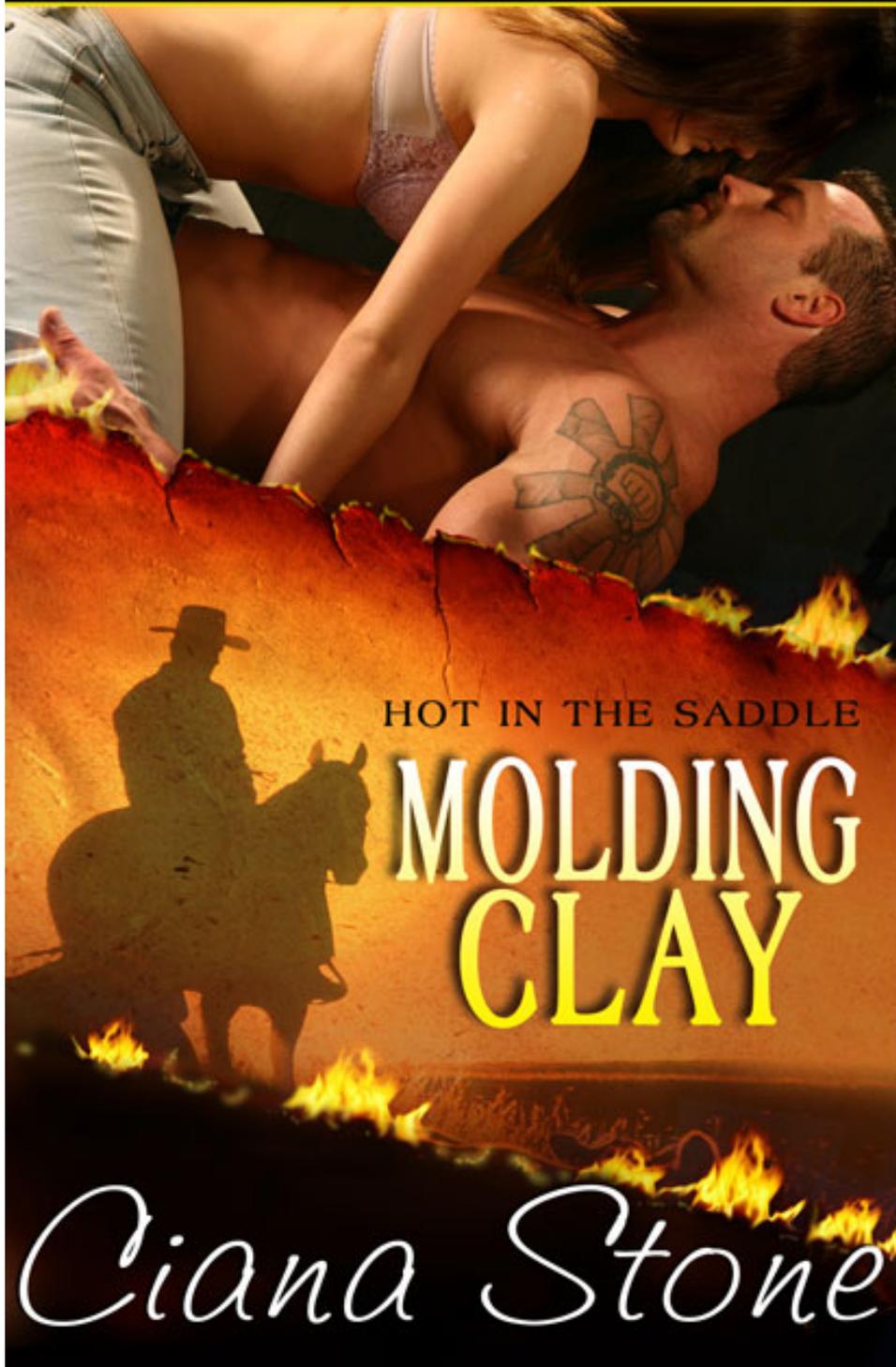


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



HOT IN THE SADDLE

MOLDING  
CLAY

*Ciana Stone*

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorasave.com](http://www.ellorasave.com)

Molding Clay

ISBN # 9781419910722

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

Molding Clay Copyright© 2007 Ciana Stone

Edited by Sue-Ellen Gower.

Cover art by Syneca.

Electronic book Publication: April 2007

This book may not be reproduced or used in whole or in part by any means existing without written permission from the publisher, Ellora's Cave Publishing, Inc.® 1056 Home Avenue, Akron OH 44310-3502.

This book is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, or places, events or locales is purely coincidental. The characters are productions of the authors' imagination and used fictitiously.

### **Content Advisory:**

**S - ENSUOUS**

**E - ROTIC**

**X - TREME**

Ellora's Cave Publishing offers three levels of Romantica™ reading entertainment: S (S-ensuous), E (E-rotic), and X (X-treme).

The following material contains graphic sexual content meant for mature readers. This story has been rated E-rotic.

*S-ensuous* love scenes are explicit and leave nothing to the imagination.

*E-rotic* love scenes are explicit, leave nothing to the imagination, and are high in volume per the overall word count. E-rated titles might contain material that some readers find objectionable – in other words, almost anything goes, sexually. E-rated titles are the most graphic titles we carry in terms of both sexual language and descriptiveness in these works of literature.

*X-treme* titles differ from E-rated titles only in plot premise and storyline execution. Stories designated with the letter X tend to contain difficult or controversial subject matter not for the faint of heart.

*HOT IN THE SADDLE:*

*MOLDING CLAY*

**Ciana Stone**

### *Dedication*

*For the “real” Clay – a cowboy who puts an entirely new spin on the phrase “ride the wild bull”.*

### *Acknowledgements*

*My deepest appreciation to all the people who were so instrumental in the creation of this book:*

*Clay – yeah I used your name as well as your body for this book. Thanks for always being there for me, for making me remember that it's the good moments that are all that are really important.*

*Suz, if I was a man you'd be mine, mine, all mine!!!*

*And Raelene, the absolute best publisher in the world.*

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Dodge: Chrysler Corporation

Levi's: Levi Strauss & Co.

Patron: St. Maarten Spirits Limited

Stetson: John B. Stetson Company

## **Chapter One**

Rusty cursed as the fire truck pulled away, leaving the home she'd lived in for most of her life a wet mess with half of it gutted and the other half covered in wet grime from the smoke. Her luck had turned from bad to worse. Two years ago, she'd gone on a bender and ended up in a cheap motel with Danny Stikeleather, a local high-school quarterback hero whose glory days ended with high school. Six weeks later she realized she was pregnant. Her first thought was to dig out one of her mama's special recipes and cook up a brew to rid herself of the child. But killing wasn't in her, so she'd allowed Danny to talk her into getting married for the sake of the child.

She knew when she married him that his promises to be a better man were probably as valid as a four-dollar bill, but she never expected him to turn into a drunk. Inside of six months, he'd not only lost his job but had lost himself in a bottle and beaten her with a shovel badly enough that she lost the child. While she was in the hospital, he got drunk and ran his truck down the side of a mountain, killing himself and leaving her to discover that he had no life insurance and a mountain of debt.

Danny's family had tried to swoop in and take control, browbeating her since the day Danny died to hook up with Danny's older brother Dennis so the family could look after her and Blackhawk Farm.

That wasn't going to happen. Rusty had never been keen on Danny's family and sure as heck had no intention of hooking up with another one of them. One Stikeleather per lifetime was enough. She knew all they really wanted was to get her married to Dennis so they could sell her land out from under her and take whatever money came from it.

That also was not going to happen. No matter how much they pestered her she wouldn't give in. She'd finally filed a complaint with the sheriff and asked for a restraining warrant to keep them off her land.

That only made things worse. Now the whole family was gunning for her and doing everything they could to make her life miserable.

It hadn't been easy. She'd tried to keep up, to pay off the debt, to keep her head above water, but there was only so much one woman could do. And truth be told, she'd let some things slide in order to hang onto what was more important than a good credit rating or even a roof over her head. Namely, her horses.

Rusty had inherited the land she stood on and ten good stock horses when her mother died ten years ago. Today she still had the land and had increased her herd to thirty-five, but it looked like that would change shortly.

The previous year, a cousin several times removed came to the Carolinas and was introduced to Rusty. Ana Stillwater-Hawks. Ana now raised horses with her husband Chase, whose family owned a big spread, the Circle R, in Arizona. Thanks to Ana, the Circle R had offered to go into partnership with Rusty. In exchange for paying up all of the outstanding debts, they would own half of the stock, and she'd work for them as head breeder and trainer. All she had to do was agree to put up with one of the Circle R men riding roughshod over her while she did her job, and the Circle R would foot all the bills. And she would keep her land. The deal did not call for her to share ownership of the land, only the assets. It was a five-year contract that was renewable at the end of the term if both parties agreed.

Rusty was both elated and sad at the prospect. She needed the money to settle all the debt Danny left her with, but having a stranger take up residence on her land and call the shots was a bitter pill to swallow. But she figured she could live with a goat for five years if it got her out of debt.

It would be good to have a steady income and Rusty planned on squirreling away every dime she could. That way at the end of the contract she could decline to continue the relationship and go back to her life on her own.

Ana had promised to visit in the spring. Seeing Ana again would be a treat. Rusty had discovered during their first meeting that they shared much more than common ancestry.

Ana's grandfather was the brother of Rusty's grandmother. Rusty had never heard of Ana. Probably because Rusty's grandmother had left the mountains of North Carolina and moved to the Carpathian Mountains near Hungary with her husband—his father's people had settled there generations ago when they left their homeland in Punjab, part of the displaced nation of the Romani people.

Rusty's mother, Mary Puxon, was born in the Carpathian Mountains and grew up there. At the age of eighteen her parents sent her to the United States so that she could see the land of her mother's birth. While on that trip, Mary met Russell Blackhawk, a native Cherokee man. They married before her trip ended and she moved to Russell's home in North Carolina. They had five happy years. Three months before their daughter was born, Russell died, thrown from a horse he was breaking. Mary was devastated by the death of her husband. She named her daughter after her dead husband and did her best to raise Rusty and give her a good life.

Rusty was grateful for all her mother had taught her and the love she'd given her. Mary was a seventh-generation witch, what popular fiction of the current day liked to refer to as a white-lighter. She'd taught all she knew to Rusty, along with a strong warning never to use the Craft for ill-will or it would be revisited on her three-fold.

Rusty had tried to live by that rule, and not only did she rarely use her power, she kept it a secret. Danny, her husband, had never suspected. Everyone knew that Rusty's mom was a witch but never thought that Rusty had followed in Mary's footsteps. It might have had something to do with the fact that Rusty was always outdoors with the boys, running and riding and getting into as much mischief as any boy around.

Ana had recognized it right away, and Rusty was secretly thrilled to have not only discovered new family but someone who could understand things a non-witch would never comprehend.

Rusty turned and looked at the sad state of her home. No use crying over spilled milk, her mother would have said. Koda, the grey wolf breed who was her familiar and closest friend, wandered over and leaned his head against the side of her hip.

"Yeah, I know, look on the bright side. Only half of it's gone," she said with a rueful smile as she rubbed his broad brow. "Well, daylight's wasting, and those horses aren't gonna feed themselves."

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay was swallowing the last of the cold sweet tea in his glass when his cell phone rang. He looked at the display and grinned as he answered.

"You calling to tell me you're ready to shuck Chase and hook up with a younger, better-looking and much more intelligent brother?"

Ana laughed at the question. "Well hell, Clay, you know I like old broke-in cowboys a sight more than young feisty ones."

Clay laughed as he heard his older brother Chase in the background yelling, "Old broke-in? You get your sweet little butt over here on this couch and I'll show you old."

"Woo hoo!" Ana replied then addressed Clay. "Well, I guess I'm gonna make this short since I'm about to get lucky. I wanted to see how close you are to Rusty's place."

Clay heard Chase laugh and wondered what was so funny about him having driven for the last two days.

"I think I'm gonna find a place to sleep and finish out the drive in the morning."

"But it's only six!" Ana protested. "And Clara told Rusty that you'd be there tonight at the latest."

"So call him up and tell him I'll be there tomorrow."

"Fine," Ana sounded miffed. "But call me the minute you get there."

"Yes, ma'am," Clay replied.

"You promise?"

"Scout's honor."

"Well, that means diddly but I'm holding you to it and if you don't I'll...I'll—"

"Cast a spell and give him a case of jock itch!" Chase yelled in the background.

"Now that's just mean," Clay said with a laugh. "I'll call you. Have a good night, Ana."

"You too. I love you," she said before she hung up.

Clay closed the phone and returned it to the case clipped on his belt. Ana and Chase had been acting awfully peculiar about this deal with the Blackhawk fellow. Even Clay's father Charlie was being close-mouthed about the guy.

Clay still wasn't sure why he'd gotten elected to take on the running of the Blackhawk operation. He was more interested in riding bulls than breeding horses at the moment. This year he figured he'd qualify for the nationals.

But a man had to make a living and since he'd graduated with a master's degree in animal husbandry five years ago, he'd been working to build up a reputation. Today the Circle R boasted the finest stock horses in the country. As far as Clay was concerned they were doing just fine, with no need to take on a small operation like Blackhawk's.

But Charlie was adamant. Actually, Clay was convinced that Charlie was standing firm on it because of Ana and Clara. Apparently this Blackhawk fellow was a distant relative of Ana's she'd discovered last year when she and Chase took a trip to the Carolinas to visit the place where Ana's grandfather had lived.

After they returned, Ana and Clara went to work selling Chase and Charlie on the idea. In the past Charlie wouldn't have let anyone talk him into doing anything he didn't want to do. But now things were different.

After nearly losing Clara to the maniac ex-husband Ana had run away from when Ana first arrived in Arizona six years ago, Charlie had realized how much he loved the

woman. It took him three years to convince her to marry him but she'd finally said yes, and Charlie wasn't about to upset the apple cart by denying her something she obviously wanted so badly.

All Clay could figure was that Ana wanted to help her cousin or whatever Blackhawk was to her. And since Ana and Clara were now thick as thieves, the men of the Circle R didn't stand a chance against them.

So here he was, headed for the Blackhawk place with orders to get it up and running and making money as fast as possible. While Clay might have been a little annoyed to be the one to inherit the job, he was also secretly a little pleased that his father trusted him to oversee things. And he was determined to make it a success.

How he'd get along with Blackhawk was a mystery. All he'd heard about the man was that when it came to training horses there wasn't anyone who could touch him. And apparently he'd trained the last three years' champion barrel racers and their horses. That was something Clay had to admire.

Whether that admiration would lead to congenial working relations was anyone's guess, but that question would be answered soon enough and right now all Clay wanted was to get a shower, stretch his legs and relax. Tomorrow was soon enough to face the mystery of Rusty Blackhawk.

## Chapter Two

Rusty turned to her wolf Koda as she parked her old truck in the graveled parking lot of Bill's Bar, beside a shiny new Dodge Ram double cab. "Somebody hit the lottery?" she asked Koda, who sat on the other side of the seat, his head hanging out of the window.

He yipped a reply and she laughed. If someone had just hit it rich then maybe they'd be feeling generous and buy her a beer. As it stood, she had enough for one beer and a salad. And a steak for Koda. After that she was broke.

A mild wave of panic gripped her. The man from the Circle R had not shown up. If they decided to back out, she was in real trouble. She'd already talked to the folks at the local branch bank about getting a loan and had been politely but firmly turned down.

With a determined jut of her chin, she pushed the anxiety aside. It was all going to work out. She just had to believe that. "Be back in a little while," she said to Koda before getting out of the truck.

A wave of noise, sweat, smoke and grilling meat hit her when she pulled open the door of the bar. She'd no sooner stepped inside when a loud voice erupted from behind the bar. "Well kiss my grits! I ain't seen you in a coon's age, gal. Where the hell you been?"

Rusty grinned and walked over to the bar. The bartender and owner, Wes Nash, came out from behind the bar, wrapped his arms around her and lifted her up in a hug. "You're a welcome sight for sore eyes, darlin'. How you doing, baby?"

"Right now, struggling to breathe," she laughed and hugged him back. "How you doing, Wes? Mary's 'bout due now, isn't she?"

“Two more weeks, according to the doctors,” Wes replied as he put her down and started walking behind the bar. “Course that’s what they said two weeks ago, so what the hell do they know?”

“She’ll come when she’s ready,” Rusty replied and then froze when Wes jerked to a halt with wide eyes.

“She?” he yelled, then grinned, slapped his hands together, gave a whoop and made a shouted announcement to the bar at large. “You hear that, ya’ll? I’m finally gonna get me a little girl!”

Cheers broke out over Wes’s proclamation. “Beer’s on the house, ya’ll!”

“Hey, hold on!” Rusty shouted to be heard over the din of the crowd as a couple of guys made room for her at the bar. “Wes, hey, Wes!”

He was paying no attention. He was too busy at the tap, filling beer glasses and going on over how long he and Mary had wanted to have a little girl. Six boys and they were starting to think they were never going to have that little girl. But now that Rusty had said “she” he was a happy man because he was going to be the daddy of a baby girl.

Rusty shook her head and accepted the mug of beer he offered. She lifted it in a toast and he reached out with both hands, grabbed her long hair on either side of her head and pulled her halfway across the bar to plant a noisy kiss on her mouth.

That brought another round of cheers, hoots and hollers and the energy in the bar cranked up several notches. Rusty laughed and took a long pull from the mug. It was good to be surrounded by such positive energy. Even if she was going to walk out of there poor as a church mouse, this moment was worth it.

From across the bar, the big man at the table alone watched the dark-haired beauty. *Christ on a crutch*. His dick had surged to life the moment she walked into the bar. At best estimate she wasn’t much over five feet tall but was built like something out of a

midnight fantasy. The worn tight jeans she wore had holes at the knees and along the side of the left back pocket, exposing a silver-dollar patch of creamy skin.

The t-shirt stretched across her chest sported faded words that read “redneck gals like it rowdy”. He’d sure like to show her some rowdy redneck sex. Just thinking about it made his balls tingle. Suddenly he was glad he’d decided to hang around a bit after he’d eaten. The night ahead was looking better every moment.

He waited and watched. At the moment the woman was surrounded by people, mostly men, drinking and laughing like she was one of the boys. He recognized the lack of sexual chemistry between her and any of the men. No, she wasn’t about to hook up with any of the fellows at the bar. What he saw happening was friendship. Old, solid and familiar.

Which worked out just fine for him. A few drinks, some good-old-boy charm and he wouldn’t be spending the night alone.

Rusty clapped Jesse Whitestone on the shoulder and wished him well, then finished her beer and turned to look for an empty booth or table. Three beers on an empty stomach had her feeling a little high and she wanted a quiet spot to sit and eat. As her eyes passed over the bar they jerked to an abrupt halt.

Great googly moogly! Her nipples tightened as her eyes latched onto those of the man sitting at a table alone. *Hey baby*, her pussy screamed. What her mother would have called a “long drink of cool water” stared back at her. Intense hazel eyes beneath elegant thick brows set into a face that belonged in a dream. A very sexy, hot, long dream.

Rusty didn’t realize how intently she was staring at the man until she became aware that the only sound she could hear was the rapid beat of her own heart. She snapped to and forced herself to break the electric contact with his eyes.

*Whew! Get a grip*, she told herself. *Remember what happened the last time you got drunk and rowdy.*

That thought alone was enough to snap her back to sobriety. With a quick farewell to Wes and friends at the bar, she hurried outside to her truck. Koda cocked his head curiously as she climbed in, gripped the steering wheel and lowered her forehead down on it. Her body was still humming from her attraction to the stranger in the bar. The unfulfilled sexual side of her nature was screaming for her to turn around and go back in and see what might happen. The rational side of her was trying hard to remind her that the last time she'd allowed herself to act on lust she'd regretted it. Not that she feared getting pregnant again. She'd armed herself with a prescription for a "morning-after pill" just in case she ever found herself needing it. So far, she hadn't had to worry about it because sex had become nothing more than a memory.

"I almost screwed up," she said when she raised her head.

Koda yapped several short barks and she cut her eyes at him as she started the truck. "I said almost. Don't worry, I haven't forgotten. And yes, I do still owe you a steak. We'll stop at the store on the way home."

Wondering if she had just saved herself a mess of trouble or walked out on what could have been one rollicking good time, she pulled out of the parking lot.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rusty was normally up with the roosters but as it turned out, she hadn't fallen asleep until after dawn. She and Koda had stopped at the store on her way home from Bill's Bar. She'd spent her last dollar on beef for Koda and a six-pack for herself.

After polishing off the six-pack and heaving it back up, she'd been unable to sleep. The fellow from the Circle R had not shown up yesterday, not to mention that sleeping in the bunkhouse was not nearly as much fun as she remembered it being in her youth. The floor would be as comfortable as the thin mattresses on the bunk beds. And thoughts of the stranger in the bar had her uncomfortably horny.

She hated she'd had to have her cell phone turned off. If she still had it she'd call Ana and see if the Russell family had changed their minds.

Koda yipped at her and she rolled her eyes. "I am not wishing the deal would fall through." She looked away from his gaze and continued. "Okay, maybe a little, but a deal's a deal and I'll stick to my end of it."

Unable to resist teasing, she added, "You just better hope that fella doesn't show up here with a yapping toy poodle that thinks it should rule the roost."

Koda gave her the canine equivalent of a laugh, showing his impressive teeth. Rusty laughed right along with him. Koda was a bit on the intimidating side to say the least. Having inherited the grey coloring of the wolf bitch that birthed him, and the size of the Rottweiler that sired him, along with nearly colorless blue eyes, he had little trouble commanding respect.

"Okay, day's a-wastin'," Rusty said as she climbed to her feet and snatched up her jeans and boots.

She dressed and went outside. Since the house was unlivable and roped off until the arson investigators finished going through it, the only shower available came in the form of the hose attached to the spigot on the well house. The shower in the bunkhouse had been broken for more than a year. Since she hadn't been able to afford help the last couple of years, there wasn't any reason to fix it.

Rusty fetched her small portable radio, along with soap and shampoo from the barn, and tuned the radio to a country station. Koda whined as she cranked the volume up and sang along as she wet herself down and started to soap up.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay swallowed the last of his take-out coffee as he drove down the long wooded drive that led into the Blackhawk place. He had to admit it was a nice spread. The pastures were green and lush, and towering hardwoods and pines lined the drive. From what he'd seen so far of the area, it wasn't bad at all. If there were bars and women nearby, he'd do just fine.

In the years since he'd graduated, Clay had filled out and toughened up. He'd also gone through some changes. He still loved to party, and riding bulls was right up there near the top of his list of favorite things. Right under sex. But now for the first time in his life he could be content spending an evening sitting under the stars and letting his mind roam.

He and his twin brother Cole had parted company for the first time in their lives upon graduation. Cole took a position with the forestry department of the state of Arizona, and spent most of his time in the national forests. It suited Cole to live a solitary life, but not Clay. He was a social animal. An occasional night of solitude was fine but he had no taste for it on a regular basis.

And thanks to Ana and the way she'd nagged him about being in better shape, the last five years had transformed his long lanky body into rock-hard muscle. He said a silent thanks to Ana every time a filly looked his way and gave him an admiring glance.

Now he understood a little more about his older brother Chase. Chase had been a lady magnet as long as Clay could remember. His Native American coloring, dark eyes and long hair had swooned half the state of Arizona before Chase met Ana Stillwater. And until that point Chase had been content to be a man with a steady stream of women, none of whom meant more than a few weeks of good times and hot sex.

That's where Clay found himself now. Not that he'd been a priest in his college days. He'd roped his fair share of fillies then, but the years since had been particularly favorable.

Just thinking about the last luscious lady he'd shared his bed with brought a grin to his face. Yep, he'd follow in brother Chase's footsteps. Play the field, enjoy life and all the bounty it had to offer and wait until the right woman came along. Which he was not in any hurry for.

What he was in a hurry for was to take a ride back to that bar and see if the dark-haired beauty showed up again. He'd developed a real itch for her that not even the

night with a luscious redhead could cure. Sure as shit, he was going to find that woman and bed her.

A sudden sharp curve in the drive had him slowing. When he rounded the curve, he spotted the barn. He didn't see anyone around so he parked and got out of his truck to go in search of Blackhawk.

He had no more turned down the side of the barn when an unexpected treat met his eyes. Standing with a garden hose held above her head, the very shapely, very naked dark-haired woman from the bar stood near the water trough, singing along with a radio as she combed her fingers through her hair.

Clay stopped and admired the view. Whoever she was, she had just upped the idea of being on the Blackhawk spread several notches. Her hair was dark and thick, nearly to her waist. Her breasts were high and full, her stomach flat and her ass a work of art.

Then Clay saw the animal. Alert and definitely not happy due to the snarl on its face and the laid-back ears. Until now, his brother Chase had the biggest dog Clay had ever seen, but this big fella made Chase's dog Cody look like a lightweight. The animal had to weigh in at over a hundred pounds. His broad head was even with the woman's rib cage.

Clearly this dog or wolf, or whatever breed it was, wasn't about to let him get any closer to the woman, so Clay did the smart thing. He stopped and stood still. He sure didn't find it a hardship to stand there and watch her. Well, not a hardship in the visual sense. There was definitely some hard action taking place south of his belt.

Rusty was holding the hose above her head, raking through her long hair with her free hand, when Koda bumped up against her and growled loud enough to be heard over the blare of the music.

Fighting the hair out of her face and blinking against the water in her eyes, Rusty turned to see what had Koda upset.

For the space of a breath, she forgot she was standing there buck-naked. A man stood beside the barn, watching her. And not just any man, but the man who'd haunted her sleep last night and had her trying several times to satisfy her own itch. Hair the same shining color as her black chestnut horse Beau, well over six feet with almond-shaped hazel eyes and a body that was built for pleasure, long and lean with muscles in all the right places and not an ounce of fat to be seen. Not to mention an impressive bulge along his right thigh, clearly demonstrating that not only was he a boxer man but he had a nice package in those faded Levi's.

Rusty felt her blood rise just looking at him. Her nipples, hard from the cold water, puckered more and her clit gave a little throb. That's when she remembered. She was naked as the day she was born.

No sooner had the thought registered than the man grinned. Despite the situation, Rusty wasn't about to show weakness. That just went against the grain. Her hands fisted and went to her hips.

"Who are you and what are you doing on my land?" she yelled.

"Name's Clay Russell, ma'am," Clay shouted to be heard over the music. "I'm here to see Rusty Blackhawk."

At that moment Rusty wished the earth would open up and swallow her. Of all the rotten luck. She'd wanted to impress the Russell man when he arrived, with her professionalism and savvy. To start out on equal footing with the man.

That clearly wasn't going to happen. Sucking in a deep breath, she forced herself to walk calmly over to the towel that was draped on the water trough.

She wrapped the towel around her body before she dared to look at the man again. When she did, she saw him quickly hide the smile on his face. She couldn't help but see the hilarity of the situation. If it had happened to anyone else she'd have had a belly laugh out of it.

And hell's bells, the way Clay Russell looked, he'd have been bound to see his share of naked women. A man like him sure as heck hadn't been celibate his whole life.

With her sense of humor restored, Rusty crossed the distance between them with Koda at her side. "Well, I guess you're in the right place, Mr. Russell."

Up close the woman looked even better. Her eyes were long-lashed and the most uncommon shade of blue. No, violet, he realized. Surely that color couldn't be real. She had to be wearing colored contacts. But fake or real, those eyes looking up at him were sure to be featured in another erotic dream in the near future. Right along with the rest of her tantalizing body.

"Mr. Russell?"

Clay blinked to attention. "Blackhawk around?"

"Absolutely," Rusty replied.

"You think I could see him, ma'am?"

"I think you've already seen about as much as there is to see, Mr. Russell," she said before extending her hand to Clay. "Rusty Blackhawk."

Clay's eyes bugged and his mouth dropped open, eliciting a grin from Rusty.

"You? You're..." he stammered then burst out in a laugh. "Well I'll be damned. Sorry, ma'am. It's just that I was expecting you to be a man."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Mr. Russell."

"Didn't say I was disappointed," Clay replied. "Just surprised." The look he gave her made her blood run hot, along with some other parts of her anatomy.

"That makes two of us, Mr. Russell," she said with a hint of humor.

Clay gave her a sexy smile. "What say we start this party over, Miz Blackhawk?" He stuck out his hand. "Clay Russell, ma'am, of the Circle R. I understand you and I are gonna be bunking together."

Koda gave a menacing growl at the comment but Rusty laughed at the sly grin and mischievous twinkle in Clay's eyes. Clearly life was going to be drastically different with Clay Russell around.

## Chapter Three

Clay peeled off his shirt and mopped his face with it. Rusty Blackhawk had nearly worked him to death and it was still a good hour until dusk. They'd been out repairing fences all day, hauling new posts from the barn and stringing wire.

She might have been a small woman, just a tad over five feet by his estimate, but she was a damn workhorse. He cut a look over at her, stringing wire. In faded, sweat-stained jeans, a wife-beater t-shirt that had enough sweat on it to encourage a man's eyes to her nipples, work gloves and an old hat, she was about the sexiest thing he'd ever laid eyes on.

Which led him back to thinking about how his family had set him up with Rusty Blackhawk. Did they all think it would just be a good laugh to put one over on him, or was there more to it? He planned on finding out when he called Ana.

He'd purposely not called her after he discovered Rusty Blackhawk was a woman. And he'd not answered his cell phone either, even though she'd called a dozen times every day for the last five days. He'd call when he was good and ready, even though he still wasn't sure whether to raise hell or thank her.

Rusty walked over and picked up the gallon jug of water sitting near Clay and turned it up for a long drink. Water spilled out over her face, running clear down to that white t-shirt. Even Clay's eyes felt hot watching her. How the hell could a woman look so damn sexy guzzling water? And make no mistake, she was guzzling. Nothing ladylike about it at all.

She lowered the jug and grinned at him. "Want some?"

Clay's dick actually jumped in his pants. This woman was clear as glass and not a damn bit ashamed of it. She'd phrased the question in that low sultry voice on purpose,

knowing his eyes were fixed on those hard nipples beneath that wet t-shirt, and that he'd been watching her tight ass all afternoon in those snug jeans.

"You bet," he replied.

Koda, who was lying in the shade cast by the truck, gave a warning growl. Clay cut his eyes over to the dog then back at Rusty. "You think that fella's gonna warm up to me any time soon?"

Rusty shrugged. "Depends."

"On?"

"On whether he decides he can trust you," she said as she walked over with the jug in her hand. "It's hot," she said as she handed it to him.

"Can't get too hot for me," he replied and took the jug to turn it up to his lips.

Rusty watched him drink, his head tilted back and the water pouring into his open mouth, little rivulets running over his full bottom lip to the short goatee on his chin and then spilling onto his neck and on down the center of his muscular chest.

She was so caught up in watching the trail of water as it made its way down his rippled abdomen to the waistband of his jeans that she jerked her eyes up to his in embarrassment when he spoke.

"Got any more?"

"Huh?"

He smiled at her, that slow, sexy smile that made a flutter start in her belly. "Water," he said, holding out the empty jug. "Got any more in the truck?"

"Oh! Yeah, I think there's another gallon."

Clay's smile widened into a grin as he walked past her to the truck and Rusty blew out her breath. Working with Clay Russell was enough to tempt a nun. She hadn't had sex since Danny died, and the sex she'd had with him couldn't be described as mind-blowing. How the heck she was going to work with Clay day in and day out was

beyond her. Either she was going to have to invest in a dildo or she was going to end up raping the man.

Which sounded pretty good at the moment and made delicious thoughts dance in her mind. Wasn't there some kind of spell in her mama's old book of shadows on bewitching someone and them not remembering what happened during the time the charm was in effect?

Clay's voice cut into her thoughts. "You look like a cat eyeballing a bowl of cream."

Rusty blushed and hurried over to the next rotten post to be replaced. "Just dreaming of a shower and a beer, cowboy," she said as she shoved at the post.

"A woman after my own heart," he commented and hefted the last post from the bed of the truck. "Tell you what. We get this finished in the next half hour and the beer's on me. Anywhere around these parts for beer, good food and a little music?"

Rusty grinned and rocked the rotten post harder to loosen it. "I think I might know just the place."

\* \* \* \* \*

Twilight was falling when Rusty and Clay finished feeding the stock. "Nice work, Mr. Russell," Rusty said as she walked to the bunkhouse. "Wasn't expecting you to do any hands-on work."

"You figured on me being of the dime-store cowboy variety?" Clay asked as he followed her inside. "Just because I've been busy with paperwork the last few days doesn't mean I don't intend to pull my weight."

Koda, who trailed one step behind Rusty, gave a couple of short yips that made Rusty laugh.

"Okay, this has been going on long enough," Clay complained. "What's the deal with you and Koda? You speak wolf?"

Rusty cut her eyes at him suspiciously. "What's that supposed to mean?"

Clay didn't quite know how to explain it. Before Ana entered their lives, he'd have sworn that communication between people and animals was impossible. But Ana changed his thinking on that. Not only did she communicate with virtually every animal she encountered, but she had made it possible for Chase to communicate with his dog Cody.

"Let's just say that living around Ana has altered the way I view communication between people and animals. And the way I think about...uh, a lot of things."

Rusty threw back her head and laughed at the same time Koda howled. "Good Lord and quarter I bet she has," Rusty said.

"So are you...I mean...are you like Ana?" Clay asked.

Rusty looked from him to Koda. Their eyes locked for a long moment. When Rusty turned her eyes back to Clay, he took a step back, blinked and then blinked again. No, there was nothing wrong with his vision, but there was definitely something going on with Rusty's eyes.

The normal violet color was now swirled with what he could only describe as light. "More than you want to know, Mr. Russell."

For several seconds they stood perfectly still, eyes locked. Clay felt the energy between them as something tangible, something that made his skin tingle and his blood sing in his veins. "Don't be too sure."

Rusty smiled and the lights in her eyes faded. She turned away and picked up a couple of towels stacked on an old wooden table, and put them in a small wicker basket holding soap and shampoo. "You did good work today, Mr. Russell. I appreciate it."

Clay wouldn't admit that it had been a long time since he'd worked quite so hard. There was a lot of work to do on the Circle R but repairing fences and hauling posts was work usually left to the hired hands. "I've done my share of hard labor."

Rusty tossed her battered hat aside, loosened the band holding back her hair and kicked off her boots. "But not recently," she said, hiding a grin as she bent to peel off her dirty socks.

Koda let loose with a series of yips and yaps that elicited a laugh from Rusty.

Clay was so caught up in looking down her t-shirt as she bent over that he completely missed the jibe, but the exchange between her and the dog interrupted his visual appreciation. "What was that about?"

"Nothing," she said as she straightened and picked up the basket. "Here," she offered it to him. "Seeing as how you're the boss, it's only fair that you get first dibs at the shower."

Clay heaved a sigh. Taking a shower under the cold water from the hose at the well house was getting old. When the hell were those guys going to show up and repair everything? Not only was the shower situation getting old but sleeping in a bunk above Rusty every night, listening to the sounds of her breathing, and thinking about those damn shorts and the man's tank top she wore to bed was enough to have him ready to split at the seams.

Tired and dirty as he was, with the night air starting to fall, the idea of cold well water wasn't a big appeal. "Ladies first."

Rusty shrugged. "Have it your way."

She walked past him and out. For a minute Clay just stood there looking after her. First thing in the morning he was making a call to Clara and have her light a fire under the delivery people to get the furniture for the bunkhouse and ranch office here and set up, along with a computer. She was also going to have to find a way to pull some strings and get a construction crew in to get started pronto on fixing up the house. No way he and Rusty could live in this bunkhouse much longer. It had been five days and already he felt like his balls were going to spontaneously combust.

Rusty was easy on the eyes and hell on the libido. Just watching her work was enough to have him yearning to throw her on the ground and ride her like a stallion.

The sound of Rusty singing had him turning to walk to the door. He stopped, wanting to look out and see her standing naked under the water, but knowing it was

not the gentlemanly thing to do. Lust battled with manners. In the end manners won. Reluctantly.

He wandered over and sat down on an old sagging-bottom chair. This arrangement was going to be more of a challenge than he'd imagined. He could run a breeding farm without a problem, but Rusty Blackhawk was another matter. Try as he might he couldn't get the images of her naked under that cold water out of his mind.

He thought about calling Ana. She had to have known that Rusty wasn't normal, that she was...well, that she was a witch. But Rusty hadn't come right out and admitted to that so maybe he was wrong.

Or maybe the damn woman had him so worked up with wanting that he just wasn't thinking straight. And that brought him to a question he had no answer for. Did he follow the demands of the screaming male inside and do whatever it took to bed this woman, or did he heed good sense and keep his hands off her so they could work together?

He wished he knew the answer to that. Unbidden images rose to the forefront of his mind again, of Rusty's firm body glistening with water, those perky nipples tight against the cold and the dark curls crowning her pussy sparkling with beads of water like stars.

Clay groaned and reached down to adjust his cock more comfortably in his pants. Right now, the idea of a cold shower was starting to have an appeal.

## Chapter Four

Rusty shivered in the cold water as she rinsed off the soap and shampoo but not even the cold water could quench the fire that burned inside her. The heat between Clay and her had ignited at first look and was growing hotter by the moment, and she was starting to wonder if the situation was going to end up being a disaster.

She'd never had a problem with men. She lived and worked in a man's world, and knew how to either become one of the boys, or to flirt and carry on without any sincerity in the flirtations. But with Clay it was different. There was an underlying current in the flirtation, something strong and unfamiliar. It excited her and also gave her pause. Anything that potent had to carry certain dangers. But then it was also the danger that attracted her. Clay was the first man she'd ever met that she wanted to throw on the ground and ride until the stars set, then hold her until the day was done and they could start again.

Which unsettled the hell out of her. Rusty was not a woman to give herself easily or quickly and the idea that she wanted Clay Russell to strip her, toss her in the hay and fuck her senseless rattled her in a way she was completely unprepared for.

Koda's thoughts intruded and she turned to face him. "I know emotion is as natural as sex," she argued quietly. "But you know me, Koda. I can't be saddled down with some man who wants too much and gives too little. Casual sex is easier. Both people get what they want and go their separate ways. Happily ever after isn't meant for everyone. Still, something tells me this one is different and maybe I need to tread carefully."

She laughed at his reply. "Spoken like a true male," she commented.

But maybe Koda was right. Maybe the only way to get it out of her system was to just let it happen. If it ended up that there was nothing but lust between them then she

could chalk it up to bad judgment and not make the same mistake twice. And then at least her itch would be satisfied and she could stop wondering.

Maybe. Her inner voice told her she was fooling herself if she believed that. A spark had ignited inside her the first time she looked at Clay Russell, and it was a spark that went way beyond mere sexual attraction. If she were honest with herself, she'd have to admit that.

And Rusty Blackhawk prided herself on her ability to be honest with herself, even when it hurt. The truth was, when she looked at Clay Russell she saw what was likely to be the man she wanted to walk time with.

"How melodramatic, made-for-television, sappy romance is that?" she asked Koda.

His reply brought her sense of humor bubbling to the surface. She finished rinsing, wrapped a towel around her body, gathered up her dirty clothes and headed for the bunkhouse.

Clay was sitting in one of the old wing chairs, leaning back with his head propped against the rough planking of the wall with his eyes closed. "Your turn," Rusty announced as she entered.

Clay's eyes opened and looked directly at her. For the first time in her entire life she was rendered immobile and mute. His eyes held a force that was as old as mankind and as powerful as a force of nature. It was the might of the male in all its purity and it was stronger than anything she'd ever felt. What she saw in those hazel depths called to her on a level that was primal and commanding. It touched the primitive female within.

It took every ounce of willpower Rusty possessed not to throw herself at him, she wanted him so badly at that moment. Had Koda not been standing beside her, lending her his strength, she might have succumbed.

Clay rose in one fluid motion and moved toward her, his eyes never leaving hers. When he was inches from her he stopped, forcing her to tilt her head back to maintain eye contact. For a breathless moment neither spoke or moved. A slow smile took shape on Clay's face.

“No peeking,” he said in a low tease then moved past her and out the door.

Rusty flushed at the image that jumped into her mind. Clay naked. Water cascading down his tight body. *Get a grip!* she mentally chastised herself. *He’s just another man, no different than any other. You’ve just been without a man too long, that’s all.*

Koda’s voice spoke up in her mind. *Dishonesty brings dishonor even when one lies to oneself.*

Rusty cut him a sharp look. “Lucky me. Of all the familiars I could have had, I get the sage of the lupine world.” She immediately felt bad because she knew he was right. She was being dishonest. As much as she would like to deny it, Clay Russell was far from just another man. At least to her. The problem was, how was she going to deal with it?

*Head-on like always,* Koda replied to her inner query.

Rusty regarded him and after a few moments a smile appeared on her face. He was right. She’d always met life and everything in it head-on. No reason to change now. Which meant that tonight she might as well have a little fun.

She started digging through the boxes of clothing she’d salvaged from the house. This called for something special.

Outside, under the spray of cold water, Clay was busy lecturing himself. This was a job and he was a professional. Just because Rusty Blackhawk was a walking hard-on was no reason for him to forget that. He just had to get his head straight.

And his dick limp. Even in the cold water, he was standing at attention, with a slow steady throb that was making his balls ache. Damn woman! How the hell did she get under his skin so fast?

Maybe he should take Chase’s advice. Bed her and get his fill then turn his mind to the business as hand. Chase might be right. Clay had met plenty of women who turned his head and sure as sunrise, as soon as he bedded them the blush was off the bloom. Chances were that it would be the same with Rusty Blackhawk.

That meant that he needed to turn on the charm tonight and when they got back, have his fill of her. That way, he could start fresh in the morning with a clear head. With his mind set, he finished washing, wrapped a towel around his waist and headed inside.

Rusty was nowhere to be seen but the door to the bathroom was closed and light spilled out onto the floor from the crack at the bottom. Clay pulled his suitcase from beneath the bed, tossed it on the lower of the bunk beds and started drying off.

Rusty put the finishing touches on her makeup and regarded herself critically in the mirror. The tint of smoky shadow on her eyelids along with the mascara made her eyes dominate her face. Which was just what she wanted.

She dabbed some of the scent her mother had taught her to make on her pulse points and breathed in the sweet aroma. She hoped it worked as well as her mother claimed.

Ready as she was going to get, she opened the door and stopped short. Clay stood across the small room in front of the bunk bed as naked as the day he was born.

*Hell yeah!* the wench inside Rusty shouted. He was as fine in the flesh as she had imagined. His broad shoulders were decorated with matching sunburst tattoos. Her eyes followed the line of his back. It tapered down to slim hips and an oh-so-fine ass that begged to be bitten.

A thump in her gut signaled the swell of her pussy and the tightening of her nipples. If ever a man was built to satisfy a woman it was Clay Russell. That was evident as he turned and saw her watching him. His cock was long, thick and standing proudly. Rusty's mouth literally watered.

Clay never even thought about being naked when he turned and saw Rusty. Christ on a crutch! She was a wet dream come to life. Her long hair cascaded down her

shoulders, past her elbows, as midnight as a raven's wing with highlights dancing in the uneven light.

That luscious little body was encased in a tight denim vest that was low enough to invite a man's eyes to the swell of her breasts. She wore a short little denim skirt that slunk low on her hips and stopped just short of being indecent on her thighs.

His eyes slowly raked over her. And he liked what he saw. Firm with more than a hint of muscle in the thigh and calf, her legs were smooth-skinned and well shaped.

A pair of sassy calf-high boots that fit snug to her legs completed her outfit.

Clay's eyes burned at the sight, right along with the rest of his body. If he didn't know better, he'd think he'd just swallowed a big gulp of Chase's home brew. Rusty was that potent.

His eyes returned slowly up her body, stopping on her face. One look and he was glad he saved the best for last. Her full lips were slick with gloss, making them look like a candy treat meant to be licked and sucked. Dark thick lashes framed her mysterious violet eyes, pulling him in.

A slow, sexy smile spread on her face as they locked eyes. It was then Clay remembered that he was naked. And not just that but sporting a champion boner. Rusty's smile widened as if she could read his mind.

"Nice outfit, but I don't think the other fellas would appreciate being so...upstaged," she said in that husky teasing voice he was coming to recognize.

Clay grinned at the offhand compliment and turned to grab a pair of jeans from his suitcase. "Well, I wouldn't want to start out on the wrong foot with the locals."

Rusty chuckled and watched him slide the jeans on, not able to ignore the fact that there was nothing between his skin and the denim. Clay saw her watching but made no move to hurry. Rusty got the idea that he was enjoying it too, but doubted that his pleasure could be near as great as hers.

She was a little disappointed when he was fully dressed, although she had to admit that he did clean up mighty good. A white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to expose his strong forearms was tucked into the jeans. A black belt with an interesting and unique buckle cinched his waist. His boots were black but well worn, the boots of a working cowboy.

Clay picked up his Stetson and walked over to Rusty. "I hope we're going somewhere the law likes to frequent 'cause sure as shit you're gonna cause a riot, Miz Blackhawk."

Rusty laughed. "That's about the oddest compliment I've ever gotten, Mr. Russell."

"Just call 'em like I see 'em," he replied.

"Well thank you. You clean up real good yourself."

"Thank you, ma'am. Now how 'bout that beer I promised?"

Rusty smiled and gestured toward the door. "After you."

"Ladies first," he argued with a smile.

Rusty stepped past him, headed for the door but looked back to catch him watching her ass.

"Like my daddy always said, ain't no crime in looking," he said.

Rusty hid a grin and headed on out the door. Suddenly she was looking forward to the evening. A night out with a sexy man, a little drinking, a little flirting. Sounded like just what the doctor ordered.

## Chapter Five

Davy Stikeleather watched the truck pull into the parking lot. The cowboy driving might be big and rich, but he wasn't near as smart as Davy because he never knew that Davy had been watching him and Rusty all day, or that he'd followed them from Blackhawk Ranch to the Grille.

The big man, Russell, got out and walked around the truck to open the door for Rusty. He even took Rusty's hand as she stepped down from the truck. Davy snorted. That man didn't know shit from shinola. Rusty Blackhawk was a nice piece of ass but she was about as far from a lady as a woman could get.

Danny, Davy's older brother and Rusty's husband, had told Davy and all the men in the family about what a wildcat Rusty was. And what a tramp. According to Davy, the only reason Blackhawk Ranch stayed in business as long as it had was that Rusty fucked her way to whatever she wanted.

Now that Danny was dead, the family knew the best thing for her was to marry up with another of the brothers and let the family step in and run the ranch. But the bitch had laughed in their faces when they suggested she marry Dennis. Secretly, Davy was glad. Dennis was a moron. Sure, he was big as a house and strong as an ox but he had a brain the size of a peanut.

Davy, on the other hand, had more smarts than his whole family put together. And he had been the one to come up with the plan to burn Rusty out. If the idiot Dennis had set the fire the way Davy instructed the house would have burned to the ground. But it had worked well enough despite Dennis. It wouldn't take long for the insurance company to send someone to tell her that her insurance had lapsed long ago.

That was Davy's brainchild as well. He'd made sure to check Rusty's mail every day, and each time she sent in an insurance payment he took it to a friend who, for a

fee, got it cashed and stamped with a fake insurance stamp. Just as he stole every statement from the insurance company demanding payment. He still had the policy cancellation in his dresser drawer at home.

She was going to be in a fix, regardless of that fancy Arizona cowboy. By the time Davy and his family got through, Clay Russell would want to get as far away from Rusty Blackhawk as possible. Then Rusty would have no choice but to take help from the family. And the next time someone was named as the candidate for her to marry, it was going to be him.

Davy watched Rusty smile up at Russell, and pulled his cell phone from his pocket. It was time to round up the family.

“The Lonely Grille?” Clay asked as he offered Rusty his hand when she started to get out of the truck. “You’ve got to be kidding.”

“Nope,” she said and smiled. “And according to Melvin, this place is definitely the inspiration for more songs than he can shake a stick at.”

Clay laughed. “Oookay. Just as long as the beer is cold and the steaks are hot.”

Rusty chuckled and tugged on his hand. “Coldest beer in three counties and the beef is the best in the state.”

Clay’s stomach rumbled as he pulled open the door for Rusty to enter. A chorus of voices rang out with greetings as she walked in, along with quite a few catcalls and whistles.

She grinned and greeted the folks in the bar as she led the way to a booth along one wall. Clay took off his hat as he slid into the booth. Rusty took the seat opposite him and grinned up at the bosomy redhead who approached the table.

“Hey, Deanna,” Rusty said.

“Hey, girl. I was starting to think you’d skipped town it’s been so long. What you been doing?” She cut her eyes flirtatiously at Clay. “Or should I ask?”

“Deanna, this is Clay Russell of the Circle R in Arizona. The Circle R is—”

“Going into partnership with Blackhawk Ranch,” Clay cut in. “And I’m the lucky cowboy representing the Circle R in the partnership. Nice to meet you, ma’am.”

Deanna was just staring gape-mouthed at Clay who was smiling at her in a completely sexual manner. Rusty wanted to kick him under the table. Even she could smell Deanna heating up.

“My pleasure, Mr. Russell,” Deanna said and extended her hand to him. “Deanna Jones at your service.”

Clay took her hand and brought it to his lips to kiss her knuckles. “Darlin’, do you think you could rustle a hungry hand up a rare steak and a cold beer?”

Deanna giggled like a schoolgirl. “Without a doubt, Mr. Russell.”

“My friends call me Clay,” he said in such a charming tone that Rusty gritted her teeth.

“Well then, Clay, I’m gonna get ya’ll two tall cold ones and tell the cook to throw a two-inch steak on the griddle. You want fries or baked potato?”

“Baked, please.”

“And what kind of dressing on your salad?”

“Keep the salad,” Clay replied.

Deanna finally turned her attention to Rusty. “What you want, hon?”

“Sweet potato, salad, corn on the cob, green beans, some okra if you have it, squash, a side of coleslaw and a side of potato salad. Oh, and two wedges of cornbread if you have it.”

Deanna cut her eyes at Clay. “Eats like a horse and never gains an ounce. Beats the dickens out of me how she does it. Everything I eat goes straight to my hips.”

“Well god bless good eating,” Clay said flirtatiously.

Deanna blushed. “I’ll get this order in right now and be back in a flash with those beers.”

Rusty leaned back against the booth and regarded Clay with narrowed eyes as Deanna gave him a sassy smile and walked away, swaying her ass in an obviously exaggerated manner.

Clay watched the waitress walk away then turned his attention to Rusty. "Nice gal. You know her long?"

"All my life," Rusty answered shortly, eliciting a sly smile from Clay.

"You got a burr up your butt about something, Fancy?"

Rusty looked away as she answered. "Nope." It gnawed at her that the flirtation between Clay and Deanna rankled. How could she be jealous of a man she hardly knew?

Deanna returned with their beers. Clay raised his glass toward Rusty. "To my new partner."

Rusty raised her glass too and clinked it against his. Their eyes met and held, and for the first time in years, her second sight came fully alive. She saw within Clay all of the secret dreams, aspirations and desires he'd kept bottled and hidden. She saw the insecurity he masked with a party-boy persona. She saw the frustration he was trying to suppress at the attraction he felt for her, and the fear that maybe she wasn't just another woman he could bed and walk away from. That he'd nearly gone crazy watching her work all day, wanting to touch her but holding fast to his manners and trying not to let the attraction rule.

She saw his past. His brothers Cole and Caleb and Chase. His father Charlie, and Clara, the woman who had become a mother to him when his own died. She saw Ana, and the special place she'd come to occupy in Clay's heart. And she saw the certainty he felt that he would never find a woman who would own his heart the way Ana owned Chase's.

She saw his desire to become one of the top bull riders in the PBR, to prove himself despite his father's disapproval. She saw his uncertainty that he could make Blackhawk a success and prove to his family that he was capable.

And she saw a heart capable of so much love and compassion that it shattered her defenses completely and allowed what she'd so feared to possess her. Clay Russell was the one. The man she wanted to walk time with.

It rattled her so much that her arm shook and her glass clattered against his, slopping beer all over the table.

Clay saw Rusty's violet eyes turn the dark purple of an Arizona sunset, and the vacant expression that captured her face. A moment later she started to shake. Their glasses rattled together hard enough to cause beer to splatter the table.

He didn't think. He just acted. He slammed his glass on the table in the same move as he rose and skirted the booth to slide in beside her. She was still holding her beer glass, with that wide-eyed vacant expression on her face.

Clay removed the glass from her hand and turned her to face him. "Hey now, Fancy, you okay?"

Rusty didn't react and that scared Clay. Something was wrong. A person didn't just zone out of reality for no reason. He had to do something to snap her back. But what?

Several possibilities flitted through his mind. Shaking her, slapping her, yelling for an ambulance. But he reacted in a purely male and instinctual way. He pulled her to him and kissed her.

Rusty was barely aware of what was happening. She was still locked within the "knowing place". Not until Clay pulled her close to him and his lips covered hers did she come back. And for Rusty it was like finally coming home. Despite the fact that they had never touched, she knew the feel of him against her. Knew the tickle of his beard and mustache against her face, the taste of his breath on her face and the soft fullness of his lips against hers.

She never considered whether it was wise or right, she simply responded. Her arms went up to circle his neck. “*Az én-m szeretett,*” she whispered before her lips parted against his.

Clay didn’t understand the words she whispered but it sent something rocketing through him that was as sizzling as a live wire and as solid as a mountain. It was something that touched the protected place in his heart that he kept locked away from the world.

Her lips parted against his. It was an invitation he could not refuse. Her taste was intoxicating, the feel of her against him, electric. Without hesitation he took what she offered, plundering her mouth like a starved man who is offered a feast.

What he didn’t count on or consider was the effect it would have on either of them. Rusty groaned and pressed against him, returning the kiss with as much passion and aggression as it was given.

Clay’s dick throbbed uncomfortably to full erection in his jeans, straining at the denim that constrained him. His hands tightened on Rusty, pulled her closer even though she was already plastered up against him.

“Well, I mighta figur’d.” The sound of a male voice beside the booth had both of them pulling away from one another.

Rusty looked around Clay to see her ex-father-in-law, Davis Stikeleather, leering down at her.

“Girl, I done told you I ain’t puttin’ up with your whorin’!” Davis tried to reach around Clay to grab hold of Rusty.

Rusty raised her fist to belt him but before she could act Clay was on his feet with one big hand wrapped around Davis’ scrawny neck, lifting him up off the floor. The bar

was as silent as a tomb as Clay jerked Davis up close to his face and spoke in a deadly calm voice.

“I don’t know who you are, and don’t care, but let me set you straight on something, mister. No one talks to Miz Blackhawk like that in my presence. Now why don’t you find your manners and apologize to the lady.”

Davis wheezed out a laugh, trying to break Clay’s grip with both hands but having no luck. “Damn whore is what she is.”

Clay literally growled a moment before he cocked his arm then catapulted Davis. People at the table nearest them were treated to a dose of Davis hitting their table on his skinny butt and sliding clean off the table to land in a heap on the floor.

About the time Davis hit the floor, two men rushed at Clay, Davis’ sons Dennis and Donny. As Dennis neared Clay, Rusty came out of the booth and delivered a solid roundhouse. His head snapped back even as his body tried to continue forward.

“You fucking cunt!” Donny yelled and fought to get around Dennis who was floundering around trying to get steady on his feet.

Clay whirled around, kicked Dennis, who was beginning to recover his balance, in the gut, sending him slamming into Donny and the both of them crashed to the floor.

Both men were cursing and yelling, fighting with one another to get to their feet. By that time, Davis was hanging onto a table, trying to get his legs to support him. Melvin, the owner of the grille, was yelling to his son Jarrod who was already in motion toward the ruckus.

Clay stuck out his foot and pushed Dennis back down on top of Donny as Dennis tried to rise. Jarrod barreled in with a baseball bat gripped in one ham-hock-sized hand. “Break it up!” he bellowed.

Rusty jumped in front of Jarrod. “They started it, J. Davis came in mouthing off and –”

"Damn straight," a man at a nearby table spoke up, earning a loud expletive from Davis. "Davis and his boys started it."

A chorus of voices chimed in, adding weight to the man's claim. Clay turned to look at Rusty. It was clear that no one in the bar was going to let her take the heat. It was just as clear that the man called Davis and the men with him were not well liked.

Jarrold looked down at Rusty. "He hurt you, Russ?"

She put her hand on the big man's arm. "No. I'm fine, J. But it sure would be nice to be able to eat in peace without this trash stinking up the place."

"You got it," Jarrold said with a grin. He turned, gave Dennis a thump on the head with the bat. "Get your old man and get outta here, boys. Less'n you want me to call the law."

Dennis was as mad as a wet-setting hen. That was plain from his red face and the veins standing out on his neck. But he backed down. "Come on," he said to his father and then shoved at his brother behind him.

"You ain't heard the last of this, bitch!" Davis spat at Rusty as he hobbled over to his boys.

"Yeah, whatever," Rusty replied and turned to slide back into the booth.

Clay waited until the men had been escorted outside by the giant with the ball bat, and then reclaimed his seat. "Things always so exciting when you're around, Miz Blackhawk?"

Rusty grimaced and reached for her beer. Clay reached over and stayed her hand. "What's the deal with those yahoos?"

"Long story," she replied, not meeting his eyes. Now that the ruckus had passed, her mind was revisiting the vision she'd had, and the kiss. God, what a kiss.

"I got time," Clay's voice cut into her thoughts.

Rusty cut her eyes at him. "Ana didn't tell you?"

"Hell, Ana didn't even tell me you were a woman."

Rusty chuckled despite herself. "Yeah well, that was pretty funny."

Clay grinned and took a drink of his beer. "Guess so. But no changing the subject. What's the story?"

Rusty sighed and propped her elbows and forearms on the table between them. "Short version. I made a mistake. Got drunk, got pregnant and married Danny Stikeleather, Davis' son. Danny turned out to be a drunk. When I was three months along, he got mad because I told him to get out, that I didn't need a no-good drunk to take care of. We were outside by the barn. I turned my back on him and he grabbed a shovel and clocked me. I don't remember much of what happened after that except a lot of pain. I woke up in a hospital, beat all to hell and no longer pregnant. That same night Danny got rip-roaring drunk and drove his truck down the side of Sweetwater gully and was killed."

She paused, took a sip of beer and looked at Clay. "That's when his family tried to move in on me. Davis decided I needed to marry one of his other sons. I told him to go to hell and ever since we've been at war."

Clay felt almost sick to his stomach. Rusty had told the story in a flat, emotionless tone, but he'd seen the look in her eyes. That son-of-a-bitch had nearly killed her and she'd had no one to turn to when those vultures descended on her.

But that wasn't the case now. Now Clay was in the picture and his mind was made up that it would be one bitter cold day in hell before he'd let any of the Stikeleathers hurt her again.

"Had your share of trouble, haven't you?" he asked gently.

Rusty gave him a rueful smile. "Well, you know how the old saying goes. Into each life a little rain must fall."

Clay returned the smile and reached out to put his hand over hers on the table. "The rainy days are over."

"That right, Mr. Russell?" she asked.

“That’s a promise, Miz Blackhawk,” he said and gave her hand a squeeze. Rusty tried not to let hope swell that the promise meant anything. She tried to shove the memory of the kiss into the back of her mind, to not recall the near overwhelming feelings it invoked. To shield herself she fell back on tried-and-true tactics. She kept it light and teasing.

“Well, I won’t hold it against you if you’re wrong.”

“Does that mean you’ll hold it against me if I’m right?”

Rusty smiled at the sexy tease in his voice. “You’re a bad one, Mr. Russell.”

“You don’t know the half of it, Fancy.”

At that moment Deanna arrived with their meals. She set Clay’s plate down in front of him then placed two platters down in front of Rusty. Clay looked from his plate to the mountains of vegetables on the platters in front of her. “Good god, woman, who do you think you’re feeding? She isn’t as big as a minute. No way in hell she’ll make a dent in that.”

Deanna laughed, and even though it brought a flush to her face, so did Rusty. Deanna patted Clay on the shoulder. “It’s clear you don’t know our Rusty. You need anything just yell.”

Clay’s eyes moved from Deanna to the mountain of food and then to Rusty. “You eat half of that and I’ll run around the barn naked singing the national anthem.”

“Make that ‘Beer for my Horses’ and you’re on,” she said with a grin.

“Deal,” he said and stuck out his hand.

Rusty accepted his hand. “Looks like I’m gonna get a show with dinner tonight. Dig in, cowboy.”

Clay shook his head and picked up her fork for her. “Ladies first.”

Rusty grinned, took the fork and dug in.

## Chapter Six

Davy hid a smile as his father bitched and moaned about the way he and his sons were treated in the bar.

“Fucking cunt!” Donny snarled into his beer. “Thinks she’s so goddamn high and mighty. Where the fuck’s she get the idea she’s better’n us?”

Davy reached over and patted his brother on the shoulder. “Don’t you worry, bro. We’re gonna fix her good.”

“Yeah, we oughta go snatch her,” Dennis slurred. “Bring her back here and fuck the shit outta her.”

“Beat the shit outta her,” Davis added. “A week’r two of that oughta see her ready to do things our way.”

“Can I fuck her up the ass?” Donny asked. “Goddamn she has a nice ass. I’d just love to stick my dick up her ass to her eyeballs.”

“Good as that sounds, I don’t think that’ll get us what we want,” Davy argued.

“Says who?” Dennis demanded angrily.

“Says me,” Davy replied without anger. It did no good at all to challenge any of his brothers in anger. That just led to raised fists. Davy had learned a long time ago to use his brains as his most effective weapons. “Look, bro. We all know that when it comes to strength, you and Donny got it in spades. You could lick any man in this county with one hand. Now I ain’t got much of that, but what God denied me in size he made up for in brains.”

“Well, yeah, that is the God’s honest truth,” Davis agreed. “You ain’t much in size, boy, but you got one helluva big brain in that head.”

"Exactly," Davy said with a smile. "And I got me a real good idea of how we're gonna get exactly what we want from Rusty Blackhawk."

"Yeah?" Donny looked at him with eyes that were darn near rolling from drunkenness. "How we gonna do that, Davy? That plan a'yurn to burn her out watin' worth a shit."

"Only because you and Dennis didn't follow instructions," Davy reminded him. "But I got another idea. One that's sure-fire guaranteed to fix that whore's ass good and proper and get us control of the ranch."

"Just what kinda plan?" his father asked.

"Well, it's like this," Davy said with a grin and started to explain. "Starting tonight we're gonna go at things a little different..."

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay cut his eyes over at Rusty as she stared out of the window into the darkness, humming along with the song on the radio. If he hadn't seen it with his own eyes he'd never have believed it. Not only did Rusty clean both platters of food but she ordered a wedge of sweet potato pie on top of it.

"It's a wonder you're not a butterball," he commented. "You eat like that all the time?"

Rusty laughed and turned to look at him. "I have a high metabolism."

"High? Hell, it'd have to be supersonic."

"Yep, and so is my anticipation at tonight's big show," she teased.

He cut his eyes at her. "That was just a joke."

"Joke hell," she argued. "We shook on it. A deal's a deal, Mr. Russell."

"Honey, if you want to see me naked, I'll be more than happy to accommodate you."

She looked away, unable to meet his eyes. She would definitely like for Clay Russell to accommodate her, in myriad ways, but she was certain that a sexual experience with him would end up with her losing herself to the emotions that were already stronger than they should be.

It frustrated, annoyed and frightened her. Rusty had never been in love. Men had come and gone before Danny, and until she met Clay she figured that would be the shape of things for her. She'd go about her life without a man until the need got too great and then she'd find a cowboy, have a one-night stand and then go back to her life.

Now, thanks to Clay Russell, that seemed like an empty, lonely life, and one she had no desire to live.

She snuck a look at him. Her vision had provided a wealth of information about him and his past. Maybe that was part of the problem. Now she saw past the gorgeous exterior into the man inside. And what she saw attracted her as much as the packaging.

Damn it all to hell and back, what was she going to do? A voice in her mind provided the answer. *Stop analyzing everything. Relax and let your destiny unfold as it should.*

She closed her eyes and leaned her forehead against the window. Suddenly everything was different. Before Clay had walked into her life, she'd been able to just go with the flow, to ride easy in the saddle of life, taking what came and dealing with what needed to be dealt with. Why was she letting him change everything?

She needed some time alone to think. Once they were home, she'd find Koda and take to the woods. A long hike in the moonlight would clear her mind and give her perspective on the situation.

With a plan in mind, she leaned her head back against the seat and closed her eyes. Within a couple of minutes she was sound asleep.

Clay looked over at Rusty. In sleep her features were relaxed and soft, making her look like a young girl. There were so many facets to this woman. She could go from

being as tough as a man, with almost the same thinking patterns, to being a world-class tease, to a she-wolf, fighting ready in a heartbeat, to a wounded soul hiding behind a façade of bravado, to a woman with passion strong enough to singe a man to the bone.

His problem was that every aspect of her was appealing. He found himself wanting to know everything there was to know about her, to shield her from hurt and pain, and to be the one to make her smile. How was it possible that a woman could have such a strong effect in such a short span of time?

His brother Chase had once told him that Ana, Chase's wife, had affected him that way. That she walked into his life and the moment their eyes met he was a goner. Clay took some comfort in that. If Chase, the consummate womanizer and confirmed bachelor, could fall to a woman so easy, then Clay didn't have to beat himself up over falling for Rusty. But he sure as shit wasn't ready to admit it to anyone.

He pulled to a stop in front of the bunkhouse and killed the engine. Rusty's eyes fluttered open and those violet orbs locked onto him. "We're home," she said in a sleep-rough voice that made his cock pulse. "Sorry. Didn't mean to crash out on you."

"No worries," he replied, thinking how he'd like to gather her up in his arms, take her inside and have his fill of her.

Rusty smiled softly. "I appreciate you sticking up for me tonight."

"From the looks of it, if I hadn't, any one of thirty others would have. You have a lot of friends."

"Yeah, good people," she replied. "But still, you stood up for me, and you hardly even know me. For all you know Davis could be right about me."

"Fancy, if that man was right, Ana and Clara would never have cooked up the deal between the Circle R and Blackhawk Ranch. And even if that scum was right, no man has the right to talk to a woman like that or to raise a hand to one."

"Got a strong moral compass, don't you, Mr. Russell?"

"I'd like to think so, yes. And if you don't mind, could we drop the Mr. Russell and Miz Blackhawk?"

"You think we're familiar enough to be on a first-name basis, Mr. Russell?"

Clay spoke without thinking. "Honey, I've already seen you naked, worked side by side with you, been damn near burned alive with a kiss and fought for you. Not to mention watching you wolf down enough food to feed three men. I think we're definitely ready to be on a first-name basis."

Rusty regarded him thoughtfully for a few moments. "I agree...in part anyway. But you got it wrong, Mr. Russell. You didn't get burned. I did. Good night."

With that she got out of the truck and headed for the bunkhouse. Only a couple of minutes passed before she reappeared, the short skirt replaced by worn jeans and a long woven poncho covering her from shoulders to mid-calf, belted at the waist. Clay watched as Koda appeared out of the darkness. Rusty lay her hand on the wolf's head and for a minute they stood as still as statues. Then as one they turned and disappeared into the darkness.

Clay climbed out of the truck, unsure whether he should follow them or just go into the bunkhouse and turn in. In the end, he did the latter. If she'd wanted him with her she would have let him know. Clearly, she needed time alone.

Which might be the healthiest thing for both of them right now because if she'd stayed, he would have been hard-pressed to keep his hands off her. That thought brought all kinds of delicious ideas to mind, and brought him to an almost immediate erection. With a sigh, he went inside. No two ways about it. It was going to be a long night.

\* \* \* \* \*

Davy watched Rusty disappear into the woods. He was tempted to follow her but that wasn't part of his plan. After he'd convinced his family that his plan would work, he and his brothers had headed to Blackhawk Ranch to start surveillance. They were

going to have to keep a close eye on things so they'd be ready to act at the first opportunity.

Davy had been watching Rusty for a long time and knew her weakness. Her ranch and her horses. The botched attempt at burning her out had hurt her but had not struck close enough to her heart. Buildings could be rebuilt, replaced. But not flesh and bones.

The family agreed and they quickly agreed to set the plan into motion. Davy sent Dennis and Donny to approach the ranch from the eastern border and take up positions near the eastern pasture where there was quick access to the corral and stables.

He approached from the north where he could take a position in the woods with a clear view of the main complex. Once he was certain Rusty and the slicker were asleep he would signal his brothers on the walkie-talkies and they would move in.

Davy grinned and settled back, waiting for the lights to go out in the bunkhouse. Rusty leaving was a stroke of luck he hadn't counted on. With her gone, all he had to do was wait for the Russell fellow to sack out.

\* \* \* \* \*

For two hours Clay paced the floor. When she hadn't returned at the end of that time, his mind was made up. He grabbed a jacket and headed outside to find her.

From his hiding place in the woods, Davy saw the Russell fellow leave and head into the woods. His luck was getting better all the time. Now not even his bumbling brothers could screw up the plan. They had free access to the ranch.

From his months of watching Rusty, he was pretty certain that she wouldn't return before morning. Many a night she and that wolf of hers took to the woods, disappearing like a mist into the landscape.

He'd tried tracking her but had never managed to discover where she went during those nights. Right now, it didn't matter.

His brothers wouldn't be happy but too bad. He'd wait for dawn to act. That way everything would be fresh when she returned.

He grinned as he imagined the look on Rusty's face when she discovered the gift he and his brothers had planned for her. It so delighted him that he decided then and there that after the deed was done he would return to his hiding place and wait for her return so that he could see her reactions in person when she rose the next morning.

For a few minutes he indulged himself in a fantasy, of Rusty in his arms, looking up at him adoringly as his savior when he implicated his family in the trouble that was about to be visited on her. He imagined the sympathy he would receive from everyone in the county when he stood up in court and recounted all the horrors his family had visited on Rusty. He saw himself in tears as he recounted his valiant efforts to stop them, and how, in the end, it had come down to him against them, and he'd acted only in self-defense to protect his own life and Rusty's.

It was a brilliant plan. All Davy had to do was work it, and soon he'd see his dreams come true. He'd be shed of his miserable family and have the woman he loved in his arms. And they would live happily ever after.

He wondered if Rusty had any idea just how lucky she was to have a man who was willing to do anything for her happiness.

A sudden thought had Davy pulling out his cell phone to place a call. It took half a dozen rings before the call was answered. A woman's voice came on the line. "Hello?"

"Stella? Davy. Listen, sweetheart, I need a favor."

"What kind of favor?" Stella asked in a suspicious tone.

"The kind that's worth a hundred bucks."

"I'm listening."

Davy grinned. One thing in life held true. Everyone had a price.

## Chapter Seven

In silence, Rusty and Koda followed the nearly indecipherable trail that led along the ridge of the mountain westward from the headwaters of Oconaluftee River and deep into the Great Smoky Mountains. Moonlight filtered pure and silver through the trees, casting shafts of light onto the leaf- and pine-needle-carpeted floor of the forest.

They emerged into a clearing and stopped. Below them lay a desolate valley. It was rumored to be the hidden place, *Ataga'hi*, the enchanted lake or Gall place as it had come to be known in the language of the white man.

Rusty stopped and sat. She'd not fasted but she could keep vigil this night and hope that the lake would appear to her. Koda lay down beside her. *Believe*, he said before he closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Rusty thought about *Ataga'hi* and the myth about it. In times past, before the People surrendered their beliefs to that of the white man, all Cherokee knew that *Ataga'hi* existed. It was a place few had seen. The way to it was so difficult, so well hidden that only the animals knew how to reach it. If a hunter should happen upon it by mistake, he would know by the sound of thousands of wings as wild ducks flew around the lake.

But upon reaching the spot, he would not find a lake, only a dry, flat expanse, void of grass or tree or flower, with no bird or animal to be seen.

Unless one sharpened their spiritual vision with fasting and praying and an all-night vigil, the lake would remain unseen. One would know whether they had succeeded at the end of the night, for upon daybreak the lake would appear.

Rusty closed her eyes and sent a wish spiraling out into the Universe, a cry for help and guidance, a plea that she see the path she should walk and the strength to walk it with honor and dignity.

Genetic memory swirled inside her, the Native American ancestry of her father calling to her as strongly as that of her mother's lineage. Generations dating back to the beginning of time appeared in her mind, a swirl of faces and feelings and lives that were both apart and part of her.

She felt the energy expand in her mind one brief moment before her mind exploded with light. Then she was lost, with only her own fervent prayers echoing through the vast emptiness.

Time passed unrecognized as Rusty gave herself to the spiral dance in her mind. Night deepened, the world turned and the stars began to fade. Upon the first hint of light from the breaking day, her eyes opened.

Joy leapt strong and vital within her. There before her was the lake, a wide and extensive sheet of purple water, fed by springs that sprouted from the high cliffs that surrounded the lake.

She marveled at the sight, watching as great flocks of birds appeared in the sky above the lake. On the glassy surface of the water she could see the undulating ripples from serpents gliding silently. Fish jumped and splashed.

A glossy black bear made his way to the water, a great gash in his side seeping blood and infection. Rusty observed in silence as the animal submerged beneath the violet depths of the water. When it rose and made its way to shore, the wound was healed.

*Your turn,* Koda spoke in her mind.

Rusty's response was to rise and strip off her clothing. The soft carpet of grass and leaves was cool to her feet as she made her way to the water's edge. A gentle, cool breeze kissed her skin, eliciting a mild shiver.

She stepped into the water and a current of warm energy ran up her leg. With slow, steady steps she waded deeper into the water. Two long water moccasins swam by her, one circling her body twice before it slid away.

Rusty sank beneath the surface. The water was clear and brilliant in the morning sun. It was like sinking into light, being surrounded by liquid heaven. She sighed, watching the bubbles float to the surface as she sank deeper, her eyes closing and body going limp.

She lost track of time, immersed in the womb of the lake, protected and safe from all harm from the outside world. The thought entered her mind that perhaps she would not return to the world of man. Safer and more peaceful it would be to stay here.

No sooner had the thought appeared than Koda's voice registered in her mind. "It is not your time. Open your eyes. See your way, and embrace it. Your destiny awaits."

Rusty opened her eyes and there in the water was her future. She could not see what was to come, the joys or hardships that would befall her, but she knew that it was time to let go of the past and look to the future she saw shining before her. She reached toward the shimmering vision and suddenly reality returned.

No longer was she submerged beneath the surface of the enchanted lake. Now she stood in the middle of a barren clearing, the morning sun bathing her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay had been trained to track by his brother Chase, and this night the training served him well, even if it did take him until nearly dawn to find her. He emerged from a thick stand of trees just after dawn and looked down at the clearing below.

For a split second he thought he saw a shimmering purple lake with cascading falls surrounding it and a multitude of animals on its shore. But in the next breath it was gone.

And there stood Rusty, in the middle of the clearing, naked. Water ran in rivulets down her skin from her wet hair, sparkling like gems on her tanned skin.

She turned and looked in his direction and Clay could have sworn that light shot from her eyes like a lens flare. Clay gasped as their eyes locked. Something inside him opened, releasing a flood of emotion so strong that his knees nearly buckled. Suddenly

he had perfect clarity. There was no longer any confusion on what he wanted, on which way he wanted his life to go. It had been decided for him, and it was not a decision he wished to debate. Instead, he embraced it with enthusiasm and joy.

As of their own accord, his legs propelled him down the rise, toward Rusty.

Rusty's heart filled as Clay started toward her. All of her prayers had been answered. She might not know what trials life would demand of her but she now knew her own heart, and it belonged to the man approaching. Unashamed of her nudity, she walked to meet him.

They stopped a foot apart. Clay's eyes moved slowly down her body then back up. "God as my witness, you are the most beautiful sight I've ever seen, Miz Blackhawk."

Rusty smiled. "My friends call me Rusty."

Clay grinned in return. "And what do your lovers call you?"

"I don't know. I've never had one."

"Time to remedy that, Fancy."

"That so?"

"Definitely."

"And what if I'm not looking for a lover?"

Clay hesitated. "If not a lover then what?"

"This," she said as she stepped up to him, slid her arms up to circle his neck and pull his head down. "*Meu inimă is cu tu,*" she whispered just before her lips touched his.

And with the joining of their lips, Rusty offered him all that was within her, her strength, her heart, her magic.

While Clay didn't understand the words she spoke, he recognized what was being offered on a level that surpassed conscious thought. His response was to wrap his arms around her and pull her wet body close, deepening the kiss.

Rusty was the first to break away. With impatience born of need she tugged at the front of his shirt, her lips moving to the center of his chest as she parted the shirt and began to pull it down his broad shoulders.

She licked his skin, wanting the taste of him on her tongue. Clay helped her efforts to undress him by stripping off his shirt. He stepped back from her to pull off his boots.

Rusty watched as he stood and unbuttoned his jeans, her eyes glued to the motion of his fingers as he eased the zipper down. Her eyes followed the motion of his hands. Every inch of him that was revealed had her pulse racing higher. Her hands moved to the center of her chest, clasped and unclasped, then moved slowly down her own body as the jeans came undone. Clay eased the jeans down his lean hips, revealing himself to her. Hunger, strong and demanding, prompted Rusty's hands to travel lower, to the vee of her thighs.

Clay stepped out of his jeans. His eyes moved to meet hers and she saw desire burning in their hazel depths. She watched his cock pulse as his eyes moved down her body to her fingers, working slowly at the erect flesh of her clit, visibly swollen and hungry.

Rusty felt her throat thicken inside, her breath hitching as her eyes moved over Clay's body. By all that was holy, she'd never seen a man so perfect, or wanted one so badly. She sank to the ground and raised her hand to him.

He lowered himself down, spreading her legs so that he could kneel between them. She shivered with delicious anticipation as his hands traced up the inside of her legs. When his fingers brushed the sides of her sex, she spread her legs wider, bending her knees to grant him better access.

With gentle fingers he stroked her outer lips. Her labia swelled and grew pliant, wet with the need that flowed from her slick channel. She wanted him with an intensity that bordered on madness, wanted to surrender to him body and soul. Never had she experienced such sensations, such need to be possessed by another.

He spread her wider, dipping one finger into the moist tunnel. She bucked up as another finger joined the first and began to move rhythmically within her. A climax started to build, rumbling inside her like a hungry beast. When his thumb, slick with her juice, circled then plunged into her anus, she exploded, filling his hand with her warm juice.

He didn't speak but raised his eyebrows in question and she smiled up at him, the smile fading to be replaced with a look of desire as their eyes met. There was no more need for words. Clay pulled her to him. Her arms instinctively went around his neck as his lips met hers, caressing, his tongue parting her lips to taste her.

Rusty groaned and deepened the kiss, her tongue warring with his for dominance.

Clay's heart pounded in his chest, his skin burned and his mind emptied of every thought other than the feel and taste of her. When she wrapped her firm thighs around his and pressed her hot sex against him, a fire swept through his mind. He sat back, put his hands on her hips and pulled her down onto him. Rusty breathed out a sharp, excited breath at the feel of his long cock pressing against her pussy, and then growled a string of words he didn't understand but responded to with a sharp stab of hunger that nearly blinded him.

Rusty pulled herself tighter to him, heat from her wet sex radiating through his aching groin as she rotated her hips, fueling his flame, grinding against the pulsing length of his hard cock. Every slide and rub of her pussy against his straining shaft shredded his weakening control a little more. His fingers tightened on her hips then clenched as he struggled to hold back the building need to ram inside her, brand her as his and fuck her like there was no tomorrow. Christ on a crutch, he had to get inside her. She arched her back, drawing her breasts closer to him. Cupping her breasts, he devoured one nipple.

She moaned and arched against his mouth, wanting more. Her hands traveled up his body, exploring the ridges of muscle beneath the skin of his abdomen. A shudder

ran through him when her fingers traced the hair that ran from his navel and thickened into a dense forest around the base of his dick.

Her touch was like electricity, sending currents running rampant through him, all culminating in his cock. His breath caught in his throat when her warm hand closed on him and stroked. He groaned and closed his eyes, fighting to hold back while his dick demanded that he plunge into her, pound hard and fast and sate his ravenous need.

His eyes met hers in a searing look that made her breath catch in her throat, it was so replete with hunger. Her own need intensified to the point that the throb of her heart was matched by an echoing pulse in her sex.

With eager hands, she grabbed the back of his head and leaned down to him. Clay rolled her onto her back, his hard cock sandwiched between them, pressing into her belly as he assumed the dominant position.

Rusty explored his mouth with her tongue, tasting his lips, nipping at his full bottom lip before indulging herself in the warmth inside his mouth. His taste was the most powerful aphrodisiac she'd ever experienced. Coupled with the fire dancing on her skin from his hand traveling down the side of her body to slide beneath her and tighten on her ass, she was breathing hard with desire.

A groan from Clay had her pulling away to stare into his hazel eyes. There was fire burning in their depths, and something more. Emotion—raw and powerful—glittered. That emotion shook her to the depths of her soul, bringing to the surface all the longing and lost wishes she'd so carefully buried.

She closed her eyes, letting her fingers trace over his face, feeling the strong bones that lay beneath the surface and memorizing the feel of him. When her fingers reached his mouth she opened her eyes and saw him watching her. A slow, sexy smile came on his face.

She returned the smile and reached up to lick at his lips, feeling his breath sweet in her face. His lips beckoned. Like an addict eager for the next high, she claimed them in a devouring kiss.

Never breaking the contact of her body to his, she moved her lips from his mouth to his neck and rolled them over so that he was beneath her. His taste was like no other she had experienced, exotic and male. His natural smell made her hunger for more. Slithering lower, she explored his chest with her mouth, taking her time, lost in the feel and taste of him. Inch by slow inch, she worked her way down his body.

When she slithered down between his legs, spreading his thighs to kneel between them, she looked up the length of his body. Her eyes met his as both her small hands wrapped around his dick. Clay's body arched at the contact, provoking a stab of powerful feminine satisfaction inside her. She started to stroke him but he suddenly grasped her wrists and sat up, pulling her arms behind her back.

Something wild and primitive called from deep inside her, something that wanted to be taken, to be possessed and loved until she was drained.

Clay smelled her need, felt it vibrating through her body. It fueled the need inside him...to make her his. To pleasure her more than any other man. To stake a claim that could not be undone.

Her skin was hot and moist. He ran his tongue under her breast, moving up the side of the full mound. She arched her back when he flicked his tongue over her nipple, using the tip of his tongue to run small circles around the hardening nub. When he captured it between his teeth, Rusty moaned.

Within moments she was writhing, her breath fast as she pressed forward, thrusting her breast against his mouth. Clay battled with himself. Fighting the urge to throw her to the ground that moment and sink his dick deep inside her, but wanting more to take her even deeper into need. That need for her to want him more won.

Releasing her wrists, Clay gripped her hips and raised her to stand before him. Her protest transformed into a purr of pleasure when he kissed her stomach and ran his tongue down the center of her belly, stopping at the fringe of hair that topped her mound. His hands moved up the sides of her legs to her hips, then around to grip her ass tightly and pull her pussy to his face. Her smell was of sweet meadows in spring, of

honeysuckle wafting in on the night air, a promise of passion that had him eager to taste more. Rusty murmured encouragement, running her fingers through his hair, pulling his head tighter to her.

Her clit was swollen and sensitive when his tongue moved over it. Rusty gasped and gripped him tighter, arching toward him. Clay indulged himself, sucking the hard nub into his mouth, circling the sensitive flesh with his tongue. Just as she gasped and started to shudder, he moved his mouth away and stood before her. Rusty bent like a reed as he gathered her against him in a searing kiss. Her body hummed, creating a sound that was primal.

He recognized the sound, his mind translating for him on a primal level that she had moved beyond mere want and fully into need. Knowing that he'd awakened such hunger had his groin tightening, his mind going nearly blank with the desire to fill that need, to hammer inside her, make her scream and shudder until there was no need left. She undulated against him. His hands cupped her ass, slowing and guiding the frantic rotation of her hips.

Rusty broke the kiss, both of them breathing hard as her hands moved down the center of his body, going steadily south. He was long and hard. She ran her fingers through the hair at the base of his cock and down the crease at his legs, admiring his length and thickness. He quivered when she ran a fingernail down the shaft to the bulging head of his cock, knowing that neither of them would last long with so much built-up need. And his need demanded to be filled.

He grabbed her shoulders and laid her down on the ground, sliding his hands down her arms and over her hips. She moaned when he kissed her stomach and ran his tongue over her clit. His hands moved up the inside of her thighs, brushing her sex with his thumbs, then his mouth replaced his hands. Rusty screamed in pleasure.

It was time. Kneeling between her legs, he lifted her hips to meet him. Slowly he entered her wet chamber. Her muscles tightened around him, making him grit his teeth

at the pleasure that shot down his shaft. Fighting to go slow, he put his full length inside her. Her body resisted at first, her pussy tight and wet around his thickness.

He stifled a groan, wanting to pound into her, to slake his thirst. It took all the control he possessed to hold back. His chest tightened as he fought for control, the effort making his breathing hard and ragged. Gritting his teeth against the need that pounded at him with ever-increasing intensity, he began a slow rhythm, pulling almost completely out before plunging back in again. Rusty quaked with each stroke, opening herself for full penetration. His rhythm began to build in speed and intensity. Aching to get deeper, he grabbed behind her knees and lifted her legs in the air.

Rusty moaned and stretched her arms up over her head, arching up against him, abandoning all control. It was so supremely feminine and submissive that it threatened his tenuous control. Primal need took over and he stroked hard and fast, her cries and gasps driving him faster and harder until he felt control fading like mist in sunshine.

Knowing that he was perilously close, Clay slowed his pace and lowered her legs. Coming forward, he captured her mouth with his. The kiss was slow but passionate, matching the motion of his hips. Together they danced a primitive dance, each naturally matching the rhythm of the other. Clay lost himself in the moment, wanting it to last forever. Nothing in his life had ever felt so right as this moment, and this woman.

As Rusty deepened the intensity of the kiss and wrapped her legs around his waist, his motions became harder. He drove himself into her wet core. She pushed against each thrust, driving him deeper into her. Her legs tightened around him as her body went into climax. Wetness poured between them, her pussy clenching around him, her belly contracting. Her head arched back, eyes closed in abandon. Clay slowed his movements, enjoying the feel of her orgasm.

Rusty went limp and sank into the feeling of Clay kissing and sucking her neck. He pulled out of her as his mouth traveled to her breasts. He teased her nipples as his hand continued the journey down her body and slipped under her ass. With expert motion, he rolled her on top of him. He ran his fingers down between her cheeks, over her anus

and up to swollen lips. He fingered her clit gently as he sucked her breasts. Just as another orgasm began to ripple through her body he shifted her and drove himself into her.

Rusty cried out and at that moment the power of the female asserted itself. She whispered words foreign to his ears that made his skin burn and his mind explode with light and sensation. She took him, setting the pace and rhythm, riding him like a runaway stallion. Sweat poured from both of their bodies. His hands pulled at her hips as his eyes raked over her body, stopping to stare into her eyes. With eyes locked and bodies connected, they traveled together to a shared climax that left them both spent and exhausted.

Rusty lay down on him, the side of her face against his broad chest, listening to the rapid beat of his heart. She felt his arms circle her protectively. Relaxing into his embrace, warm against his skin, she fell asleep.

## Chapter Eight

The delicious sensation of fingers dancing across the skin of her back woke Rusty. She opened her eyes and remained still, enjoying the feel of Clay's warm, solid body beneath her, a cool breeze wafting across her and his hands moving slowly down her back to cup her rear.

She raised her head and looked into his eyes. "Anyone ever told you that you're about the most beautiful thing that ever walked this world?" he asked in a low, slow drawl that sent a shiver racing through her.

"Not that I recall, Mr. Russell."

"Mr. Russell?" he asked with an arch of his brow. "Honey, we're way past that."

"Hmmm, maybe," she teased.

"Maybe hell," he chuckled and rolled them over so that he had her pinned to the ground. "No more Mr. Russell. It's Clay. Come on now, it's a short word. Only one syllable."

"Nope," she said with a shake of her head and pushed him away so she could sit.

She stretched her arms over her head and arched her back, sighing as the muscles loosened. Clay watched with glittering eyes, propped on his side on the ground.

"Aw now, Fancy, what's a man to think if you won't even say his name after a night of lovin'?"

Rusty laughed. "Well to start, it was morning. And to say a night of lovin' implies that it was something that lasted for hours on end and as I recall..."

Clay growled and silenced her when he sat and grabbed her hair to pull her face to his for a kiss that sent fire singing in her veins. His tongue parted her lips and

plundered her mouth, staking his claim not only with the kiss. With his left hand fisted in her hair, he held her captive, running his right hand slowly up her bare inner thigh.

Rusty returned the kiss with equal passion. Having sampled the delights of making love with Clay, she was anticipating what was to come. She thought perhaps to just let him have his way when his questing fingers stroked her clit, bringing it immediately to life. But then she changed her mind. Maybe it was time to let Clay feel some of her fire.

"Wait." She pulled back from his kiss and stilled his hand. "I want you to come with me."

"That's where I was headed, darlin'," he replied as she stood.

"No, come with me somewhere."

For a moment Clay didn't move. "Please," Rusty said and extended her hand.

Clay got to his feet as Rusty slid on her boots and gathered up her clothes. "You might want your boots," she commented as she started picking up his clothes from the ground.

"Uh, you plan on stomping around in the woods in just your boots, honey?"

Rusty gave him a sassy smile. "You got a problem with that, Mr. Russell?"

Clay rolled his eyes. "Darlin', I'd rather look at you naked than just about anything I can think of, but don't you think it's a little risky running around naked in the woods?"

"Oh I get it, you're chicken," she teased. "Well okay, fine. Get dressed then."

Clay cursed and grabbed a boot. In seconds he was standing with his boots on and his fists on his hips, looking so darn delicious that she almost changed her mind.

"Okay, where to?" he asked.

"Follow me, cowboy," she said and started hiking up the hill.

Clay had logged plenty of miles hiking the countryside in Arizona but never in his life had he hiked naked. He wouldn't be likely to admit it to anyone but it was kind of

exciting. The wind was cool but the sun warm on his skin. And watching Rusty's enticing little ass sway in front of him was an added treat. So much of a treat that he paid little attention to the direction they walked. He was far too caught up in watching that tight ass, and the sway and bounce of Rusty's breasts when she turned occasionally to look at him.

His dick was at full attention, pointing ahead like a compass, aimed directly at Rusty's backside. He sure hoped they didn't encounter anyone. He didn't like the idea of trying to explain running around in the woods buck-naked, sporting a champion hard-on.

Rusty beckoned him as she pushed back thick branches of cedar. "This way."

Clay followed her through the thick stand of cedar. They emerged into a clearing and he stopped dead in his tracks. A rolling pasture sloped downhill from where they stood, the sun lighting the tall grass into golden fronds. Tall oaks and ancient cedars grew in random stands and the land stretched in all directions as far as he could see, guarded over by a sky so blue it seemed painted on.

At the foot of the hill they stood upon was a small lake, glistening in the sunlight. As he watched he saw a fish breach the surface of the water and fall with a splash back beneath the surface.

"Are we trespassing?" he asked, feeling sure that the land had to belong to someone.

"Nope," she grinned. "Welcome to Blackhawk Ranch, Mr. Russell."

Clay grinned at the teasing tone in her voice and the emphasis she put on his name. He'd not had time to ride the whole of the ranch and had no idea the spread was so beautiful. "It's beautiful, Rusty."

The teasing quality left her voice. "It's home."

Clay's grin faded. What he heard in Rusty's voice spoke of roots that ran deep, of belonging to and being one with a place. It was something he understood to a degree. He had a connection to the land of the Circle R. But understanding came from knowing

his brother Chase. When Chase looked out over the land of his own spread, his home, his face wore the same look as Rusty's wore now. It was an expression that said "this is where I belong".

Rusty broke the somber moment. "Race ya!" she shouted and took off running toward the lake.

Clay's long legs ate up the distance her head start afforded her in short measure. He scooped her up with one arm and without breaking stride, tossed her over his shoulder, clutching his clothes in his free hand. She laughed and screamed all the way to the foot of the hill.

When Clay neared the edge of the water he tossed his clothes onto the soft grass and without slowing plunged into the water, boots and all.

Rusty had time to drop her clothes and shriek before they both went under. The water was cool and dark. Rusty kicked away from Clay and swam toward the middle of the lake. When her head broke the surface of the water, she looked around for Clay. He was nowhere to be seen.

A sudden yank on her leg alerted her to his location. She surrendered as he pulled her beneath the surface and wrapped around her. For a few moments they remained locked in each other's arms, their legs moving in time.

Clay kicked his powerful legs, propelling them to the surface. Rusty pushed away from him and swam toward shore. He caught up with her when she was chest deep in the water and turned her to him.

"Not leaving the party so soon, are you, honey?"

Rusty grinned. "Why, Mr. Russell, who said anything about leaving? I just needed to sink my toes in the mud to do this."

She put her hands on either side of his face and locked eyes with him. With infinite slowness she moved closer, her body, cool from the water, sliding up against him. Her breasts flattened out on him as her legs moved to circle his waist.

Clay moved his hands beneath her, cupping her ass to pull her more firmly against him. The feel of her hot sex against his belly had him heating up fast. With those violet eyes holding him prisoner and her hot body sliding up and down on his, it was only moments before he was itching to get inside her. He started to reposition her to do just that but she stopped him.

“Not yet,” she said softly and pulled his head down. Her lips caressed his, her teeth nipping at his lower lip before her tongue flicked out to soothe the small ache and slide into his mouth. The kiss was slow, deep and wet and would be the mark of what he would forever judge a kiss against. It lasted a moment, an eternity. He didn’t know which and didn’t care. The whole of his existence was wrapped up in that kiss. His body was on fire. He’d never wanted a woman as bad as he did her in that moment.

When she released him from the kiss, she leaned back to lock eyes with him. It was as if she was seeing inside his soul. He felt exposed, raw and more in need than he’d ever been.

“Rusty, darlin’,” his voice rumbled, rough with need.

“Mr. Russell,” she said with a hint of a mischievous smile.

Clay had never cared what a woman called him. Stud, darling, honey, baby. It had never mattered. But with Rusty it did. He wanted to hear her whisper his name, say his name, scream his name. “Darlin’, please – no more Mr. Russell.”

She studied his eyes for a long moment. He was starting to think that she wouldn’t speak and then she very softly whispered, “Okay...cowboy.”

His hands tightened on her flesh and his cock pulsed against her. “I want you, Rusty. More than I’ve ever wanted a woman. God as my witness, I want you beyond reason.”

She smiled and stroked his face softly. “Enough to surrender?” she asked.

“Surrender?”

“Yes, surrender.”

“To what?”

“This,” she replied and softly chanted, *“Quicquid didiceris, frequenter repete, en menti tuæ infige, de multum discas non multa: quia animus humanus non potest omnibus par esse.”*

If anyone had ever told Clay that reality could explode, he would have laughed or accused them of doing drugs. But that’s exactly what happened. Reality splintered. There was no earth, no sky and no cool water lapping against their bodies. All that existed were Rusty’s eyes, big and luminous, dancing with lights that spilled out and danced in a whirling dervish around them, tingling his skin with energy that was electric and completely sexual.

It was as if every inch of his flesh had transformed into an erogenous zone. The stroke of her fingers down his face and neck left a trail of electricity. His nipples burned as her nimble fingers circled and stroked, then moved lower.

Clay couldn’t contain a moan when her hand slipped between them to encircle his dick. She rubbed the head against her wet channel, the warm fluid from her sex lubricating him so that his dick slid easily against her. He felt her sex opening, felt the flutter that started in her belly as she eased the head inside her.

His breath rasped out hard as she pressed down, taking more of him into her tight little pussy. Her fingers dug into the flesh of his shoulders as she worked herself onto him, inch by slow inch, taking the length of him inside her.

She started moving on him, slow and steady, up and down, her pussy slick, hot and tight, a gloriously warm soft glove that pulsed on his dick, delivering sensations he’d never experienced.

Rusty leaned close to his ear and whispered her chant again, finishing by taking his earlobe between her teeth and biting gently. After that Clay couldn’t really say what happened. All he knew as his existence was wrapped up in that moment, in the orgasm that built slow and steady like a loaded freight train rolling down the track, getting closer with each moment, building and building until there was nothing but release. A

climax that was like a wave claimed him, pounding, driving and rolling. Capturing him in the undertow and refusing to release him.

His knees buckled as his dick throbbed and his seed spilled deep inside her. Rusty clung to him, her pussy milking him until he was dry and weak. He sank down into the water with her still wrapped around him, his forehead resting against her shoulder.

Rusty cradled him against her. For several minutes they were frozen in place, neither willing to break the union.

“Darlin’, I’ve no idea what just happened, but if that’s what a man gets by surrendering then I damn sure want to surrender again—real soon,” Clay whispered against her skin.

Rusty giggled and unwound herself to sink into the water. “And just how soon is real soon, Mr. Russell?”

“Mr.?” he yelped and dived after her as she laughed and started wading for the shore.

Rusty laughed out loud as he caught her and turned her into him. “Damn, woman, what’s it take to get you to call me by my name?”

Rusty smiled and hugged him. “Time, cowboy. Just time.”

Clay’s face split in a smile as he guided her hand down to his erection. “Time’s a wasting, darlin’.”

“Nothing with you is a waste...darlin’.”

Clay smiled and scooped her up in his arms to carry her to shore. He placed her down on the soft grass, lying beside her and running his hand down the curve of her body as she stretched like a lazy cat under his touch.

Rusty reached for him, opening her mouth to speak a few words he didn’t understand. He silenced her with a finger to her lips. “Not this time. Mind-blowing as that was, this time it’s my way.”

“Then have at it, big boy,” she encouraged before sucking his finger into her mouth.

Clay never imagined that an index finger would possess so much feeling. But inside her mouth, his finger literally throbbed with sensation.

“Damn, woman, you are a witch.”

Rusty released his finger with a chuckle and started to speak when a stricken look came over her face. She pushed him away, scrambling for her clothes and screaming for Koda.

Clay hurriedly rose. By the time he’d dressed, Rusty was disappearing into the stand of trees at the top of the rise. He ran after her at full tilt, his heart pounding in his chest, not from the exertion but from anxiety at the fear on her face and in her scream.

Even at a dead run it took him a couple of minutes to catch up with Rusty. She didn’t acknowledge his presence directly behind her but continued to run as fast as her legs would carry her toward the main ranch complex.

It took them nearly fifteen minutes to reach the pasture bordering the west side of the ranch proper. Horses pranced and snorted anxiously in the pasture, pawing the ground and dancing around a dark lump on the ground.

Rusty let loose a howl of pain and grief that struck Clay to the center of his soul as she collapsed on the ground beside the prone body of a painted horse. It took only one glance to see that not only had the horse been shot but gutted as well.

For several moments she screamed, tears streaming down her face as she stroked the dead animal. Then she bounded to her feet and flew toward the house. Clay followed, unsure what to do except stay close.

Rusty ran into the bunkhouse and emerged a few seconds later with a rifle. She headed for her truck with a murderous gleam in her eyes that had the violet darkening to the color of storm clouds.

Clay raced after her, grabbing her arm as she reached for the door of the truck. “Hold on now!”

“Let go of me!” she snarled and jerked her arm free of his grip. “Those bastards killed my horse!”

“And you’re gonna what? Kill them?” he shouted back at her. “For the love of might, woman, what the hell good will that do but land you in jail?”

“Shut up!” Rusty screamed at him.

“No!” Clay grabbed her as she moved to open the truck door.

She struggled against him, putting up enough of a fight that he had to exert more force than he wanted to subdue her. She screamed and battled until finally his superior strength won out and she collapsed against him, sobbing uncontrollably.

“They...they...killed...killed my horse,” she bawled brokenly against his chest.

Clay didn’t know what to say so he held her silently, letting her cry. It took awhile before the sobs turned to silent heaves and then to sporadic sniffles. When Rusty pushed away to look up at him, her eyes were swollen and red, filled with such grief that his heart nearly broke.

“Ah, darlin’.” He gathered her to him again. “We’ll find the bastards who did this and make them pay.”

“I already know who did it,” she mumbled against his chest.

He pushed her back to arm’s length to regard her seriously. “I know you think it was your in-laws, Fancy, but—”

“Not think. I know,” she interrupted. “This has the stink of Stikeleather all over it. I can’t let them get away with it. I can’t.”

“We won’t,” he said with heavy emphasis on the word “we”. “But we’ve got to do this by the law. Okay?”

She was silent for a long time. Finally she nodded. “Fine. We’ll try it your way, but god as my witness, if the law doesn’t see justice done, then I’ll take matters into my own hands.”

As she spoke, her eyes began to dance with a wild light, like lightning illuminating dark clouds. A breeze picked up, blowing uncommonly strong, and the sky itself darkened with sudden clouds.

The horses in the corral snorted and danced as if in anticipation of a storm. Even Koda, ever close by, let loose with an anxious string of barks and yips.

At the sound of Koda's barks, Rusty seemed to snap out of whatever force bound her. She turned to look at Koda. "They will pay," she stated with utter finality.

Koda gave one bark in reply and turned away. Clay watched it all with apprehensive curiosity. "Darlin', please. Don't do anything you'll regret. Let the law do its job. If they can't bring the guilty party to justice, then I promise you, I'll use the entire weight of my family to find them and make them pay. Just promise me that you won't...uh, you won't do anything you won't be able to undo. Deal?"

Rusty studied his eyes. "You give me your word on that, Mr. Russell?"

"God as my witness," he promised.

"Then you have a deal," she said, and added, "but fair warning. Anyone who welshes on a deal with me doesn't get a second chance."

With that she turned and walked away. "Where are you going?" Clay called after her.

"To prepare a goodbye for a friend," she said over her shoulder.

Clay heaved a sigh and started for the bunkhouse to get his cell phone. Time to call the sheriff.

## Chapter Nine

Davy slammed the thin door to the bedroom back against the wall as he entered, rousing Stella from her sleep. She squinted up at him from the rumped bed. "Mornin', sugah. Didn't 'spect to see you so early."

"Got a hankerin'," he replied and started stripping off his clothes. "Get up on your hands and knees, honey."

"Can't we do it regular this time, honey?" Stella whined.

Davy reached out and slapped her hard then grabbed her by the hair and dragged her completely off the bed, across the bedroom and into the small den. He shoved her over the arm of the couch, pressing her face hard against the cheap vinyl. "You stay there, bitch, or I'll whip your ass so hard it bleeds. You got me?"

Stella whimpered and nodded, remaining as she was, bent over the arm of the couch, ass up.

Davy went into the kitchen and rumbled around for a few minutes. When he returned he held a squeeze bottle of cheap margarine in his fist and a leather strap.

"Now, time for Daddy to punish his bad girl," he said as he upended the bottle and squeezed the rancid margarine all over her ass.

Stella had time enough to squeak before the strap landed on her rear. She yelped at the pain and reached back to cover her ass. Davy grabbed her by the wrist and bent her arm back so hard it felt like it was going to break. "You do that again and I'll beat you so hard you won't be able to walk for a week. Now stretch your arms out over your head and stick that ass up higher."

She whimpered but complied. It was a game they both loved. He had a need to possess and she a need to be possessed. Davy's dick grew increasingly erect with each

blow of the strap. When Stella was screaming like a banshee and her ass was crisscrossed with rising red welts, he tossed the strap aside.

He squirted the margarine over his dick and then stuck the tip of the bottle into her anus and, using both hands, squeezed hard. She cried out in protest but made no move in fear of retribution. Margarine seeped out of her ass when he removed the bottle.

He stroked his dick, his mind transforming the cowering woman in front of him into the likeness of Rusty. Now it was she who was bent over in surrender before him.

“Reach back and spread your cheeks, baby,” he crooned in the tone of a lover. “Beg me to fuck you up the ass.”

Stella visibly winced as her hands gripped the flesh of her abused cheeks and spread herself open as wide as possible. “Oh yeah, baby. Yeah.” Her breath was fast and hard, letting him know that she wanted what he had to offer.

Davy punched her in the back of the thigh, angered that she had improvised her dialogue. She knew what he wanted to hear but sometimes she forgot and acted on her own need instead of his. “I said beg me, baby. Tell me how much you want it.”

“Please,” she whispered, pressing her ass higher, spreading as wide as possible. “I want you, baby. Put your dick in me. Fuck me hard, baby. Please. I need you.”

The fantasy returned and Davy grinned as he rubbed the head of his dick against her anus. “Want it, don’t you, baby?”

“Yes, please,” she whispered.

He pressed his pelvis forward, sinking the head of his cock into her anus. “Nobody fucks you like Daddy, do they, baby?” he asked as he grabbed her hips and pulled her toward him.

“No one,” she screamed as he impaled her on the length of him. “You’re the best. The best.”

“Damn straight,” he groaned and pounded into her. “You’re mine. And you love it. Want it. Can’t live without it.”

“Yes!” she screamed. “Please, fuck me hard, Davy. Fuck me hard!”

Davy grinned and slammed against her in increasing speed and ferocity. Within moments he felt the buildup begin. “You’re mine!” he shouted as he released himself inside her, his body quaking under the force of the climax.

“Oh yes,” Stella moaned, still unaware that the man who’d just lost his load in her ass was talking about another woman entirely.

\* \* \* \* \*

It had been six weeks since the murder of the horse. Since that morning, Rusty had become a different woman, a ghost of her former self. Clay had done everything he could to snap her out of it, but she’d cut herself off from him.

Not even Koda seemed to have an effect on her, even though Clay had seen them engaged in long discussions. Each one ended the same as the previous, with Rusty taking off for the woods, not returning until dawn when she would set to work with a vengeance.

Clay was worried. If the murdered horse wasn’t enough, the series of events that had followed was enough to drive even the strongest person to madness. They’d had cut fences that had them spending days rounding up stray stock, two horses that had vanished without a trace, supplies that were never delivered and suppliers that claimed to have received calls canceling orders, slashed truck tires twice when they went to town and a poisoned stream in the east pasture.

Not even the resources of the Circle R would be enough to pull Blackhawk out of the red if this continued. Already the family was starting to suggest that perhaps Clay should discuss with Rusty the possibility of selling the land and transferring the stock to the Circle R in Arizona.

He was loath to make such a suggestion to her. She’d barely said a dozen words to him as it was, speaking only when there was something that had to be said concerning work. Other than that, she avoided him.

Clay couldn't figure it out. "What the hell have I done?" he asked aloud as he sat on the porch of the bunkhouse and watched her go into the barn.

*You are not held accountable for what eats her soul, human,* a deep voice seemed to come from inside his head.

Clay literally bounded to his feet in surprise. Was he losing his mind?

*Not that I can tell,* the voice replied to his mental question.

Clay whirled around and saw Koda standing at the end of the porch, regarding him.

"That can't be you," Clay said.

*Because?* Koda's face actually split into the canine equivalent of a grin.

Clay's butt hit the chair bottom with a thump. "You're talking to me? Actually talking? Why?"

*Because I cannot help her alone. Should she sink any deeper into her despair and guilt, she could be lost forever. That I cannot allow. I need your help.*

Clay stared in amazement as Koda walked over and sat down in front of him. "She won't even talk to me," Clay said. "So what can I do?"

*Remind her that she loves you.*

Clay's heart did a funny little lurch in his chest. "Loves me?" he asked, despite the spark of hope that ignited inside him. "Hell, she won't let me near her."

*Because she blames herself for what happened. She was with you when the horse was killed and she feels responsible. She let her feelings for you take precedence and so she was not here to prevent what happened. She thinks she is as responsible as the one who committed the murder. She neglected her duty and the cost was a life.*

"That's ridiculous!" Clay exclaimed.

*Not to her.*

"Well, why haven't you tried to set her straight on that?" Clay asked.

*Because she blames me as well. Why did I not sense trouble and warn her?*

Clay nodded thoughtfully. "Were you aware of what was happening?"

*No, my mind was elsewhere. I did not sense it until it was too late.*

Clay fell into silence, thinking. He'd never imagined that she felt responsible. That she carried around such guilt. Or that she blamed Koda.

*Her accusations at me are nothing more than frustration, human. It is her guilt that needs eliminating. It eats at her soul and carries her steadily toward a madness that will prove disastrous unless averted.*

"What do you mean?"

*She will use her power for ill rather than good.*

"And?" Clay asked. "What will happen if she does?"

*Her power will turn against her and destroy her.*

Clay felt a sick sweat break out on his body. "So how does reminding her that she loves me cure anything? If she even does. Doesn't look much like love from my view."

*Pain and guilt cloud the heart and mind, human. You should know that. Her heart is filled with love for you. Despite not wanting to. She runs from that love because it is what will free her and she is afraid to let go of the guilt.*

"That doesn't make sense," Clay replied.

*Humans rarely do.*

With that, Koda turned and leapt off the porch, trotted to the barn and disappeared through the open door. Clay blew out his breath and leaned back, staring blankly at the wooden ceiling above his head.

If what Koda said was true, then what did he do? That thought alone had him rolling his eyes and questioning his sanity. He'd just had a conversation with a wolf? Shit on a stick, wouldn't Chase like to hear that? Thoughts of Chase had him suddenly sitting up straight.

Ana! If anyone would be able to advise him it was Ana. He snatched his cell phone from the holder at his belt and punched in her number.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rusty tossed the last shovel of dirty bedding into the wheelbarrow and swiped the back of one dirty glove across her forehead at the sweat that tracked down toward her eyes.

*You can't get rid of it as long as you cling so tightly to it.*

She turned and glared at Koda. "I don't need your shit right now, thanks."

*Now is exactly when you need it. You can work yourself until you drop, hide in the forest every night of your life and run from the truth until the day you die, but the truth will still stand when you are gone.*

"And just what the hell is this mighty fucking truth?" she snapped.

*That you cannot control the actions or intent of others. You could not have stopped what happened. Not any of it. If not that day, then it would have happened another. When a man is intent upon evil, he will find a way to commit that evil despite all efforts of another.*

"But I wasn't here!" Rusty screamed and sat down hard on the ground, covering her face with her filthy gloves. "Brummel died a horrible death and there was no one here to protect him.

"Or to hold him and let him know he was loved at the end." She looked up at Koda as she sobbed.

*He knew. Rusty, we all know. Your love is like the sky above us, as vast and pure and constant. And that love is returned tenfold from every being here. Even the human, Clay.*

Rusty wiped at the tears that ran down her face. "He doesn't love me, Koda. How could he? I don't even love myself."

*And therein lies the problem, my friend. Hatred stains your soul and robs you of that which is most precious. Unless you release the hatred and embrace the love, then you are as doomed as those guilty for all the evil that is perpetrated against you. You give them all the power. You let them win.*

"No!" Rusty jumped up and ran to the tack room. Within minutes she had Beau saddled and was mounted.

Clay saw Rusty tear out of the barn on Beau and race toward the western pasture. He ran to the barn and quickly saddled Fleetfoot, the largest and fastest of the stock.

Koda stood waiting at the entrance of the barn. The moment Clay emerged, Koda took off at a run. Knowing without being told that Koda would lead him to Rusty, Clay followed.

Rusty raced across the pasture, urging Beau to go faster. They flew like they were racing a storm, Beau's powerful legs pounded like pistons, his hooves kicking up clods of dirt and grass in his wake, with Rusty crouched low over his neck, her small frame moving as one with his as if they were one being.

She didn't know what she was running from exactly. Only that she had to run. That unless she escaped the pain and anger she would explode into a thousand pieces. She kicked Beau into a jump as they neared the fence bordering the pasture. Once clear, she steered him sharply to the left, headed for the trail that led into the hills. Toward salvation.

\* \* \* \* \*

Davy reached his secret observation spot just as Rusty rode out of the barn at breakneck speed. It was only a couple of minutes before the Russell fellow was in hot pursuit.

Davy grinned and grabbed his cell phone. If they were lucky, they had time to pull off another attack before Rusty and Russell returned.

He quickly called his brothers and set them into motion, then settled back to wait. His plan was working like a charm. Even though he and his brothers had started the gossip about Rusty, rumors were flying, people speculating that she'd gone off the deep end and was unstable.

Not that the law wasn't looking in his family's direction. They'd all been called in for questioning after every event. Fortunately for Davy, his alibis had been secured and were holding up just fine. Stella could be quite convincing, even if she was a whore. When she claimed that she and Davy were engaged, and even produced a diamond to back it up, everyone believed her.

The only problem was that now she was starting to believe the lie herself, and Davy found himself spending far more time with her than he wanted. Fucking her kept her happy even if it was distasteful. But with enough liquor and drugs, he could pretend it was Rusty he was fucking. That fantasy was enough to have him giving Stella some rough nights of hard sex and kinky thrills. But she didn't mind. Hell, she welcomed it. And fool that she was, she took it as proof of his love for her.

He'd let her believe it until Rusty was his, then he'd get rid of her. No one would question her taking an overdose and killing herself over their breakup. Everyone in the county knew that she'd been trolling for a husband for years and was getting desperate. To be so close and then get dumped would be enough to have her ending her sorry life.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay was grateful for Fleetfoot's strength and stamina, and marveled that Koda was able to stay ahead of them, his feet flying effortlessly over the ground in pursuit of Rusty.

Ten minutes passed before he heard Koda's voice in his mind. *There they are.*

Clay searched the land before him. Sure enough, disappearing into a stand of trees at the top of the ridge was Rusty, laid out along Beau's body as if she were part of the animal.

Her skills in handling a horse were evident as she urged the horse in a winding course through the trees. Clay was pushed to keep on her tail and entered the heavily wooded area behind her.

When he emerged two horse lengths behind her, they were on top of the ridge, with a long slope headed down on one side to a barren landscape. He recognized the place but was certain that the first time he'd been there he'd come from another direction.

Rusty raced Beau down the hill and leapt out of the saddle almost before she reined the animal to a halt. She ran to the middle of the barren clearing, her arms thrown out wide, turning in a circle and shouting to the heavens.

"Gods and angels, spirits on high, I seek your guidance, please hear my cry. My soul walks in darkness, thick and black. Please help me find the strength I lack. Show me the way, guide me this night. Erase the darkness. Show me the light."

Tears streamed down her face as she turned 'round and 'round, repeating the words time and again.

Clay reined Fleetfoot to a stop and dismounted. He didn't know what to do, so he did nothing but stand and watch, tears gathering in his own eyes as he watched and felt her despair.

*She requires our strength,* Koda spoke in his mind.

Clay looked down at the wolf by his side. "What do we do?"

*This.*

Koda started toward Rusty. A breath later Clay followed. He watched Koda stop beside her as she turned, 'round and 'round, calling out to the heavens. Koda's voice joined Rusty's in the chant. Clay took a position beside Koda and raised his own voice in time with theirs.

Rusty heard their voices and her constant twirl slowed then stopped, her chant stuttering to a halt.

Clay and Koda finished the chant then fell silent.

"It's not working," she said in a voice so void of hope that Clay's heart nearly broke.

“But it will,” he assured her, not realizing until he uttered the words that he believed.

He reached out for her hand and placed his free hand on the back of Koda’s neck. “We’ll make it work. Let us help, Rusty. We love you.”

Rusty studied his face for a long time before she took his outstretched hand. She let him pull her closer and placed her free hand close to his on Koda’s neck. With a weak voice she began the chant again, closing her eyes and tilting her head back so that her face pointed skyward.

Clay and Koda joined in the chant. He closed his eyes and concentrated all his energy on the words. So focused was he on the wishes the words sent out into the universe that he lost track of time, standing there under the sky, the three of them joined in a triangle of hope.

He became aware that a wind had risen. Not strong or possessed of anger, but a cool, soothing breeze that carried the scent of wildflowers and fresh grass, trees and fertile earth.

He opened his eyes and with surprise beyond all measure saw around them a fertile green land, lush with grass that rippled in the breeze and flowers that grew in random profusion.

A beam of light streamed down from the soft billowing clouds that floated lazily in the sky, illuminating them in golden warmth. Clay felt the light penetrate him down to the marrow of his bones, healing warmth that was so pure it nearly made him cry for joy.

He turned his mind from his own joy to look at Rusty. Her face was still turned up but now her eyes were open, tears streaming as she smiled up at the heavens, her violet eyes swimming with dancing lights.

The light slowly faded and after a moment Rusty turned and dropped down on one knee in front of Koda, gently loosening her hand from Clay’s to loop both arms around the wolf’s neck and hug him.

She stayed like that for a long time before she pulled back. "Thank you, my friend. For always being there for me, for telling me the truth even when I don't want to hear it. For loving me. You hold my heart, Koda. We are of the same blood, you and I, and nothing will ever change that."

*Words of truth, my friend. I rejoice in your return to the light.*

Rusty smiled and rose to face Clay. "You saved me. You and Koda. Your love saved me. I never thought to know such love, and I am so sorry for all I have put you through. All I can say is that I will strive to never cause you pain or suffering again. I love you, and as long as my energy exists on this plane or another, I will love no other."

Clay never imagined that a heart could sing but in that moment his did. "I love you, Rusty. Now and always. I'm yours if you want me."

Rusty smiled and all of the pain and grief that had been etched so deeply on her face was gone. "Well now, there's an offer I just can't refuse, Mr. Russell."

Clay blew out his breath. Even in the most intimate of moments, as they were declaring undying love, she managed to be a tease and a smartass. "Woman, you're enough to vex the hell out of a man."

Rusty laughed and threw herself into his waiting arms. "Vex? Why, honey, I haven't even begun to vex yet."

Clay laughed and spun her around, burying his face in the crook of her neck. "Ah, darlin', I do love you so."

He slowed the spin so that her feet could touch the ground. She brushed long silken strands of hair from her face and smiled up at him. "I love you..."

"Come on now, darlin', it's not that hard. Say my name."

Rusty's eyes sparkled with light, causing a flutter in his belly that was part anticipation and part sexual. "Once I say it, there's no going back so you better be sure."

"Never been surer in my life," he replied without hesitation.

“Well just remember, in the years to come when you bitch and moan about all the vexation I cause you...you asked for this. I love you, Clay.”

Clay literally jumped at what sounded like the clear pure tone of a bell, echoing throughout the universe, throughout his heart, mind and body.

“What the heck was that?”

“A sealed deal,” she said with a mischievous grin. “You’re stuck with me now, Mr. Russell.”

“Shit on a stick, are we back to that already?” he complained. “Damn, woman, what’s it take to get you to say my name?”

Rusty laughed, turned and ran. “Catch me and you’ll find out.”

Little as she was, she could move fast. She led Clay along the base of the ridge, through a thicket of cedar so dense that he lost sight of her, and into what had to be the prettiest grove of walnuts and oaks he’d ever seen. Towering three stories high at least, their massive branches and thick boughs formed an umbrella against the sky. Light filtered in shafts to the forest floor, carpeted in leaves and spongy soil.

Rusty ducked behind the trunk of a massive oak. Clay circled around the other way and she ran smack into him.

“Gotcha,” he declared the obvious and took her into his arms.

“Indeed you do,” she breathed, catching her breath. “Question is, what’re you gonna do with me now that you’ve got me?”

Clay looked around then back at her. “Well, my first inclination isn’t working out too good, seeing as how we’re in the middle of a forest. Not exactly the ideal spot to make mad love to your woman.”

“Traditionalist,” she teased and started backing away.

“Come back here,” he made a grab for her.

“Come and get me.”

Clay watched her backstep to an old oak with twin trunks. Off the side of one, a large branch, nearly as thick as the trunk it emerged from, stretched almost horizontal to the ground.

Rusty stopped with her back against the branch. With a coy expression, she slowly started unbuttoning her shirt.

Clay's dick swelled at the sight. Inch by inch, she revealed herself to him. Her nipples tightened as the cool air brushed over them. Rusty turned, draping the shirt on the branch. With a look over her shoulder at Clay, she unfastened her jeans and began to work them ever so slowly down her hips.

Beneath the denim was only woman. A sound between a growl and groan came from Clay as she bent over to pull off her boots, giving him a bird's-eye view of her tight ass and pink sex, plump and glistening.

She smiled and straightened then turned to face him, hands cupping her breasts, thumbs stroking over the hardened buds of her nipples.

Clay was nearly bursting with need at just the sight of her. She was intoxicating, completely uninhibited and natural in her nudity as if she were part of the forest, a mythical wood sprite come to tempt him.

Rusty watched Clay's hazel eyes grow dark with hunger, and his hand move unconsciously to the length of his erection, straining at his jeans along the inside of his right thigh.

When he started toward her, she thought of a large sleek puma, his movements purposeful yet fluid, his eyes smoldering and heat flowing from him that she could feel despite the distance that separated them.

He divested himself of his boots and socks before he reached her, leaving them where they fell on the forest floor. Stopping in front of her, he stripped off his shirt, tossing it across a low-hanging branch. Rusty reached up to trace her fingers from the firm swell of his chest to the waist of his jeans, all the while, her eyes locked with his.

Her body yearned for his touch, for the feel of him filling her. His scent alone made her nipples burn and her sex grow full with need.

She moved her hand lower as he slid out of the jeans. The span of her grip was too small to encompass his hard shaft but strong enough to make his breath hitch as she began to stroke him. As she worked one hand up and down the length of his pulsing cock, the other dipped down to fondle his balls and caress the sensitive skin between his testicles and anus.

A glistening bead eased from the small opening in the head of his cock. She ran her index finger over it then raised her hand to her mouth to suck the taste of him from her finger. It was as strong an aphrodisiac as she'd ever known and her mouth watered for more. But Clay obviously had other plans.

Clay dislodged her hands before she could make him come. He was already dangerously close. He placed his hands on either side of her waist and lifted her up to sit on the branch behind her. Rusty grabbed his shoulders, pulling him forward as she spread her legs to accommodate his body between them.

He rubbed the head of his cock against her sex, feeling it open like a blossom in sunlight to his touch. Wet and ready, she wiggled against him.

He smiled and eased off when she tried to push forward, to take him inside her. Easing her back so that she was bent bowlike over the massive branch where he'd tossed his shirt, he lowered his head to one breast.

Her breath whooshed out as he rolled her nipples between index fingers and thumbs. A tremor ran through her that was like fuel to the fire in his veins. To know that his touch could incite such sensation was intoxicating beyond compare.

He took his time, sucking and laving her nipples until she was moaning with pleasure and want, reaching to try to take his dick in her hands. Gently but firmly, he pushed her hands aside, holding them tightly as his mouth began a slow trek down the center of her body.

Her clit was a glistening orb of taut flesh that beckoned. He sucked it into his mouth and Rusty arched, a moan coming from deep inside her that was primal and totally female.

Releasing her hands, he gently spread the lips of her pussy, lubricating his fingers with her juice. His tongue circled her clit, flicking at it then circling again as he eased two fingers into her hot channel.

Her pussy quivered around his fingers, contracting and releasing. With slow, steady thrusts, he worked his fingers inside her, finding that secret spot that when stroked had her crying out. Her thighs trembled and her clit hardened to a tight marble. Clay knew she was close.

He released her hands and raised his head. "Noooo!" she protested. "Don't stop."

He smiled down at her, one hand moving to grasp his dick as the other teased the lips of her pussy. "I want to see you do it. Come for me, darlin'. Show me how much you want me."

A thrill unlike any she'd known raced through her. His tone was one of mastery, that of a man sure of his power over a woman. She was his. That made her pussy weep with hunger. Never had she surrendered to a man, been his to do with what he wanted, been a slave to his desire. Never had she imagined she would want to.

Clay had awakened desires within her she hadn't known existed. Now that the awakening had occurred, she embraced it wholeheartedly.

With slow flowing movements, she let her hands move up the sides of her chest to her neck, sweeping her long flow of hair up with her fingers and arching her neck back, thrusting her breasts high.

Ever so slowly, she worked her hands down, stopping to moisten her fingers in her mouth then tease her hard nipples, rolling and pinching until the demanding call of her clit drove her hands lower.

With both hands, she spread her thighs wide then spread her sex, fingers moving slowly between the outer and inner lips to meet at the hard bud of her clit.

“That’s it, darlin’,” Clay crooned in a voice rough with desire. “Show me, Rusty. Show me how bad you want me.”

His voice served to deepen her hunger, the look on his face spurred her on. She stroked her clit, rubbing until a climax threatened, then slowing to run her fingers down between the lips to fondle Clay’s finger that teased the opening of her pussy.

“Do it,” he urged. “Come for me. Now, Rusty. Come for me and call my name.”

She almost came right then. Her pussy spasmed, wanting, needing the feel of his cock seated inside her. Her fingers moved once more to her swollen clit.

It took only seconds before the wave hit. Her body quaked, pulsing sensation driving her to arch on the limb. “Clay—” Her voice was a harsh whisper, an explosion of breath.

Clay’s dick throbbed in his hand. At the sound of her crying his name he nearly came in his own hand. With swift motion, he positioned himself between her trembling legs. One thrust and the head of his dick speared her hot channel.

“Wait,” she rasped. Wiggling free from him to roll over on her belly, she bent across the limb with her behind in the air, his discarded shirt bunched beneath her.

Clay almost lost his load at just the sight of her, ass up and legs spread, offering herself to him. He pulled her legs farther apart, opening her pussy wide. One push and his dick slid fully into the tight, wet warmth.

Rusty cried out, a wordless moan that sent an electric shock straight to his balls, making them tighten almost painfully, the sensation was so intense. Gripping the limb, she pushed back against him, arching so that her belly pressed tight against the limb and her hips rose higher.

Clay couldn't suppress the groan that rumbled from his chest. The sight of his dick moving in and out of her tight pussy, and her little anus, open and available, was enough to drive a man mad.

Lubricating his thumb with the juice that flowed from her, he eased it into the tight hole of her ass, his hand splayed out on her buttock.

She groaned and pressed against him. Her ass was tight and obviously virgin. The realization that she'd never given that part of herself to another man had him nearly buckling at the knees to control the orgasm that threatened.

"Relax, darlin'," he murmured in a voice so rough he didn't recognize it himself. "Just relax and let me in."

"Clay," she gasped as he worked his thumb into her ass to the first knuckle. "Oh god...Clay."

"That's it," he encouraged, feeling the vibration that thrummed through her. "Give it to me, baby. Let me have all of you."

"Yes," she whispered. "Please. Take me, Clay. Take me now."

It was total surrender he heard in her voice, felt and saw in her body. She pulled her hips higher, offering him everything.

With one push, the knuckle of his thumb slid within the circle of tight muscle. At the same time, he sank to the hilt into her pussy, riding her in swift strong strokes.

Rusty screamed his name as an orgasm claimed her. Her pussy tightened on his dick in pulsing waves as her ass contracted around his thumb. Clay couldn't hold back the flood any longer. With a groan, he succumbed to the climax.

Moments or an eternity passed as he rode the waves of sensation that claimed his body and mind, reality sliding from his grasp as he lost himself in feeling.

When at last reality returned, Rusty slumped limply across the limb. Clay eased from her body and rolled her over to pull her into his arms. Their lips met, parted and

joined in a kiss that spoke of love and belonging, their slick skin pressed tightly to one another.

As their lips finally parted, Rusty reached up to place her hand on the side of his face. "I love you."

"Ah, Rusty, darlin'," he whispered. "You've stolen my heart. For me there will never be another. I love you.

"One thing," he added and she raised her eyebrows curiously. "Do you think that maybe one day, we could do this in an actual bed?"

Rusty laughed and traced the pad of her thumb across his full lower lip. "Why, Mr. Russell, how conventional."

"Mr.?" he sputtered as she clamored free of him with a wicked giggle. "Woman, I can see right now I'm gonna have to spank your ass good."

Rusty hooted a laugh, grabbed her clothes and took off running. "Promises, promises," she yelled over her shoulder.

Clay snatched up his clothes and hurriedly dressed then took off in hot pursuit. By the time he caught up to her, she was half dressed, running in the direction of the horses, laughing like mad.

He caught her just as she neared their mounts. She screamed in delight as he swung her into his arms. "Well, honey, seeing as how you're still bare-assed, I guess now's as good a time as any for that spankin'. Less of course, you want to promise you'll stop that annoying habit of calling me Mr. Russell."

She rolled her eyes, "Hmmm, seems to me that not stopping's gonna get me a lot more than stopping...Mr. Russell."

Clay gave her a mock scowl. "Have it your way," he said as he plopped down on the ground and laid her across his lap.

"Clay, I was kidding," she protested as he brought his hand down on her rear.

"Really!" she yelled at the second spank, and tried to break away.

“Not hardly,” he argued in a sex-hungry voice and threw one leg over the back of her thighs to trap her in place, at the same time grabbing her arm and twisting it up behind her to force her to press her chest down to relieve the pressure, effectively raising her pink-cheeked ass higher.

Rusty squirmed in protest, at first anxious over being so completely trapped and vulnerable. Clay’s hand came down on her ass again, hard enough to make her jump and her skin burn but not hard enough to cause damage.

She grunted and bit her bottom lip, trying to stem the lust that was manifesting fast and hard. But her traitorous body would not cooperate. It wanted what he offered. To be dominated completely.

Clay sensed her rising passion, smelled the scent of her sex rising in the air. It inflamed him, much to his surprise. He’d never wanted to possess a woman, to dominate her, be the master to her slave. But Rusty brought out something in him that had remained dormant too long and once set free, it could not be locked away again.

He wanted her to want it, to beg for it. To be his without reservation.

He paused and released her. She rolled away, her face flushed and pupils dilated with desire. “So, you had your fill of bullying?” she asked in a husky voice.

“Not by a long shot, darlin’,” he replied equally as husky. “Now I want you to roll back here on my lap with that delicious little ass in the air. I’m gonna give you a good spanking, and when I’m done, I’m gonna fuck you with my tongue. In your pussy. Up your ass. And then I’m going to fuck you with my fingers. And when your pussy is swollen and sensitive to the touch and your ass is stretched nice and loose, I’m going to put my dick in you and ride you until you can’t come anymore.”

Rusty’s pussy actually clenched at his words, juice spilling out to wet her thighs. How was it that he knew her secret desires when she didn’t? How was it that she wanted to be dominated by this man, to be used as his toy of satisfaction?

“Don’t make me tell you twice, darlin’,” his voice broke into her thoughts. “Roll over here.”

Her body literally trembled as she complied, positioning herself across his lap.

“Stretch your arms up over your head, darlin’, and push your ass up higher.”

She did as he commanded. A moment later his hand came down on her right buttock, a sharp sting that radiated out into a burn. A second blow followed on the other cheek. By the fourth spank, her ass was on fire and she was groaning with the pleasure of the pain.

“Please,” she gasped at the next spank. “No more. Please.”

Clay’s hand landed lightly on her ass. “You gonna be good, Rusty? You gonna do what I tell you? Give me what I want?”

“Yes, yes!”

“Then get on your hands and knees, honey. Spread those legs and put your head and chest on the ground. I want your ass up where I can get to you.”

Rusty was afraid her body would betray her further, that she would come just thinking about what was going to happen. She whimpered in lust and anticipation as she complied. Clay knelt behind her, his fingers moved to the open channel of her sex, dripping with need. He spread her wide then lowered his head, running his tongue from her ass to clit in one long, slow lick that had her gasping and grasping handfuls of grass on the ground.

The sun traveled across the sky, starting its sink toward the western horizon by the time Clay fulfilled all his promises to Rusty, leaving her limp and exhausted, lying atop his strong body.

“Good god,” she said and sat up, straddling him as she peeled wet strands of hair loose from her skin, holding her hair in a bunch on top of her head to cool her skin.

“Complaint or praise?” Clay asked, lying contentedly on the ground, taking pleasure in the sight of her naked body straddling his, her arms up over her head, pulling her firm breasts up higher.

“Definitely praise,” she replied. “Mr. Russell, you tap into a side of me I didn’t even know existed.”

“And now that you do?” he asked, for once ignoring the Mr. Russell tag.

“Now I guess I’ll just have to hang onto you like a big ol’ leech.”

“Why, Miz Blackhawk, how romantic.”

They both laughed, surprisingly comfortable in the sexual roles they had assumed without plan or forethought.

“Yep, ol’ silverlips, that’s me,” she replied.

“Hmmm, I’d say gold,” he argued with a sexy smile. “Much warmer and matches the color of your skin better.”

She released her hair and leaned over, propping herself on her arms on either side of him.

“Well, gold or silver, if these lips don’t lock around some food soon I’m gonna dry up and blow away.”

As if on cue, her stomach rumbled loudly.

“Damn, woman, let’s get you to the trough!” Clay exclaimed.

Laughing like kids, they both hurried to dress and mount their horses. Rusty laughed as she leaned close to Beau’s neck, urging him faster, even as Fleetfoot’s long legs brought Clay closing in on her. For this one moment, all was right with the world.

## Chapter Ten

Rusty and Clay rode side by side to the barn. She was flushed from laughter, her hair tangled from the wind, but smiling as she looked over at Clay, the man she loved. She extended her hand to him. Just as their hands touched, a loud rapport rang out, spooking the horses, causing them to prance nervously. Fleetfoot reared up, making Clay fight to stay in the saddle.

Being less nervous by nature and soothed by having Rusty rubbing his neck, Beau settled quickly and she whirled him around and shot off toward the paddock. Her eyes raked over the stock. A moment later she was out of the saddle and climbing the fence, heedless of the concealed threat.

Clay reached the fence to see Rusty in the middle of more than a dozen frightened horses, pawing and prancing nervously, their high whinnies filling the air. Rusty seemed oblivious to the danger of tons of horseflesh and sharp hooves as she knelt over the prone body of a chestnut mare.

He vaulted the fence and ran to her.

"She's been shot!" Rusty's hands were plastered over the wound, trying to stop the bubbling blood.

Clay knelt down beside her. "It's not fatal. It got her high enough on the leg that she'll make it. We just have to get that bullet out and stop the bleeding."

"We can't let her die." Rusty looked at him with pleading eyes. "We have to save her."

"We will. Just keep pressure on the wound while I get the medical kit."

Clay took off for the barn. Rusty pressed down on the wound, took a deep slow breath and closed her eyes. She thought of the joy of a few moments earlier, and the grace she'd felt bestowed upon her in the mountain clearing. Suddenly all of the noise

around her vanished. In that silence she poured all of her energy, offering her life force to the wounded animal, willing the horse's wounded body to heal.

She felt heat gather in her hands. Within moments her skin felt as if a branding iron had been pressed to her palms. Sweat broke out and poured down her face, stained her clothing and turned her dark hair into sodden strands.

The pain intensified until she was gritting her teeth so hard her jaws hurt. She refused to give in to the pain. The horse was an innocent life, harmed by the evil intent of another, and she refused to let that be.

"You *will* heal," she hissed between clenched teeth. "By all that is holy and good, you will heal."

"Rusty, no!"

Clay's voice filtered into the silence that bound her but she couldn't cease her efforts. She could feel strength flow from her to the horse, feel the beat of the animal's heart getting stronger and steadier. Just a few more moments was all she needed.

Like being yanked from a deep sleep, she was wrested away, the contact broken.

"No!" she screamed, beating at the arms that held her. "Let go! I have to save her! I have to—"

"You already did!" Clay shouted then lowered his voice. "Darlin', look. Look. Can't you see you already did?"

Rusty's head whipped around to look. Sure enough the wound had stopped bleeding.

"But the bullet's still in there," she whispered. "Clay, we have to get the vet here quick or infection will set in and—"

"I'm on it, baby," he interrupted, pulling his cell phone from his belt and dialing as he spoke.

"Yeah, hey. Clay Russell over her at Blackhawk Ranch. We've got a horse with a gun shot. We've stopped the bleeding but the bullet needs to come out."

He listened to the response then replied, "Will do. Half an hour."

Rusty looked up at him as he ended the call. "Doc said to bandage it up and get her in the trailer. He'll be set up to operate as soon as I get her there."

She nodded silently. Together they got the mare to her feet. Rusty led her toward the barn as Clay ran and hooked up his truck to one of the trailers. Working together, they had the mare loaded and bandaged inside of ten minutes.

"Come on," he said as he secured the door to the trailer.

Rusty stepped back, shaking her head. "You take her. Someone has to stay here. Get the rest of the stock into the stalls."

"Rusty, whoever shot her is still out there. You can't stay. Either come with me or you go and I'll stay here."

"No."

"Rusty, listen to reason. There's someone out there with—"

"Clay, I know what I'm doing," she interrupted softly. "Please. Trust me. I can handle this. Just get Blackberry to the vet."

Clay started to argue but she took his arm, squeezing urgently. "Please, I need to know that she's being taken care of. And I *need* to take care of the stock. I promise, no harm will come to them or me while you're gone."

He opened his mouth again to argue but decided against it when he saw the lights start to dance in her eyes, and heard Koda's voice in his mind. *I will safeguard her, human. Go do what needs to be done. We will be here when you return.*

Clay looked down at Koda then at Rusty. She nodded and stood up on tiptoes to place a soft kiss on his lips. "Come home to me," she whispered then released him and hurried toward the paddock, whistling for the horses as she went.

"You find the bastard that did this," Clay said to Koda. "Don't hurt him. Just find him and get me a name."

*And then?*

“Then this shit stops,” Clay growled.

Koda cocked his head, regarded Clay for a brief moment then turned and ran toward the paddock where Rusty was already herding the horses toward the paddock gate.

Clay climbed in the truck, cut one look over his shoulder at the brave woman he loved, then started the truck and pulled away.

Rusty watched the truck disappear from sight. She knew Clay didn’t understand why she wouldn’t go with him. She didn’t have the heart to tell him that she was afraid he would be the next in the rifle sights if he stayed.

She finished getting the horses into their stalls and feeding them, then she and Koda walked together to the barn door.

Rusty put her hand on Koda’s head. “It’s the Stikeleathers. They’re the ones behind all this, Koda. Question is, why can’t the law pin them? They’re not that smart.”

*One of them is.*

Rusty cut him a sharp look. A split second later her eyes widened. “Of course! Davy. That smarmy little slime.”

*Don’t underestimate your opponent. He has successfully outwitted your law and avoided capture thus far.*

“You’re right. But...” She turned to Koda with a grin. “I do have one ace left up my sleeve.”

Koda laughed. *I was wondering how long it would take for you to realize that there are ways to deal with evil that lie beyond the purview of your law.*

Rusty dropped down on one knee and looped her arm around Koda’s neck. “Right, partner. So what we have to do is come up with a nice little varmit trap. But first, tell me. Is he still out there?”

Koda grew very still, sniffing the air with closed eyes. *Yes.*

“Think you could round up enough friends to give him a scare if I put a charm lock on his weapon?”

*I don't need reinforcements for that.*

“Sorry, didn't mean to imply you aren't up for the job. Just thought some of the gang might enjoy taking part in the fun. And it has been awhile since you've run with the pack. I know you miss them, Koda. And I'll be fine here. Clay will be back soon. And maybe I'll ask the owls to keep an eye out in case Davy comes back. I'll call if I need you.”

*So be it.*

Koda gave her hand a lick then trotted out of the barn and disappeared into the growing darkness.

Rusty watched him go, then closed her eyes and took several long slow breaths. She opened her eyes, staring sightlessly into the darkness, her hands moving in the air before her, her lips muttering the words of a charm. Three times three she repeated the charm, weaving the spell with her hands. Then she snapped the fingers of her right hand. A brilliant flare of light accompanied the snap. The charm was in place.

Knowing that now Koda would be in no threat from a weapon forged by man, she headed for the house.

Inside it still stank of burned wood and fabric. She made her way to the rear of the house, where her mother's room lay. It had survived the fire. Despite the stink that permeated the rest of the house this room still smelled as it always had. Of flower petals, herbs and oils.

“Could use your help now, Mom,” Rusty said as she went to the heavy carved armoire and opened the door. “I never was as good at this spell casting as you. Sure hope I remember what you taught me.”

She pulled a carved wooden box from the back of the armoire, tucked it under her arm, grabbed a thick old quilt that was draped over a chair and left the room, closing the door behind her.

While her mother had always done her best magic in the kitchen, Rusty was cut from a slightly different cloth. Perhaps it was her father's blood in her, but her power was stronger outside where she was connected with the earth.

She went out behind the bunkhouse, beneath the shelter of an ancient oak. Spreading the quilt on the damp grass, she sat down, setting the box between her legs.

The hinged lid opened easily despite all the years it had sat unused. Inside lay the implements of power, passed on to her from her mother.

Rusty smiled as she beheld the collection. Even laughed out loud as she recalled her mother telling her that she'd never feared that her precious collection would be stolen. For who would think such items as her treasures had value?

Rusty lifted the most powerful and beautiful of all the objects. A feather. A simple feather of brown and white and rust. She waved the feather in the air before her, seeing a trail of light wafting in its wake.

Asking for blessings and guidance, she waved the feather in a gentle dance, tracing lines and symbols in the air, the trailing light creating a visual yet quickly fading pattern in the darkness.

Once the blessing had been requested, she returned the feather to the box and picked up the next object. A small glass vial of water. Inside it was a tiny shell, plucked from the sea at dawn.

Rusty pulled the cork from the bottle and wet her right index finger with one drop. Pressing the damp tip of her finger in the center of her forehead, on her throat and the center of her chest, she pictured the vastness of the Earth's water, its gentleness and its power. That which is so weak yet so strong.

The third object was another glass vial containing dark black soil. Collected from the highlands of the place of her mother's line, and the mountains from whence her father came, it was the sacred spirit of the earth. Rusty uncorked it and dribbled a tiny amount into the palm of her hand.

She uttered a chant, appealing to the spirit of the Earth, asking for clarity and steadfastness to stand firm and solid in her resolve to end the evil.

The objects to be taken from the box next came from her father's people, a stick worn smooth from the hands that had held it. Attached to the top of the stick was a rope, fastened so that it acted as a type of pulley.

Rusty rose and felt around on the ground beside the quilt. She found a small piece of wood, broken dry and splintered. Positioning the tip of the stick onto the dry wood, she gripped each end of the rope and started rotating the stick, faster and faster.

Minutes passed. Sweat streamed down her face but her efforts never slowed. Then she saw it, a tiny puff of smoke. Faster and faster she spun the stick. Another puff of smoke rose from the dry wood, then a minute spark of red.

Gently she blew on the igniting ember, spinning the stick without pause. The ember ignited and she laid the starting stick back in the box, breathing gently on the tiny flame.

Bowing her head, she offered thanks for the fire and made her request. That her efforts be forged in the fire of truth, burned free of ego and self-service. That she be allowed to stop the evil that stained her land and robbed beings of life. She asked for justice to be served in a way that no life was lost.

For a long time she watched the flame. It grew and consumed the wood that fed it and when the fuel was gone, diminished and disappeared. It was not until the wood was without heat that she put it aside, closed the box then lay back and stared up through the leaves of the tree at the deepening sky, waiting for her answer.

It came in the form of the sound of Clay's truck coming down the drive. Suddenly she knew how to do it. With his help, they would trap the Stikeleathers and bring them to justice without ever striking a blow.

Excitedly, she gathered up the box and quilt and hurried to the house, with hope in her heart that her horse was okay.

Clay no sooner stopped the truck than Rusty was pulling open the door. "How's Blackberry? Did he get the bullet out? Will there be any permanent damage? Do you know what kind of gun it came from? Did Doc Wilson give you the bullet? Are you—"

"Slow down, darlin'," Clay interrupted as he slid out of the truck and took hold of her arms. "First. Blackberry will be fine. Doc Wilson says chances are good that she'll recover fully but probably will never see competition."

"Who cares? 'Long as she's okay."

"That's my gal. The slug came from a deer rifle. Doc says we can check in town to see who all owns one, but it's bound to be a long list."

"I already know who it was."

"And you found that out how?"

"Koda told me."

"Koda."

She nodded. "It was one of the Stikeleathers. Clay, I think I have it figured out."

He regarded her with a healthy dose of skepticism. "You got it all figured out while I was gone."

"Yep."

"Something you're not telling me, darlin'?"

"No."

Clay guided her toward the bunkhouse. "Let's start over, okay. I left and you..."

"I told Koda that I was certain it was the Stikeleathers but didn't understand why they'd eluded the law 'cause they aren't the brightest bulbs on the strand. And he reminded me that one of them is."

Clay took her hand and guided her to the wooden bench on the porch of the bunkhouse. "One of them is what?"

“Smart. Davy. He’s the shrimp of the family. And the youngest. Coming from a family that thinks might makes right, he had a hard time growing up. He was always getting pushed around because he was small and not very strong.

“I remember Danny saying once that Davy had more brains than all the rest of them combined.”

“Could have been nothing more than the boast of a brother, hon.”

“No. He was right. Davy isn’t book smart but there’s always been a kind of creepy intelligence about him.”

“Creepy?”

“Yeah. He really creeps me out. I’d rather face one of the brutes like Donny than Davy. With Donny you know what you’re up against. But Davy’s different. He’s the type to stab you in the back. And he’s a pervert.”

Clay cut her a look. “I’m serious!” she exclaimed. “He used to sneak around and try to get a look at me in the shower and stuff and once I caught him outside the window when Danny was trying to get in my pants.”

“Well, that still doesn’t make him a criminal mastermind.”

“Fine, don’t believe me.” She pulled her hand from his and stood to walk out into the yard. “Koda!” she called softly. “Did you get rid of him?”

Clay stood when Koda’s voice sounded in his mind. *As predicted, it was the youngest of the brood. At the moment he’s on foot, running for what he thinks is his life as the pack has fun chasing him.*

Rusty turned with a smile to report to Clay but he waved his hand to stop her. “I heard.”

Rusty was a little surprised that Koda was allowing Clay to stay tuned in but figured that was Koda’s choice.

“Okay, I’m convinced,” Clay said and patted the bench beside him. “But we can hardly take the word of your wolf to the law.”

"We don't have to take anything to the law," Rusty said as she stepped back up onto the porch.

"You wanna explain that, Fancy?"

"Gladly, Mr. Russell," she said with a wicked grin. "If you want to trap a rat you just have to leave the right bait."

Clay pushed his hat off his head and set it on the bench beside him. "I get the feeling I'm not going to like this."

"Oh, I think you'll like it well enough," she said and sat down beside him. "And you get to play a starring role."

Clay groaned and leaned back against the wooden wall. "Okay, let's hear it."

\* \* \* \* \*

Davy burst through the front door, out of breath and as wet as if he'd just come in out of a rainstorm. Davis was sitting at the kitchen table with a mason jar of corn liquor in his hand.

"Damn fool!" Davis shouted. "You damn near made me spill my drink! What the hell's matter with you, boy?"

Davy started to blurt out the story but stopped. If he told his father that Rusty had sicced a pack of wolves on him, Davis would laugh in his face and say he was a liar, that he'd just gotten spooked and run off, just like always.

One thing Davy could count on was Davis belittling him, making him out to be a spineless coward because he didn't like to settle things with his fists.

"Where's the boys?" he asked instead.

"Out pussyfootin' far as I know." Davis returned his attention back to his jar of liquor.

Davy hurried back to his room and snatched off his wet clothes. He'd take a shower and head on over to Stella's. She might not be much but she was eager and he was suddenly feeling a hunger that only a night of sex would cure.

## **Chapter Eleven**

Clay reached over and took Rusty's hand as he parked the truck in the crowded parking lot of the Painted Pony Bar. As was usual for a Saturday night, the place was packed. She sat staring out of the window, a serious expression on her face.

"You sure you want to do this?" he asked.

At her nod, he gave her hand a squeeze and pulled her to him. "Just remember you can bail any time you want and we'll find another way. Okay?" he whispered.

"I'll be fine. You just make damn sure you don't let that Stella into your pants."

Clay shuddered at the idea. The last week he and Rusty had played amateur detectives. They knew all about Davy and Stella and, thanks to Koda and the pack, knew that Davy was orchestrating the attacks on Blackhawk Ranch. He had his brothers doing most of the dirty work, but it was clear that he was calling the shots.

Koda had observed him on a walkie-talkie, directing his brothers three nights ago when they tried to steal two of the horses. Thanks to the pack, and Clay and Rusty sleeping in the hayloft on standby, the plan failed.

Rusty had used her mother's scrying bowl and after three failed attempts had succeeded in tapping into Davy's private life. She saw the photos he'd taken of her, taped inside his closet door, along with the other sick images of bondage and torture that excited him so.

That spurred her to set their plan in motion. It was obvious that Davy had plans for her that she wanted no part of and she wasn't about to let it get to that.

"Then let the show begin," he said and raised her hand to kiss her knuckles. As he started to open the door she stopped him. Something had been niggling at the edge of her inner vision, something she couldn't bring into focus. But it was something that

troubled her, and she felt she had to set up safeguards, just in case whatever it was manifested into something dangerous.

“Clay, wait.”

He turned back to her.

“If...if something happens. Something we didn’t count on, then I—”

“I’m not going to let anything or anyone hurt you,” he proclaimed.

Rusty knew he meant what he said. What she could not say to him was that her fears were not that something would hurt her, but that ill might befall him.

“I know,” she assured him. “But humor me, okay. If something should happen, something out of the ordinary and you find yourself backed into a corner or outnumbered, then I need you to remember this. *Aeris accendo asporto.*”

“What?”

“Just say it. *Aeris accendo asporto.*”

“*Aeris accendo asporto,*” he stumbled slightly over the unfamiliar words.

“Again,” she said.

“*Aeris accendo asporto.* I got it.”

“Don’t forget. Please, Clay. This is important. Promise me you’ll remember.”

“I promise,” he said and took her hand to lay it over his heart.

“Okay.” She gave him a smile, but as they got out of the truck she wove a quick memory charm on him to help him remember if the need arose.

They entered the bar and made their way through the crowd to a table near the crowded dance floor. Rusty spotted Davy at the bar but didn’t see his brothers.

Stella, who worked as a waitress at the bar, approached their table. Rusty plastered a bright smile on her face. “Well hey, Stella. Long time. Oh my goodness, is that a diamond on your finger? Girl, I didn’t know you were engaged! Who’s the lucky guy?”

Stella smiled wanly. “Hey, Rusty. Looks like I ain’t the only one with a new man in my life. This must be the Russell fella I been hearing so much about.”

She turned her attention to Clay. “Stella Stevens at your service, cowboy.”

Clay turned the full force of his charm on, smiling up at her from beneath the brim of his hat. “Well now, that sounds plumb inviting, darlin’. Clay Russell’s the name, but my close friends call me Breaker.”

“Well now, I just got to know the reason for that name,” Stella flirted right back, ignoring Rusty completely.

Rusty wasn’t finding it difficult to look miffed. Even though she knew it was an act, she wanted to snatch Stella bald and drag Clay out of the bar by the scruff of his neck. Damn him, did he have to be so freaking good at his role?

“Well now, darlin’,” he was saying, tipping his hat back to pin Stella with his eyes. “I got me that nickname on the PBR. Seems I just break those bulls’ balls every time I get on one.”

Stella giggled and leaned down with one hand on the table. “Hard rider, are you, handsome?”

“Long and hard, sugar. Ain’t no other way.” His accent was becoming thicker by the moment, making Rusty want to kick him under the table.

“Whooo! You gonna have me break into a sweat any minute,” Stella said in a husky voice, leaning a little closer so that her breasts threatened to spill out of the low-cut red top that clung to her curves like a second skin.

“Well, darlin’, I’d sure like to see that, but this lil’ ol’ gal here just might start to spittin’ if I don’t pay her a little attention—seeing as we’re partners and all. Why don’t you bring me a tall cold one, and when you get a break maybe we can see if we can work up a sweat on the dance floor?”

“You got it, stud. What’s your brand of poison?”

“Whatever you got on tap is fine, honey.”

Stella grinned then grimaced as Rusty cleared her throat loudly. “Yeah, Russ, what’ll you have?”

“Tequila. Straight up. No, make that a bottle,” she added as Stella started to move away. “Tab’s on Russell here.”

Clay scowled. “I think we already had this discussion. No more tequila.”

“You’re my partner, Russell. Not my keeper,” Rusty sniped. “Now you gonna buy me a drink or do I need to sit elsewhere?”

“Fine,” Clay spat and looked at Stella. “Bring her a damn bottle.”

Stella walked off and Rusty leaned a little closer. “You don’t have to turn it on all at once, Mr. Russell.”

“Jealous, darlin’?” he teased.

“Just don’t lose yourself in the role.”

Clay chuckled then assumed a scowl as Stella hurried back across the bar toward them. “Here ya go, handsome,” she cooed as she placed the beer in front of Clay, and then plunked a bottle of cheap tequila down on the table with a shot glass. “Russ.”

Rusty saw an opening and took it. “I don’t want this cheap rotgut. Bring me a bottle of Patron. Silver.”

She cut Clay a look, hoping he would catch on and join in. He was quick and immediately assumed his role. “Look here, I offered to buy you a goddamn bottle. If you think I’m paying fifty bucks—”

“Eighty,” Stella cut in.

“Eighty bucks for a bottle of booze so you can get liquored up and act like a slut then you got another think coming, missy!”

“Fine!” Rusty jumped to her feet. “Then drink alone, Russell.”

People were watching and talking as she flounced over to the bar and scanned it for a free space. Davy scooted to one side and motioned to her. Rusty stomped over to the bar.

“Thanks,” she growled to Davy and leaned over the bar, yelling at the bartender, “Mitch! Hey, Mitch! Can I get a shot of Patron down here?”

"Coming up, Russ," he yelled back.

"And one for my friend." She jerked her thumb at Davy.

She turned and stared angrily across the bar to where Clay sat at his table, Stella leaning down over him, looking for all the world like she was trying to scoop him up in her cleavage.

"Here ya go," the bartender said as he set the shots down in front of her.

Rusty turned, slid one glass over to Davy and lifted another for herself. "Here's to getting rid of fucking high-handed, dime-store cowboys who think their rich daddies can buy them whatever they want and to hell with the rest of us."

She clinked her glass to Davy's then tossed back the shot. He raised his eyebrows in surprise then downed the shot. Rusty grabbed the full glass on the bar, at the same time yelling for the bartender. "Hey, Mitch, just bring me a bottle."

"And put it on Russell's tab," she added with a smirk at Davy. "So..." She tossed back her second shot, blew out a breath and leaned on the bar. "How's it hanging, Davy? Been a long time. Where you been keeping yourself?"

"Actually, I've been busy," he replied. "And engaged."

"Engaged? To who?"

"Stella." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

Rusty cut her eyes over to Clay and Stella. "Well then, lil' bro, you might wanna remind her of that. When I left, her and Russell were already talking dirty and getting ready to start in on more."

Davy shrugged. "Fuck her. She can't be faithful, she can go to hell."

"There you go!" Rusty slapped him on the back. "Wish it was that easy for me to get shed of Russell. Damn man's enough to drive a woman to drink."

She lifted the bottle the bartender had placed in front of her. "Which reminds me. How 'bout another one?"

"Sure," Davy replied, still a bit standoffish and suspicious of her sudden friendly manner.

Rusty grinned, sure the cogs in his brain were churning. "So how about a dance, Davy? As I remember it, you always could cut a rug."

"Why not," he replied and threw back his shot. "Whooo, that packs a whollop, don't it?"

Rusty laughed and took his hand to loop his arm across the top of her shoulders. The band was starting up with an old Wynonna song as they reached the dance floor, the lead singer belting it out in a pretty good facsimile of the original.

Rusty shook her ass, shimmied and strutted, twirling this way and that, making the short flirty skirt she wore twirl out around the tops of her thighs. "Come on, honey, don't be shy, we's family," she slurred her words as she grabbed Davy and pulled him up close, grinding against him.

A moment later she knew she'd scored. All of his hesitation and suspicion vanished. His hands grasped her roughly, pulling her against him so she could feel his erection pushing at the front of his jeans.

Rusty wanted to gag. Instead she batted her lashes at him and smiled sexily. "Well well, looks like Davy's all grown up."

"More'n you can imagine," he said in her ear and followed it up by plunging his tongue as far down her ear canal as possible.

Her fists tightened on the shoulders of his shirt and she shuddered in revulsion. Which he mistook for a shiver of desire. "Like that, baby? I got lots more."

"I bet you do." She pulled back from him, wanting nothing more than to sand the skin off her ear. "What say we find us a table and finish that bottle of Russell's booze and talk about it?"

Davy grinned and grabbed her arm to pull her off the dance floor. Rusty saw Clay cut his eyes at her as they passed. She stuck out her tongue at him, already wondering if maybe she shouldn't help the alcohol along and cast a little spell on Davy.

Clay watched Rusty and the little slimeball make their way toward the back of the bar. Now was as good a time as any to make his move. Pushing his chair back, he stood and scanned the crowd.

Stella spotted him from the bar and hurried over to the bartender. As Clay made his way toward the bar, he watched her hold a heated discussion with the bartender. The man finally threw up his hands. Stella gave him a kiss on the cheek, grabbed a bottle and hurried to catch Clay as he made for the door.

He pretended not to hear her as he pushed his way to the door and stepped outside. The cool night air was a welcome relief to the stench of alcohol and too many colognes and perfumes wafting off hot and sweating bodies.

He took a deep breath but turned his head and she stepped up behind him. "Hey, sexy. Where you running off to?"

"Just getting a breath of fresh air, darlin'. You finished for the night?"

"That depends. What you got in mind?"

Clay looked down at the bottle in her hand then let his eyes slide up her body the way he'd done hundreds of other women. It wasn't until that moment that he realized how shallow he'd been. Rusty had changed him, made him see how empty his life had been before her.

For a moment shame made him hesitant. He was about to put the same moves on Stella he'd used on countless others, with no thought as to what consequences his actions would spawn.

But this time was different. At least he hoped it was. If Rusty was right, then Stella knew what Davy was up to and was willingly acting as his alibi. If that was so, then she

was as guilty for the trouble visited against Blackhawk Ranch as the Stikeleathers and did not deserve his pity.

“What say we take a ride and find some place quiet we can talk,” he suggested with a sexy smile.

Stella hesitated for a moment, glancing back at the bar, then tossed her hair and plastered a smile on her face. “Sounds like a plan.”

As they got into the truck, Clay said a silent prayer that he wasn’t leaving Rusty to deal with something she couldn’t handle.

Inside the bar, Rusty poured another shot for Davy. He’d consumed nearly half the bottle. While he was tossing his shot back, she quickly dumped the contents of her own glass onto the floor and then lifted the glass to her lips.

“Wooo hooo!” she cheered drunkenly. “Damn, much more of that and I’m gonna be officially shit-faced.”

“Me too,” he slurred in genuine inebriation then reached out to take her hand. “So, Rusty, you were telling me about that slicker Russell. He giving you a hard time, huh?”

“He’s a bastard!” she hissed. “Bossing me around, telling me how to run my ranch, how to train my horses. I tell you what, Danny, if it wasn’t for all this trouble I think I could get shed of him, but it’s been one thing after another since the day he stepped foot on my land.”

“Well, I might just be able to help you out,” he boasted.

“Yeah, right,” she snorted. “It’ll be a cold day in hell when your family helps me out. Come on, Davy, you and me both know they hate the ground I walk on. Why, you’re the only one of the whole goddamn bunch that ever treated me like I was worth a shit.”

"They ain't 'xactly fond'a you," he agreed. "And truth is, they can be a surly bunch. But you know I always liked you, Russ. I thought maybe after Danny died, well, that maybe me and you..."

"Ah Davy. Really?" she cooed, thinking how much she'd like to scratch his eyes out. "Why didn't you ever tell me? All this time I've been out there all alone, wondering if I'd be able to hang onto the ranch. If I'd ever find another man to love."

"You can. Russ, you can. I can help you."

"How? Until we catch the assholes responsible for all the trouble, Russell is glued to the saddle. If I could just get things back to normal and stop all this trouble then I could convince him and his family that I don't need him to oversee things. I could hire my own foreman and get Blackhawk back on its feet."

"You leave that to me," he assured her and poured himself another drink.

"Davy, it's sweet that you want to help but I can't see how you're going to find the people responsible for the trouble when the law doesn't have the first clue."

"Baby, you'd be surprised what Davy can do," he bragged and swallowed the shot. "Question is, if I take care of your problem, what's in it for me?"

Rusty saw the opening she'd been waiting for. Taking a deep breath, she mentally chanted, at the same time reaching for his hand. Something electric sparked at the contact of their skin. She locked eyes with him. "Davy, you help me pin the bastards responsible and you can have everything you deserve. That I promise."

Davy grinned and tried to lean across the table to kiss her but she moved out of reach and his lips slobbered across the side of her face. Rusty smiled as seductively as possible. "Honey, I think it'd be best if people didn't see us together until the dust settles. That way Russell can't get wind that we're putting our heads together to get rid of him. I better get on back home before tongues get to wagging. But before I do, can I ask one question?"

"Anything, baby." Davy was so drunk his eyes were literally rolling.

“When exactly do you think you can make this happen?”

“Two days,” he managed to mumble before his head hit the table.

Rusty smiled and stood. She looked around for Clay but didn’t see him anywhere. After searching the bar, she went outside. His truck was gone.

“Shit!” she steamed. Leaving her stranded wasn’t part of the plan.

With another curse, she started the long walk home.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay checked the time on the digital readout of the plastic clock that sat atop the television in Stella’s apartment. They’d left the bar an hour ago. He wondered how Rusty was faring with Stikeleather and whether he should give up on Stella and hightail it back to the bar.

At present she was “powdering her nose”, a phrase that grated on Clay’s nerves. What made women incapable of saying they had to take a leak? Another thing he loved about Rusty. She’d fly off with a “gotta pee!” over her shoulder.

Stella entered the room, interrupting his thoughts as she weaved her way toward him. It was a wonder she could walk at all. She’d nearly single-handedly polished off the bottle of bourbon she’d brought from the bar.

“Heya, handsome.” She ran her hand over his leg as she sat down beside him. “Miss me?”

“You have no idea,” he replied, patting himself mentally on the back for being able to answer honestly. An hour with Stella seemed like much, much longer. So far, he’d managed not to have to kiss her, but it was getting increasingly difficult.

“So, you were telling me about your fiancé,” he initiated the conversation. “What was his name again?”

“Davy?” she asked and snorted. “Honey, I’d toss him aside like yesterday’s news if there was something better on the table.”

“Really?” He smiled charmingly and angled to face her. “Doesn’t sound much like an engagement, darlin’.”

“He’s a freak,” she said with a hiss. “Fucking freak. Wants to come in here acting like he owns me, have me do all kinds of kinky shit and the whole time he’s pretending I’m someone else. Stupid fucker doesn’t think I know, but I do. I know.”

“That’s horrible,” Clay said. “But maybe you’re wrong about him. I don’t know the fella, but surely he wouldn’t pass up a chance at a life with a woman like you for some other little hussy.”

“Hussy, hell.” She gave another snort. “Dumb jackass has it for your partner. Little tomboy Rusty, all piss and vinegar Miss I-Can-Outdo-Any-Man-in-Sight Blackhawk.”

“Rusty?” Clay asked in mock surprise. “Why the hell’s he hot for her? Woman ain’t bad to look at, but she’s a heap more trouble than she’s worth.”

“Exactly!” Stella crowed. “See, me and you think alike. Man would be a fool to take up with Russ. Not only does she think she’s good as a man but—and this is just between us—her mama was a witch.”

“A witch?”

“To the bone,” Stella said, tapping his leg to punctuate each word.

“Well, Stella—honey—I don’t know about the witch part, but I do know she’s got a mean disposition and hard to get along with, which brings me to wonder if maybe you aren’t reading your beau all wrong. After all, why would he want Rusty when he could have a sexy, sweet woman like you?”

“Hell, it ain’t just her. Him and his whole family’s had a hard-on for that ranch long as I can remember. Why you think Danny married her after he got her knocked up?”

“Way I hear it, the pregnancy was an accident and he married her to give the child a name.”

Stella howled in laughter. "That what she told you? Well, she's lying to your face, honey. Truth is, Danny set out to get her. He watched her for nigh onto a year before he got her drunk that night and knocked her up."

"He must've had it bad for her."

"He had it bad for her ranch."

Clay shook his head. "What's so special about that ranch?"

Stella laughed again. "You ain't heard? Supposed to be some treasure buried out there. Something Rusty's ma brought back from across the ocean, something handed down from her folks. Some folks say it's a treasure from somewhere way overseas that belonged to Rusty's mama's folks way back. Others say it's some kind of magical gypsy thing."

"And the Stikeleathers went to the trouble to get her married to Danny to try and get it?"

"Yep." She hooted another long laugh. "Damn fools. All it got was Danny dead and the rest of them chasing after their own tails trying to bully Russ into hooking up with one of the other dimwit brothers."

"You including Davy, your beau, in that dimwit group?"

"Hell no. Davy's a lot of things but he's no dummy. That fella's got smarts. Why, look at all the shit he's had his family do to—" Her eyes grew round and she clamped her lips shut.

"Do to what?" Clay asked.

"Nothing, forget it."

"Come on now, darlin', you've got me curious. What I hear is that Davy's as dumb as the rest of his family. Now you say he's smart. Which is it?"

"What difference does it make?"

"Like I said, just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat," she said with a giggle.

Clay forced a chuckle. "Well ain't that the truth. But I'm not a cat, and it's downright mean to get a man's curiosity up then leave him hanging."

"You're hung, all right," she said and made a grab for his crotch.

Clay fended off her advance, capturing her hand in his. "Easy, darlin', no need to rush."

"You a slow hand, big boy?" she asked teasingly.

"Something like that," he said with a smile. "Now what were we talking about? Oh yeah, Davy. You said something about all the stuff he'd had his family do?"

Stella frowned for a long moment then shook her finger at him. "I get it. I get it. I should've known. You ain't here 'cause you got the hots for me. You're here for her. You think I'm gonna spill the beans on Davy."

On wobbly legs she got to her feet. "Well, you got it wrong, mister. I ain't no rat, and I ain't no fool. Now get the fuck outta my house 'fore I call the law."

"Honey, you got it all wrong," he protested.

"The hell I have." She backed away from him. "Get out! Get the fuck out!"

Clay knew when to cut his losses and this was one of those times. Besides, she'd already confirmed that Davy and his family were behind the trouble at the ranch.

Without a word, he stood and left. Back in his truck, he thought about what he'd learned as he headed for the bar to get Rusty.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay had no sooner left the apartment than Stella was on the phone, calling Davy. She had to try three times before he answered, and when he did, she could tell he was drunk.

Without giving him a chance to do more than say hello, she started in telling him what happened. Only in her version, Clay had lured her out of the bar by telling her he had information on how Rusty was trying to renege on her deal with him, and pin all the trouble on the Stikeleathers.

Davy didn't say a word until she ran out of steam, and then all he said was, "Anyone asks, I was with you all night. You got that, Stella. I was with you all night."

"Sure, baby, whatever you say," Stella replied and hung up the phone. Russell would be sorry he tried to play her for a fool. It was clear from Davy's directive that he planned on doing something he needed an alibi for. Stella smiled to herself and looked for the bottle. Might as well celebrate with a drink.

## Chapter Twelve

Rusty put her hand up over her eyes at the glare of headlights coming up fast behind her. The vehicle, a truck, stopped with its lights on her, making it impossible for her to tell who was driving.

“Need a ride?” Davy’s voice rang out a moment after the sound of the truck door opening.

“Surprised you’re fit to drive,” she replied. “You were out cold when I left, so I figured I’d walk.”

“They threwed me out,” he said as he stepped unevenly in front of the headlights, revealing the gun in his hand.

“Hey now!” Rusty protested, putting both hands up, arms bent at the elbows. “What’s all this?”

“This is me calling the shots from now on,” he said in a boastfully arrogant tone. “You always did underestimate me, Rusty. You think I’m fool enough to fall for that line of horseshit you laid on me at the bar? Ha! Not hardly.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Like hell. See, while you were trying to work me, Stella was working that dude. I know what you’re trying to do and I’m here to let you know it ain’t gonna work.”

“Davy, you’re not making sense at all. If you’d just stop and think—”

“Don’t talk to me like I’m stupid, bitch!”

“I wasn’t—”

“I said shut the fuck up. Get in the truck.”

“Why?”

"You want me to shoot you?" He waved the gun, shouting at her. "Get in the goddamn truck!"

"Fine," she agreed, realizing that Davy wasn't at all stable. And unstable people were dangerous. She'd learned that from her short marriage to Davy's brother.

Cautiously she went to the passenger door. Davy followed, his wobbly walk giving testament to the fact that he was way too drunk to drive. As soon as she was seated he tossed something into her lap. "Put 'em on."

Rusty felt the first glimmer of real fear when she saw the handcuffs. "Davy, this isn't necessary. I'm not going—"

"Shut up and put on the fucking cuffs!" he screamed.

Rusty knew better than to push it. She fastened the cuffs around her wrists. Davy checked to make sure they were good and tight before he shoved her across the seat. "Get behind the wheel," he ordered as he climbed in and slammed the door. "Start the truck."

"With these on?" she asked, raising her manacled wrists.

"You'll manage," he snarled. "Start the fucking truck."

Rusty did as ordered but did not put it in gear. "Now this is how it's gonna go," he said. "You and me are gonna head on over to your place for the night. Tomorrow morning we're gonna take a ride down to town hall and get the judge to marry us."

Rusty momentarily forgot her fear. "Like hell!"

Davy backhanded her, making her head swim. "Keep your fucking mouth shut. You're gonna do exactly what I tell you to do or your dude is gonna end up deader'n a doornail."

Fear lanced through Rusty with sharp bitterness. "What have you done?" she gasped.

Davy laughed. "I ain't done nothing but spend the night with the woman I love, honey. Now my brothers, they's a different story. Right about now they should be at

Blackhawk waiting for the dude. When he shows up, they might have to get a little rough with him. But he'll live. If you do like you're told."

Rusty stared at him in astonishment. Surely he couldn't think the plan would work. Even if she went through with it, as soon as she knew Clay was safe she'd go to the law.

As if reading her mind, Davy laughed. "It ain't something you can get out of. Right after we're married good and proper, you're gonna sign over Blackhawk to me. Then if you wanna walk, be my fucking guest. I'm gonna have my fun with you tonight anyway, so it's not like you'll be fucking up my wedding night."

"You're not touching me," she said hatefully.

"Oh I'm gonna touch you, all right. And your fucking dude is gonna watch. I'm gonna fuck you seven ways from Sunday and when I finish, I'm gonna give my brothers a turn."

He laughed manically and slammed his hand down on the dashboard. "I finally got you, bitch, and by this time tomorrow I'm gonna own Blackhawk and the treasure will be mine."

Rusty gaped at him in complete bewilderment. "What treasure?"

"You know what fucking treasure!" he screamed.

"No I don't!" she screamed back. "There isn't any treasure!"

"There is!" he yelled and tried to backhand her again, but she saw it coming and dodged the blow.

"You're crazy, Davy. If there was a treasure do you really think I'd have half starved the last few years to make ends meet?"

He cut her a look that spelled to her that at least she'd made a dent in his dementia. But it was short-lived. "I know what I know," he grumbled.

She thought about it. If he really believed there was a treasure, then she had to figure out what gave him the idea. Maybe then she'd see a way to exploit his delusions and use them against him.

“Okay, fine. I give up. You are a lot smarter than I gave you credit for. But how did you find out about the treasure? I thought the secret was safe.”

“Always underestimating Davy,” he crowed. “It’s gonna put all you fuckers in the grave.”

“You’re probably right,” she agreed. “How did you figure it out?”

“Actually it was my pa. He was over paying a visit on your ma after your daddy died and while he was there he found a letter she’d written to her family.”

Rusty was suddenly rocketed back in time. She was only five years old. She was playing outside, climbing the big oak that grew right outside the kitchen window. That particular day she’d made it higher than she ever had before. She could see down into the window of the kitchen.

Her mother sat at the table, writing. Just as Rusty started to call out, her mother rose and disappeared from view. A minute later she was back. With her was a man. He took a seat at the table. Moments later her mother put a coffee cup down in front of him and reclaimed her seat.

Rusty couldn’t hear what they said but could tell from the way her mother’s body tensed and the expression on her face that she was not happy. When the man jumped up and reached across the table to grab her mother’s arm and jerk her halfway across the table, Rusty screamed.

Both her mother and the man looked up and saw her. They were all frozen in place for a moment then the man released her mother, snatched up the letter from the table and ran from the room.

Rusty shimmied down the tree, crying and afraid. Her mother ran out of the kitchen door as Rusty tore across the yard toward her. Rusty flew into her arms, sobbing. It was not until years later that she remembered. When her mother had wrapped her arms around Rusty, she’d been trembling.

Now the memory returned with such clarity that Rusty realized who the man was. Davis Stikeleather.

“My mother wrote about it in a letter?” she asked.

“She was writing to her family. She said that they didn’t have to worry. The treasure was safe and would continue to be so as long as it was on Blackhawk soil.”

Rusty’s throat constricted. She could almost hear her mother speaking, but the words were not what Davy relayed. How could she ever have guessed that her words would inspire such avarice, envy and evil? It made Rusty want to cry.

But at the moment, she had more to worry about. Such as how to get away from Davy and make sure nothing happened to Clay.

An opportunity presented itself at that moment. Heedless of Davy’s wrath, she jerked the truck into a hard left turn. It crossed the oncoming lane and bounced as it hit a fallen tree along side of the road.

“You fucking cunt!” Davy screamed at her as she floored the accelerator. “Stop!”

Rusty kept her foot plastered to the accelerator. The truck bucked and bounced over the fallen tree and into the ditch beside the road. As soon as it came to a halt, the tail end sticking up in the hair and the engine screaming, Davy belted her in the side of the head. Her last conscious thought was of Clay.

\* \* \* \* \*

Clay walked out of the bar and slapped his hat against his leg. No one had seen Rusty since he left. According to the bartender, she’d left alone, but aside from that no one knew anything.

He hurried to his truck and headed for Blackhawk Ranch, hoping he’d find her waiting for him when he arrived. Otherwise, he didn’t know what he’d do.

The bunkhouse was dark when he arrived. He called out for Koda but got no reply, so he went inside. He’d no more stepped inside when something slammed into the back of his head. For a split second he saw stars and then there was nothing but blackness.

When he woke, he was lashed to a chair. There were two men in the room. The Stikeleathers from the altercation in the bar.

“Well, well, lookey here, Donny. Mr. Bad-Ass is awake.”

Donny walked over in front of Clay. “Not such a bad ass after all, are you?” With that, he slammed his fist into Clay’s face.

Clay’s head reeled back from the blow, blood spurting from his split lip. Dennis grabbed Donny’s arm before he could deliver another punch. “Member what Davy said. Leave him be until we hear from Davy.”

Donny shook off the restraining hand. He didn’t hit Clay again, but he did leer in his face. “Soon as we get the word from Davy, I’m gonna beat the living shit outta you. Then I’m gonna gut you and bury you where no one will ever find you.”

Clay had never known fear, but the man’s words did strike a cold chord within him.

“That ain’t the plan,” Dennis argued. “We’s to wait for Davy. Once he gets here with Rusty, we gonna fuck her while the dude watches. Then in the morning we’s all going to the judge and Davy’s gonna marry the bitch and have her sign over the ranch to him. Once that’s done, we gonna come back here and finish off the dude and make it look like she did it.”

Clay could not believe what he was hearing, or that anyone was stupid enough to lay out their plan the way Dennis had. But what he could believe was that any of the Stikeleathers were mean enough to try to carry out the plan. Clay wasn’t ready to die, but he thought he’d rather die than see Rusty suffer at their hands.

Which meant he had to find a way to free himself and be ready when Davy arrived. The question was how?

*Wait.* Koda’s voice rang in his mind. *It is not yet time to act.*

*When?* Clay asked silently.

*You will know when the moment is upon you.*

*What the heck does that mean?* Clay silently asked. But there was no answer. There was nothing left to him but to wait. And worry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Davy shoved Rusty toward the bunkhouse. Thanks to her stunt in the truck, they'd had to walk the rest of the way. He'd cursed and threatened her every step but she'd remained silent. If nothing else, what she'd done was buy time. She could only hope it had not been a foolish decision. *Come on, Koda, she prayed. I need you.*

They reached the bunkhouse and Davy pounded on the door. "It's me! Open up."

The door opened and Davy shoved Rusty in ahead of him. She got one look at Clay, bound to the chair with a bloody face, and whirled on Davy, kicking out and catching him in the thigh. "You sorry pack of shit!" She followed up the kick by swinging both cuffed wrists at his head, as he bent over to grab his leg.

"Goddamn!" he yelled as she started pummeling him with both fists. "Get her the fuck off me!"

Donny grabbed Rusty around the waist and hauled her up off the floor, kicking and screaming. He slung her around, let go, and she crashed into the table and crumpled in a heap to the floor.

"Rusty!" Clay shouted, struggling at his bonds.

"Clay!" She started scrambling across the floor to him on her knees.

"Shut the fuck up!" Davy screamed at him and whipped out his gun and pointed it at Clay's head.

Rusty froze then slowly stood. "He's no real use to you, Davy. It's me that holds the title to Blackhawk. *And I'm the only one who can lead you to the treasure. Just leave him be.*"

"One more smart move from you, and I'm putting a bullet between his eyes. You got that?"

"Yes."

"Good, then take off your clothes."

"What?"

“You heard me. Take off your fucking clothes.”

Rusty held up her manacled wrists. “Kinda hard to with these on.”

He handed his gun to Dennis. “If she tries anything smart, shoot the dude.” As soon as the gun had transferred hands, Davy produced the key and unlocked the cuffs.

“Now,” he said as he returned to his brother and reclaimed his gun. “Get outta those clothes.”

“No!” Clay shouted, bumping the chair around and struggling at the ropes that held him.

Donny clubbed him in the side of the head hard enough to topple the chair over sideways. The chair back broke, loosening the rope enough that by the time Donny had hold of the chair, trying to right it, Clay had one arm free. He grabbed Donny’s arm as Donny bent over and Clay yanked hard enough to send Donny tumbling forward onto his head on the floor.

Dennis ran to his brother’s assistance. As he was trying to get Donny off the floor, Clay was pummeling him with his free fist in the kidney. Rusty used the moment to make a dive at Davy, trying to get his gun. He saw her coming and lashed out. The gun caught her in the side of the head and sent her reeling. She fell, shook her head and climbed to her feet to launch another attack.

At the sound of the gunshot, everyone froze.

Davy walked over and pressed the gun into Clay’s temple. “You want to see him die, bitch?” he screamed at Rusty.

“No.”

“One more thing outta either of you and he dies. You got me?”

“Yes,” she agreed immediately, cutting her eyes at Clay with a silent plea for him to do the same.

Clay made no reply. “Get him tied up again. Tight this time,” Davy ordered.

It took a few minutes for Dennis and Donny to right the chair and retie Clay. When they finished, they were sweating and red-faced.

“Now have a seat, boys,” Davy said in a grandiose fashion. “My future wife is going to give us a little show.

“Right, honey?” he asked with a sneer at her.

“Right,” she said and smiled.

*Where've you been?* she silently communicated with Koda.

*I thought there might be wisdom in numbers. Use what is at your disposal to free the human and get the two of you from the path of danger.*

She smiled again. The odds had just gotten better.

“I do this better with music,” she said as she started to strip off the jacket she wore over her top.

“Then hum, bitch.” Davy laughed. “Just get outta those clothes.”

“Good idea,” she said and started singing in a low tone, words that only she recognized.

She peeled off her jacket and tossed it at Donny, then turned as she started pulling her top up. Her eyes met Clay's. “*Dico,*” she sang.

At the word that came from Rusty's mouth, Clay knew the moment was right. *Aeris accendo asporto!* he murmured. *Aeris accendo asporto.*

*Again,* Koda's voice urged.

“Three times three,” Rusty sang, pulling her top over her head and letting it fall to the floor.

Clay counted the number of times he repeated the phrase, noticing that none of the men seemed to even know he was speaking.

At the end of the last syllable of the final word, Clay felt something swell inside him, something he'd never experienced. Energy seemed to blossom inside him, growing until he felt like a balloon that was overfilled.

Acting on instinct, he blew out his breath.

What happened next was like something out of a dream. A sound like an approaching freight train emerged from Clay's mouth and Davy toppled over in his chair and went tumbling across the floor like he was being blown by a hurricane.

Donny and Dennis, sitting on the bed, were slammed back against the wall, their arms splayed out, like bugs on flypaper.

Rusty was the only one unaffected. She ran to Clay and started working at the knotted rope. Within seconds his arms were free.

"What's happening?" he yelled to be heard over the sound of wind that continued to roar in the room, blowing furniture and ripping curtains from the windows.

"No time," she replied and finished untying his legs. "Come on!"

Taking his hand, she pulled him toward the door. "Come on, it won't last much longer!"

"The gun!" Clay yelled and pulled away from her.

"Leave it!" she screamed. "Clay, leave it!"

They raced out of the house and into the midst of what had to be two hundred wolves. Standing at the head of the pack was Koda.

Clay skidded to a halt. "Holy shit!" He looked around warily at all the wolves.

"Here they come," Rusty announced.

Clay spun around to see Davy burst out of the bunkhouse with his gun in his hand. He stopped abruptly when he saw the wolves. Donny, behind him, nearly knocked him down and in turn was run into by Dennis. All three men stood gawking at the wolves.

Davy looked at Rusty then smirked and raised the gun to point it at Koda. She stepped forward with a soft "no" and raised her right hand.

A bolt of light shot from her hand, striking the gun and lighting it like molten metal. Davy screamed and threw it down. It sizzled and hissed as it hit the damp ground.

“Now,” Rusty said with a smirk at Davy, “here’s how it’s gonna go. You three are gonna sit down right there on the porch while Clay and I call the sheriff. And if you try to run...” She looked around at the wolves and then shrugged. “Well, you get the idea, right, Davy? After all, you aren’t stupid.”

In unison the men sat down, looking fearfully at the wolves as they huddled together on the porch. Clay put in a call to the sheriff. Within twenty minutes the place was swarming with law enforcement vehicles.

\* \* \* \* \*

Two hours later the last of the police cars pulled away, leaving Rusty and Clay standing alone in the drive. Clay draped his arm over Rusty’s shoulder and she snuggled up to his side.

A yip drew their attention. Koda appeared out of the darkness, followed by the pack. Rusty knelt down and hugged Koda, then stretched out her hand to the pack.

Clay watched in amazement as the pack surrounded them, the wolves licking and rubbing up against Rusty as she knelt with her arm around Koda. When at length, she’d stroked and thanked each of them, they melted away into the darkness like ghosts.

Rusty gave Koda one final hug. “Thanks,” she said. “No one has ever been blessed with a truer friend than I am by you. All’s well now in our home, so go run and relax. I’ll be fine here with Clay.”

Koda looked up at Clay then threw back his head and let loose a long howl. In the darkness answering bays sounded. Rusty grinned as Koda took off into the darkness.

She held out her hand to Clay. He took it and pulled her up to him.

“We did it,” she said with a smile.

“You did it,” he argued.

“No, we.” She pressed her hand on his chest. “All of us.”

Clay shook his head. “There’s one thing I don’t understand. What’s the bit about a treasure?”

Rusty smiled up at him. “When I was five, Davis came trying to put the moves on my mother. She rejected him outright, and he stole a letter she was writing to her family. In it she wrote that the treasure was safe and would remain so as long as it was on Blackhawk soil. He thought it meant there was a buried treasure.”

“What did it mean?” he asked.

“What she actually wrote was *a kincseim* is safe and shall remain so as long as she dwells on Blackhawk land, for she and the land are one.”

“What does *a kincseim* mean? And what was she talking about?”

“*Kincseim* is Hungarian for ‘my treasure’, the endearment my mother used for my father, and later for me. She always knew that this is where I belong, that this land is part of me, and I of it.”

Clay was silent for a long time, standing there in the darkness, holding Rusty. “She was right. You are a treasure. My treasure. And if this is where you belong, then it’s where I belong too.”

“But your home is in Arizona,” she said softly. “You have family and friends, a connection to your ranch as strong as the one I have here. I can’t ask you to give that up, Clay. I don’t want you to.”

“Then what’s the answer, darlin’? We’ve got to have a home for all our little ones.”

“Little ones?” she asked with a smile. “In case you’ve forgotten, Mr. Russell, we aren’t even married.”

“Well, I’m aiming to fix that,” he said and turned her to face him, clasping his hands behind her back. “I figure if you’re going to persist in that annoying habit of calling me Mr. Russell, I ought to at least be able to return the favor and call you Mrs. Russell.”

"Mrs. Blackhawk-Russell," she corrected him.

He opened his mouth as if to argue then shook his head. "Whatever you say, darlin'. Marry me."

Rusty reached up to pull his face down to her. "You know, I think I just might."

"Might?" He pulled back from her before their lips could meet.

"Yep. One day. Right now we got something to do."

"What?"

"This," she said with a laugh and broke away from him.

"Hey!" He made a grab for her as she took off running toward the woods, shucking her clothes as she ran. "What the heck you doing?"

"Celebrating," she said as she stopped to face him. "Come on, Clay. Come dance naked with me under the moon."

"Can't we just celebrate in the bed like regular folks?" he asked, starting for her.

"Nothing regular about us, Mr. Russell. Hadn't you figured that out yet?"

"Well..." He stopped, considered it, then grinned and started unbuttoning his shirt. "Well hell, when in Rome."

Rusty laughed in delight and watched him disrobe. When he walked up to her, naked and erect, she pulled him to her and jumped up, wrapping her legs around his waist.

"Time to dance, cowboy." She waved her hands in the air and sparkling lights streamed from her fingers.

Clay chuckled and twirled around. Rusty leaned back, trusting him to hold her, her long hair streaming like a banner as he spun her around, both of them laughing as lights twinkled and danced around them.

When he finally stopped and swayed back and forth, she pressed against him, winding her arms around his neck, her breasts teasing his chest as her wet sex moved against him.

“You keep that up and I’m going to have to take you right here and now.”

“Hmmm,” she murmured, nibbling at his earlobe. “I sure hope so.”

Clay dropped to his knees and eased her backward so that the upper part of her back and head were on the ground. Unwinding her legs from his waist, he spread them wide, bending them back toward her chest, leaving her exposed for the taking.

“Lord, you have the prettiest pussy I’ve ever seen,” he murmured before lowering his head to lap at her, working his tongue between the outer and inner lips and stroking her all the way to her clit.

Rusty moaned as he took her clit in his mouth, tonguing it. He took his time, teasing her clit with his tongue until her body started to quiver, then moving lower to thrust his tongue into her pussy.

“Clay,” she gasped as a vibration raced through her body.

He felt the tremors and ceased, raising his head and lowering her completely to the ground.

“Hold your legs,” he directed, moving her hands behind her knees. “Spread those legs wide, darlin’. And don’t let go.”

She was more than willing to comply. He had that tone in his voice, the one that said “you’re mine”, that look in his eyes that said she belonged to him and when it came to sex, she was submissive to his dominance.

“I’m going to lick you and suck you and fuck you with my fingers, but you are not to come until I tell you. Understand? You come when I tell you to come and not until.”

“Yes,” she breathed, excited beyond measure at the idea of being so completely dominated by this beautiful, sexy, powerful man.

Clay knelt between her legs and slowly ran his tongue along the inside of her thigh and up the side of the vulva to bite lightly on the flesh above her clit. Rusty’s breath came faster as his fingers pushed back the hood covering her clit and his tongue laved the erect tissue.

She moaned and gripped her legs tighter, trying to stem the oncoming tide that threatened to wash her away into release.

“Not yet. You can’t come until I tell you,” he breathed and worked his tongue down to penetrate her pussy.

“Clay!” She quivered with need. “I can’t...I...”

“Not yet,” he commanded and started again on her clit, easing a finger into her pussy to stroke that spot that made her skin literally burn.

Rusty lost all sense of time, aware only of the cry of her body for release, and the sublime torture he imposed on her with his mouth and fingers. Each time she was close to coming, he would slow, commanding her to hold back the tide.

She reached a point when she no longer had the energy to resist. “I can’t, I can’t,” she nearly sobbed. “Please, please, let me come. I can’t take it, Clay. I can’t.”

“Yes you can,” he argued in a husky growl and sat back on his heels. “Get up on your hands and knees.”

Rusty nearly came at just the tone of his voice. She turned and positioned herself on hands in knees in front of him.

“I want you to bend your arms so that your forearms are on the ground, fingertips touching, forming a triangle with hands and forearms. Good, darlin’, that’s good. Now lower your forehead down on top of your hands.”

“That’s it,” he crooned as she supplicated herself before him. “Now push your ass up.”

“Yes, yes,” he growled as she complied. “God, I love the way you look, Rusty. So beautiful. So...delicious.”

Rusty nearly whimpered with desire at his words. When she felt his hands grip her at the base of her buttocks, pushing her ass up and spreading her open wider, she couldn’t suppress the low moan.

His thumbs spread the lips of her pussy, opening her wide, wider. His tongue dipped in, probing, stoking. "Please," she whispered, certain that at any moment she would lose control, so strong was her need.

"Not yet," he directed, "not yet."

He continued to lap at her pussy, fucking her with his tongue until she was trembling, then withdrawing. Her need slid wet and hot, running down her legs.

"Clay, please," she begged. "Let me come. Please."

"Just a little longer," he promised and with his words, rubbed her juice over her anus then sank his finger into her.

Rusty moaned, at first tightened against the penetration. "Loosen your ass, darlin'. Let me fuck you with my fingers. Let me take your ass and I'll let you come."

"Yes," she groaned and pressed her ass higher, meeting his thrusts.

"That's it," he encouraged her. "That's it. Tell me you want it, baby."

"Yes." Her voice was rough and low. "Please yes."

"Please what? Tell me what you want."

"Fuck me," she begged. "Fuck me with your fingers. Take me please. Just...let...me...come."

A moment later she screamed in pleasure as his dick pushed slowly into her wet pussy.

"Now fuck me," he said in a growl so deep and rough that her pussy contracted at the sound.

Rusty rose on hands and knees, rocking back against him, his dick stretching and filling her pussy, his finger stroking deep in her ass.

On and on she rode him, her breath coming out in harsh gasps as she fought to hold back the orgasm that pressed ever closer.

Suddenly she felt his fingers on her clit, rubbing it, rolling it. Her world exploded into a million shining shards, her entire body shaking, clenching and vibrating.

She screamed his name and felt him pump his seed deep inside her, bringing another wave crashing down on her and eliciting a flare of energy from deep inside her that burst from her eyes like a geyser of light, enveloping them in a swirling miasma of energy that intensified the sensations, sending them both into a climax where they could feel the sensations of the other, experience the rolling, consuming orgasm that imprisoned them like a storm, one wave after another pounding them in unison.

When at last the waves subsided, they collapsed onto the ground, breathing hard. Clay lay atop her, his head against the center of her back, hearing the rapid drum of his heart and realizing that it matched the pace and time of his own.

She rolled over and cradled his head on her chest, her fingers dancing lightly on his back, creating tingles like little electric sparks.

“Need wind,” he murmured against her sweat-slicked skin.

“Wind, yes,” she said and whispered a few words.

A moment later a cool breeze kissed his skin. “Ah, darlin’.” He raised his head to kiss her breast. “I could live to be a hundred and not get enough of you. Even now as I lay wilted and spent, all I can think of is the next time I have you. Have you cast a spell on me, Rusty? Enchanted me so that my hunger for you knows no end?”

Rusty smiled. “All I did was invite you to dance.”

He chuckled. “And just what do you call this dance?”

“Love, Clay. I call it love.”

“Me too, darlin’. Me too.”

## **About the Author**

Ciana Stone has been reading since the age of three, and wrote her first story at age five. Since then she has enjoyed writing as a solitary form of entertainment, and has just recently come out of the closet to share her stories with others. She holds several post graduate degrees and has often been referred to as a professional student. Her latest fields of interest are quantum mechanics and Taoism. When she is not writing (or studying) she enjoys painting (canvas, not walls), sculpting, running, hiking and yoga. She lives with her long-time lover in several locations in the United States.

Ciana 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).

## **Also by Ciana Stone**

Hot in the Saddle 1: Chase 'n' Ana

Mind Games

Riding Ranger

Wyatt's Chance

*Also see Ciana's release at Cerridwen Press ([www.cerridwenpress.com](http://www.cerridwenpress.com)):*

That Which Survives



Discover for yourself why readers can't get enough of the multiple award-winning publisher Ellora's Cave. Whether you prefer e-books or paperbacks, be sure to visit EC on the web at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com) for an erotic reading experience that will leave you breathless.

[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)