached up and kissed him. "I've got one more present for you." Kate pulled him toward the back of the barn. She went over to the large drop cloth and pulled it off. Under the drop cloth was a new ranch sign to hang over the entrance to the ranch.

Ben smiled and kissed her and read the sign. "Ben's Wildflower Ranch. It's perfect, Kate. I hope Lilly grows up to be just like you. A wildflower in a sea of blowing grass."

Kate laughed, "I have a feeling she will. If you can keep those two Sommers boys away from her. They're already fascinated by her."

Ben's eyebrows drew together and then he smiled. "If they grow up to be anything like their fathers I'll be proud to call them sons."



## About the Author

I've been a reading fanatic for years and finally at the age of 40 decided to try my hand at writing. I've always loved romance novels that are just a little bit naughty so naturally my books tend to go just a little further. It's my fantasy world after all.

When I'm not being a mother to a five-year-old and a six-year-old, you can usually find me in my deep leather chair with either a book in my hand or my laptop.

Carol welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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