



# Cowboy Christmas

By Frankie Belleville

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# **Silk's Vault Publishing**

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## Chapter 1

Abigail Williams was used to driving in the snow. She'd grown up in Colorado, so she should be used to it. But driving in the snow in metro Denver was a little different than driving on the back mountain passes. The roads were well-plowed and sanded at all the major intersections and it snowed less out on the plains than it did in the mountains. She sighed again for the up-teenth time, and tried to relax her grip on the steering wheel.

She couldn't remember the last time it had snowed this bad in Denver. Whose idea was it that she should be driving in the mountains during December anyway? She clucked her tongue and turned the radio down for the second time in the last half hour. Ever since she had left Carbondale on her way over McClure Pass, the snow had been falling continuously. It was starting to get dark and the snow was beginning to hypnotize her. Her eyes were getting very heavy and was it her imagination, or did it seem like the rare driver seen going up the road was headed right for her?

She was coming down the backside of the mountain. It was straight mountain on one side and a straight shot into the semi-frozen reservoir on the other side. One wrong turn on the tight pass and she'd be dumped on one side or the other.

Where were the dang plows? She could hear her tires crunching over the newly fallen snow. The wind was picking up, flinging the fresh powder into her windshield, making it even

harder to see. She felt the car lift slightly under her, and she eased off the gas even more. At this rate, she was never going to make it to the ranch.

Her boss had decided that she needed a vacation. She was an architect at one of the largest architectural firms in Denver. They had a good reputation and they had a lot of jobs on the books. Ever since she had graduated from college four years ago, she'd applied herself like an obsessed person to her job. She worked nights and weekends. She had no life. All she knew how to do was work.

With that said, she was very good at what she did. She was brilliant. She was the fastest and one of the most accurate in her office. She was the one who got all the tough jobs that usually required a whole team of architects. She had two others on her team that worked with her and together they were fantastic.

But Brian had decided that she needed a break. In the four years since she had started work there, she had never once taken a day off or called in sick. If she was sick, she had the work emailed to her and she worked at home. The few weekends she had taken off, she'd used that time to clean the apartment really well or to pay her bills or do some light shopping. Or the TV came on and never went off. She had no cable, but she did have an endless supply of movies that could keep a person awake for a very long time.

One of Brian's friends was just outside of Somerset, Colorado which was just outside of Orchard Valley. It was tucked into Laughing River Valley just off the main highway, the paperwork stated. The mountains unfolded before her almost mysteriously and then enveloped her again from behind. Brian had paid for her to spend two weeks at the man's spread, the Star Mountain Ranch, and had informed her that she had no other choice but to go.

The sun sank behind the jagged horizon before her, sinking her into swirling darkness.

The mountain loomed large to her right and the reservoir on her left leered like a giant abyss ready to take her and swallow her whole. Her heart was hammering in her chest. Oh, but she hated driving in the snow at night and she really hated driving in the mountains in winter. What had she been thinking?

Oh, right. She'd been thinking that she might be fired this time. That's what she had been thinking. Brian was from Germany and didn't believe in working to the death. As he put it, it was only a building. It wasn't a war. It wasn't a life or death type of thing. It was a building. And buildings could wait for sleep and for weekends off and for vacations. He had threatened to fire her before, but she had never taken him seriously. Yeah, she had a mouth and a sharp attitude, but she was the best in her field for her age and experience. He wouldn't really fire her.

But something about the way he said he would fire her if she didn't take this break and get as far away from civilization as she could made her believe him. He was serious this time and she knew it.

It wasn't as if she thought that her job was so important. And it wasn't the fact that she thought she had something to prove, either. She just didn't have any other hobbies. She didn't have anything that she enjoyed to do. She liked working out. She liked eating right. She didn't like to shop, so she had a lot of money in investments. She had a nice new car every year. She had nice clothes. She didn't like to do crafts. She didn't like to draw. She absolutely abhorred writing. She read sometimes, if she was really bored. There was no sense in cooking when she was only cooking for herself.

What else was there? She liked to hike and bike and run. She liked to watch movies. The kids at the ticket counter at the theatre in Highlands Ranch knew her by name. But movies and hiking, biking and running only took so much time. What was she supposed to do with the

rest of it?

She just couldn't picture what she was going to do for two weeks on a ranch out in the middle of nowhere.

Movement caught her gaze. Her lips flattened in response as she searched just outside the range of her lights for a place to pull off on the narrow road. There was a very small widening of the road right in front of a curve that disappeared around the mountain. Most of the pull-out was covered by a huge snow bank. She hoped that it was big enough to hold her and the cop car behind her. She mentally shrugged, turned on her turn signal and pulled to a slow stop.

The police officer came up to her, bundled in a light jacket. She rolled her window down and shivered, reaching down to turn the heater on full-blast. She was a native to Colorado, but she doubted if she'd ever get so used to the cold that she could wear a jacket in the snow. She was the type of person who saw snow and got cold.

"Ma'am," the police officer said, stooping low to peer into her window. "Do you know why I've pulled you over?"

She pasted on a smile that said, "Hi. I'm frazzled, don't like driving in the snow, got one nerve left, please leave me alone," and said instead, "No. I don't."

He looked behind him. "That pass is closed. How'd you make it through?"

Her eyes rounded. "I don't know. How do you close a pass?"

He looked at her, his grey eyes staring at her through a square face. He took in a deep breath and resettled his weight. "There was a gate. How did you get past the gate?"

"I didn't see a gate," she said. She blinked through her smile which was the city girl's way of politely saying, "You're a dumb-ass. Leave me alone."

"That's funny," he said, straightening a little. "I just closed it."

“Oh, well, you were behind me.”

His gaze narrowed on her. He nodded. “Well, just be careful. We’re supposed to be dumped on tonight.”

“Great,” she said with a definite lack of real enthusiasm.

“Where are you headed to?” he asked.

She sighed and settled back into her seat. “Star Mountain Ranch.”

“Old Chuck isn’t taking guests this time of year. There’s nothing for tourists to see.”

“Well, I’m not exactly a tourist.”

“You’re a friend?” he asked. Between the tone of his voice and the look on his face, he didn’t believe that she was the type of person that Chuck would call a friend.

She looked out the windshield into the deepening dark. “My boss is a friend and he bought me this vacation.”

“You don’t strike me as the type of person who would call this a vacation.”

*That makes two of us*, she said mentally. She smiled at him. “Well, I’m going to try my best.”

He nodded. “Well, your turn is just down the road. You’re going to go around two more curves and then your turn-off is on the left. It’s kind of hard to miss. I’ll follow you down the mountain.”

“Thanks,” she said tightly. “I appreciate that.”

Now not only did she have hypnotizing snow ahead of her, she had headlights blinding her from behind.

He walked back to his SUV and got in. Shaking her head, she pulled her car into second and slowly started back down the mountain. The roads weren’t slick, especially with the newly

fallen snow. She just didn't trust that they were that safe to drive on. There was one set of tire tracks that she was kind of following. She was watching those tracks as she drove. They made a deep zigzag in the snow followed by a brief donut where someone had lost control. She slowed it down a bit and continued. Apparently whoever had lost control had been able to dig themselves out of the ditch and continue because the tracks continued down the mountain.

She was shaking by the time she got to her turn-off. The police-officer was right. It was right down the road and the road shouldn't be open. Where were the snowplows anyway?

She drove for a short distance until the road before her started into some pretty tight switchbacks. The mountain was on one side and it was a straight shot into the valley below on the other side. She saw the sign that read that the ranch was within a mile and she heaved a huge sigh of relief. She pressed on the gas slightly to get her up the slight incline.

Then the next thing she knew, her line of sight was filled with mountain, road, darkness, road, mountain, road, headlights, darkness, road. She ended with a bump, snow flying over her windshield. Pain crashed into her skull and it was lights out for Abby.

## Chapter 2

Cade McPherson had been driving back to his place, which was right down the road from the ranch. It was snowing, but not as bad as it could be. The weather report said there was a chance of six inches. The roads weren't plowed, so he didn't have to worry about the roads being slick. There was at least some hope of traction when the snow wasn't already trampled down with traffic and snow plows.

Chuck had asked him to keep his eyes open for their guest. Cade mentally shrugged as his old Ford chugged down the mountain. That was fine. A woman from the city would probably have heard the weather report and caught a room in Glennwood Springs to wait for the roads to clear again. Besides, it was only a matter of time before the pass shut down, if it wasn't already. He didn't think that he'd be seeing her that night. He doubted if he'd be seeing the young priss at all that season.

Chuck had told him that Brian, his classmate from college, was sending out one of his architects for a vacation. Apparently the woman only knew how to work. Great. Just what he needed. A city girl on the ranch needing entertained. The Kunz's, who owned Star Mountain Ranch, had other things to do, friends to entertain, the holidays to plan for. They didn't need someone to baby-sit as well.

Cade wasn't volunteering for the job. That was for sure. He'd been working on the ranch

for about ten years. He watched the guests while on the trail and Chuck knew that was the extent of his duties as far as tourists were concerned. His duties were for the animals, not the people acting like animals.

City slickers. Dang, he hated them. They were snobby. They didn't know how to dress properly for the country. They thought that because they had money to take a vacation that they were better than he was, a simple field hand. He had a nice spread of his own that he was starting, with Chuck's help. He wasn't going to be a field hand for the rest of his life, but his dreams were simple. Get his spread. Put some horses and some cattle on it. Annoy the shepherds that were trying to take over the valleys, and live a quiet peaceful life of solitude. He had absolutely no problems with that.

Cade's biggest problem when it came to people was that he just couldn't stand women. Sherry, Chuck's wife, was different. So was their daughter Katie. They were both absolute dolls. But the other women—he shook his head in disgust. They could all climb trees for all he cared.

He was just about to really enjoy that silent tirade when he went around a curve in time to miss the flying front bumper of a car sliding its way out of a donut. One tire came dangerously close to the edge, which would have sent the small car into the valley below. However the driver did some quick thinking and the car finally ended up plowing into the mountain.

Cade gentled his truck to a stop and got out. This must be their guest, he thought as he opened the creaky door and stepped out. He sighed as he looked at the damage. The back tires were still rolling as the back end hung in the air. The hood was buried in the snow drift. The driver's door was buried so deep, he'd be unable to open the door without a lot of digging. The brake lights were glaring in the fresh snow.

He shook his head and walked to the passenger door. He tried the handle but it was locked. He stooped down and peered inside. The woman was petite, wrapped in her coat. Her hair was up in a tight bun at the back of her head that was resting against the steering wheel. Her arms were limp and flopped down at her side.

Cade let out a tired breath. "Great," he muttered to himself. "Just great."

He knocked on the window a couple of times, but got no response from the woman. He rolled his eyes and went back to his truck for a coat hanger to jimmy the lock. With any luck, he wouldn't have to break open a window. He doubted if she'd appreciate that. It wasn't necessarily a life and death situation. She hit her head. She'd have a headache for awhile, might even have to stay awake for a time, but she'd live.

He got the hanger out of his truck, rearranged the hook and started working on her door. He'd been working for a frustrating ten minutes when the woman awoke with a start. Her body twitched. Her head came up. She blinked. She looked over at him in alarm and then she let out an all-mighty, cat-curling scream.

Cade reeled back in surprise. He'd gained many first impressions from a woman before, most of them pleasant, but never in his life had he ever had a woman scream at him with such fear before. He shook his head, gained his bearings and approached the car again. He tipped his cowboy hat back a bit so that when he leaned over, his eyes weren't hidden. "Ma'am," he shouted. "Ma'am, roll down your window."

She looked at him for a dazed and confused moment before she blinked and nodded. She was still blinking when the cold air of the mountain night hit her. "What are you doing to my car?" she demanded.

"What am I—" Cade started. He stopped, took a breath, looked toward heaven for

guidance and gave her his sexiest smile. “Ma’am,” he said, his western twang deepening, “you fishtailed in front of me and plowed into the mountain. I’m trying to help you.”

“I—” She stopped and looked out her windshield. She closed her eyes. Her shoulders slumped as she put her hand to her forehead and groaned.

Something inside of Cade unfurled. He knew what it was. It had reared its ugly head once before. Desire. Strong, hot desire. He needed to nip that in the butt.

“Shit,” she said. “Damn it. Fuck. Shit. Hell. Holy mother of a cock-sucking dog!”

Cade’s eyebrows went up with each word out of her mouth. He didn’t know that women even knew those words, much less uttered them so carelessly. “Ma’am,” he called. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” she said with tired irritation. She looked up to see where she was and what her situation was. She shook her head with a wry expression and sighed. “Damn it. Just what I need to start a vacation. Whose idea was this damn thing anyway?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am.”

She looked up at him in surprise. “No. I—” She rolled her eyes, winced and gently massaged her head. She looked up at him; her head tilted to the side and gave him a slight smile. “I’m sorry. Thanks for stopping. I guess I should see about getting out of here. Am I buried deep?”

He gave her an are-you-kidding look.

Her lips flattened as she nodded and gripped the steering wheel. “Well, do you know where the Star Mountain Ranch is?”

He nodded. “Right down the road.”

“Up the road.”

“What?”

She stared at him horrified surprise. “I’m so sorry. I’m so used to watching my boss’s kids. I didn’t mean to correct you.”

He just gave her a look that told her without words that he was not amused.

She gave him an uncomfortable smile. “Well, I saw the sign. I can’t be that far away. I’ll just grab a bag and head over.”

He stood. Good. His good deed was done for the night. She could walk to the ranch house. It was less than a mile. As long as she kept moving, she’d be fine.

He mentally kicked himself. As much as he hated women, he couldn’t be that mean to her.

Yes, he could, told himself. He was a mean, crabby old asshole. He’d just get into his truck and pretend as if he’d never seen the woman.

“Damn it, Cade,” he muttered to himself. “You’re a dumb old coot.” He stooped down and watched as the woman was trying to open her door. “You’ll never get out that way.”

“I was just realizing that, thank you,” she said irritated.

He rose and took in a deep breath. “Damn fucking, no good—” He bent down again and smiled tightly. “I’ll offer you a ride. Why don’t you just turn off the car and grab what you need. I’ll pull out your car in the morning.”

She looked at him and he saw the dislike that was being sheltered behind the appreciative smile. “Thank you. That would be nice. However, if it’s too much trouble with the snow and all, I’ll just walk.”

“Lady, have you ever walked in the snow at this altitude?”

“I’m a native to Colorado,” she said indignantly.

He rolled his eyes and stood up, giving her room to maneuver. “City slickers. Think that they’re natives. Never been out of the city, I bet.”

“I beg your pardon?” she said sweetly, looking up at him through the window.

He stood next to the door and looked down at her with a glower. He tipped his hat and stepped away from the car. “Just grab what you need tonight. We’ll pick up the rest tomorrow.”

Okay. So the woman was nice to look at. She was shorter than what he liked, but she was full-figured and healthy looking. Her hair was deep black. Her skin was pale and her eyes were large and brown.

But she was still a woman, and women just couldn’t be trusted. No pickin’ bones about that.

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Abby was a little disoriented. So she was in a snow bank. Great, she thought sarcastically. That was just wonderful. It was just what she needed to put an end to a perfectly fantastic day.

And she was being rescued by a local who didn’t like her. His words were perfectly within the realms of being politically correct. They could even be misconstrued to be somewhat nice, but his body language. Okay. So she wasn’t much of a people person herself, but she could feel the vibes radiating off of this man.

She shimmied out of her car and grabbed a suitcase that she hoped had what she needed for the night. She grabbed her computer bag and turned toward the truck. He was turning it around on the tight two lane road. The moon was peeking from behind a cloud high overhead. The exhaust from his beat-up old truck built around her in a soft, red cloud, adding to the mysterious ambiance of the valley. She walked toward the other edge of the road in stunned

amazement. Below, there was a cabin with the lights on and smoke slithering out of the chimney. The pale moonlight sent the entire valley into shimmering midnight beauty.

The valley below her was straight out of a story book. She shook her head, amazed. She forgot that she was cold, that her head hurt, that she'd just crashed her car into a mountain. She was stuck in the moment.

The cowboy came up to her and stopped. "If you're done wool-gathering," he said, "I'll drive you down to the ranch house and get back on my way."

"Is that it?" she asked. She turned to him and watched as huge snowflakes fell between them.

"Yeah." He turned and headed back toward his truck. "Just throw your stuff in the back of the bed. Don't even think about walking down there. The snow's almost taller than you are."

She turned to him and sent him a dirty look. There was something just so damned irksome about that man. Her hand itched to slap him.

He was the perfect picture of a cowboy though. Gal-dog! That man was hot. Well, he would be if he'd just stop talking. As soon as he opened his mouth, the hot meter took a sudden dive to zero. He was tall and slender. He wore his jeans really well. His jacket was a little heavier than the police officer's had been, but not by much. He didn't wear gloves and Abby was wishing that she had hers on. His cowboy hat hid his hair and she had no idea what color his eyes were.

She shook her head and climbed into the truck, stuffing her suitcase and computer bag in her lap. The cowboy sat there for a long moment and looked at her with resignation. She kept her pained gaze forward and hugged her bag to her. With any luck, she wouldn't have to see him ever again.

But then again, with the way her luck had been going the past couple of days, that was highly unlikely.

## Chapter 3

Sherry was a buzz of blonde cheeriness as she swept Abby into the sprawling ranch house and put her temporarily in the family guest room. Abby had her own little cabin, but Sherry told her that there was no way she was going back out in the snow. She shoved Abby into the room, handed her a towel and pointed her to the bathroom and told her to make herself at home.

As luck would have it, the bag that Abby had grabbed had not been the right one. It had her undergarments and pants, but no shirts and no pajamas and no toiletries. She didn't want to bother Sherry again, and she didn't feel like showering at the moment. She wanted to thaw out and collapse into bed. So she took off what wasn't needed, and slept in the clothes she'd worn all day.

That night, she dreamt about the cowboy who had helped her. In her dreams, he was hot and had a sweet smile on his face. He touched her as she hadn't been touched in a long time. He held her and warmed her through the night.

When she woke the next day, she could hear some banging in the kitchen and people talking. The sun was filtering into the large, homey room through the white sheers. Abby sat up and rubbed the sleep out of her eyes accompanied with a large, spine-cracking yawn. Another day. The first day of her vacation. Hoo-fucking-ray. She couldn't wait.

She gathered her towel and glowered at her open suitcase. Her soap and shampoo were still in the car. She shook her head and walked out her door. There was a short hallway that opened into the large living room and dining room. Everything was bright and cheery and made her feel at peace, if not at home. The walls were white with light wood accents and pale blue painted trim.

There was an older gentleman with an earthy air who sat at the table. He looked at her and saluted her with his coffee cup. “Mornin’. You must be Abigail.”

“Abby, please,” she said with slight smile. She hugged her towel close to her, all too aware that she had no bra on.

“Well, come sit and have some breakfast,” he said with a smile that warmed his round, rough face.

“I was actually wondering—well, I—” Abby stuttered to a stop. She needed to learn some people skills. She didn’t know how to talk to people. How stupid was that?

Sherry walked in with a huge smile on her face, turning her gray eyes almost blue. “Do you need something, dear?” Her gaze flickered across the towel in Abby’s hand. “Oh, let me guess. Your shower stuff is in the car still.”

Abby nodded with a grateful smile in return.

Sherry tipped her head and walked toward her. “Well, come on. I’ve got some extra shampoo and stuff if you’d like. Cade takes forever in the shower and then he’ll be feeding the horses and cattle before going to dig your car out.”

“Oh, okay,” Abby said, following the blonde woman. “Whatever. I’m sure it’ll be fine.”

Sherry went to the hall closet and opened the door to reveal shelves that were packed with half-used bottles of shampoo and soap. She turned to Abby apologetically. “I just can’t throw it

out. I change my mind which types of shampoo I like so often, I might as well keep it just in case.”

Abby’s smile turned into one of disbelief. There were a lot of bottles in there. Some of the stuff looked like it dated back to the 70’s.

“Oh, I know. I’m a nut. I can’t help myself,” Sherry said and started to walk back toward the kitchen. “But you just pick out what you want. There are spare razors on the bottom shelf if you like. The bathroom’s on the left there. When you’re done, breakfast will be all ready for you.”

Abby smiled at her thankfully and turned to choose her shampoo. It was like going to the store. The woman had nearly every single type of hair soap known to man-kind.

She heard footsteps coming from the bathroom, reached in and grabbed a pair of matching bottles and closed the door, tucking herself out of the way of whoever was approaching. From her lowered gaze, she caught two strong, sexy naked legs. Her gaze traveled up as the man stopped in front of her. The white towel covered him from waist to knee. He was well-formed. There was very little fat on his body at all. Blinking, her gaze met his and she stopped.

It was the cowboy. He was taking a towel to his head, rubbing all the excess water from his blonde hair. His hands paused as his green gaze traveled up her sleep-rumpled form. His mouth tightened as he met her gaze. “You’re up early,” he said, his western twang heavy in the air.

“Well, the noise in the kit—“

“On a ranch, we don’t laze around,” the cowboy said roughly. “We rise with the sun.”

“I’m an early riser too,” Abby shot out, her ire rising.

He tipped a dark eyebrow at her and stood there for a long moment. “Are you enjoying the view?”

She narrowed her eyes at him and let out an exasperated sigh, pushing past him.

“Cade,” Sherry called down the hall, a dishtowel in her hand. “I told you to behave.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cade said, turning to watch Abby disappear into the bathroom. “I took all the hot water,” he called after her.

Abby turned around and glared at him, her black hair hanging straight and long around her face. She stuck out her tongue and slammed the door.

Sherry put her hands on her hips and gave Cade a look that told him that he was in trouble.

Cade couldn’t help himself. He just grinned, his steps a little lighter than usual as he walked toward the room they held for him so that he could change for the day. As he closed his door, a screech echoed down the hallway and mumbled cursing followed it as the water ran. His smile only widened. He was going to have fun with that one.

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The water was absolutely freezing. Abby had never taken such a quick shower in all her life. She was glad she had forgotten to grab a razor. She was afraid of what she might have cut off. She didn’t think that goose-bumps were a great thing to trim.

She hurried and got dressed. She dried her hair a bit and then twisted it into a knot at the back of her head. She looked at herself in the small mirror over the dresser. She looked like a business woman. She was wearing a short-sleeved turtleneck and a pair of jeans without any socks. There was no make-up to hide any blemishes on her clear, pale face. Her brown eyes were large and surrounded by thick black lashes that needed no mascara. She shrugged. It was

the best she was going to get.

She walked out of the room and into the dining room where Sherry was placing a large platter of pancakes in the center of the table. She looked up at Abby and smiled. “We’re having pancakes and bacon. I hope that’s all right with you.”

Abby shrugged. Just because she liked to eat food that was good for her didn’t mean that she was a snob. She knew how to eat like a pig and this was a vacation. “Pancakes are great,” she said with a smile.

“Fantastic,” Sherry said, bustling back into the kitchen and arriving with another plate piled with bacon. “You just sit right there,” she said, pointing to the chair that was opposite of where Abby was standing. “I’ve got everything else under control.”

“Do you need any help?” Abby asked. She wasn’t the type of girl who was used to being waited on.

“No, hon, you just sit down and enjoy yourself.”

Chuck set the paper down and smiled at Abby as she sat down next to him. “Sherry’s like that. Always has been.”

Abby smiled at him and reached for her napkin. “Do we just dig in?”

“Be my guest,” he said, resituating himself to enjoy the festivities of breakfast.

Cade sauntered through the door and frowned.

Abby handed the plate to Chuck and caught Cade’s look. She rolled her eyes and reached for the butter. There was a voice in the back of her head that said that there was no pleasing that man. She didn’t want to know why he was frowning. After today, he wouldn’t have anything to do with her. He was going to help with her car and that was going to be the end of dealing with Mr. Grouchy Cade.

“Stop scowling,” Sherry commanded as she came in the door with a pitcher of orange juice and two more glasses. “Did you want milk, hon?” she asked Abby.

Abby looked up and shook her head. “I’m lactose intolerant.”

“Oh, well, I’m sure glad to know that. I was planning on making chowder tonight. I’ll make something different.”

“Well, it doesn’t really matter,” Abby said quickly. “Chowder sounds wonderful. It just gives me—well, I mean, others don’t want to be around me much afterwards.”

“You fart?” Cade asked.

She felt face flame. “That’s so disgusting,” she muttered to her plate, reaching for the syrup. “We’re at the table.”

Cade shrugged and sat down next to her. “It’s something that happens.”

Sherry walked behind him and thwapped him in the back of the head with her spatula.

“Ouch, Sherry,” Cade said startled, his hand going immediately to his head as he ducked out of range of her weapon. “What was that for?”

She walked over to her seat and pointed the utensil at him, her eyes narrowed. “Now you listen to me, Cade Michael McPherson. You will behave. You will be polite or you will be asked to leave.”

Cade actually made a move to rise, much to Abby’s surprise. But instead, he hunched his shoulders, grabbed for the plate of pancakes and merely muttered, “Ah shit.”

That was basically what the breakfast time conversation amounted to. Sherry asked Abby about her job and Abby’s description apparently went a little over everyone’s heads. She smiled apologetically and spent most of her attentions on breakfast.

Chuck and Cade wolfed their breakfast down and then went outside, leaving Sherry and

Abby alone.

Sherry looked over at Abby.

Abby looked over at Sherry.

Sherry smiled tightly and said softly, “You don’t know how to relax, do you?”

Abby shook her head with a wry grin and sat back in her chair. “I don’t know what to do without work.”

“Well,” Sherry said brightly, rising from the table, a plate in hand. “We’ll just have to see what we can do about that.”

## Chapter 3

Sherry's idea of fun wasn't exactly what Abby thought was fun. It kind of was at first, but then things just kind of went down-hill from there. Sherry liked baking, and apparently it was the time of year to start baking cookies and cakes and pies and bread and rolls and all other kinds of stuff. Lunch came quickly for Abby. She'd had a morning filled with flat cookies, hard bread, pies that were too sweet and rolls that felt like rocks.

Sherry's smile was a little worn around the edges as well as she surveyed the mess they'd made of the kitchen. "You don't cook much, do you?"

Abby just shrugged apologetically and smiled. "I'm sorry. There's only me. There's not much need to cook with already-made food at every corner."

Sherry nodded slowly and set down her dish towel. She sighed deeply and shook her head. "Well, I guess we should clean up and make lunch."

Lunch consisted of soup and Abby's rock rolls. She cleaned the kitchen while Sherry set about making homemade chicken soup. Abby set the table and set out her rolls with a slight feel of shame. She just wasn't much of a country girl.

Chuck and Cade pulled up with Abby's car just as lunch was being put onto the table.

Abby looked out the window and surveyed the damage from a safe distance. It didn't look bad. Hell, from the window, she couldn't even see a scratch on the car. She let out a sigh of relief. At least she'd be able to get back home.

The snow had stopped falling sometime during the morning and the sun was now in full blaze. Cade and Chuck both had on their sunglasses and cowboy hats, their coats in hand as they talked and laughed together coming up the stairs. Abby watched the transformation of Cade. It was amazing what a smile could do for a man. It lightened his features and made him seem more approachable. She felt her stomach turn over. She'd never get a man like him. That was for sure. He liked country girls like Sherry who could do anything. All she could do was design buildings and order carry-out.

What was she thinking? She didn't need a man like him. She needed a good, well mannered, white collar man who understood what it meant to work late at night, who needed to go golfing every other weekend and who had enough money that they would never have to worry about a thing.

But as she watched Cade and Chuck walk through the door, something washed over her. She realized that all that stuff was so material. It was so base and see-through. She stepped into the shadows as Sherry walked into the entryway with a bright smile on her face to greet her husband with a light kiss and a warm welcome.

"How was your morning?" Chuck asked brightly.

Sherry shrugged and glanced at Abby wryly. "I've had better," she said with a laugh.

Abby chuckled with her and watched with a certain yearning as the earthy scene of love without material wealth unfolded before her. Chuck shed his coat and took his arm and wrapped it around Sherry's waist to guide her into the dining room. Their conversation was small, but it

was filled with something that Abby had never seen before and had never experienced.

And suddenly her dream man seemed so sterile. She was left feeling empty and as if there was some huge hole in her soul. She looked around the room and saw it for what it was. These walls saw love. These walls saw fights and tears and heartache. They saw joy and merriment. These walls weren't simply covered with paint of soft earthen hues. They were filled with something she had never had; love and family.

Her gaze lowered to the floor as she wrapped her arms around her and leaned up against the wall behind her.

Cade had shed his coat, but he had stopped, his eyes having settled on Abby. She looked up startled. She hadn't even noticed that he was still there. Her gaze met his and something in his eyes shifted. Where once there was only a quiet disdain, there was now a tentative warmth. They stood there for a long moment, their gazes searching the other.

And Abby's stomach decided it was time to rumble, though whether it was from hunger or from fear of . . . shit. Fear of what could happen between them. Fear of what might not. Fear that she would never experience the wealth of emotions that Sherry and Chuck had in their simple life. Fear of being touched and loved and warmed. Fear of remaining out in the cold of solitude. She had no idea. Too many things were running wild inside of her head.

She decided that it was hunger.

Cade smiled slightly and scuffed his toe, burying his hands in his pockets. "Did Sherry keep you busy today?"

Abby let out a chuckle. "I think I kept her more than busy. I never realized all the things I was missing by living in the city. We were baking."

He nodded, his eyebrows raised.

She chewed on her lip and dropped her gaze. “Yeah, well, I think that Sherry will say that I should leave the baking to others.” She let out a dry chuckle. “I sort of suck at it.”

“You’ve never had any practice,” Cade said softly.

“Well, there’s that.”

They were quiet for a long moment.

“Do you like it?”

She looked up at him, startled and then blinked her gaze away. “I don’t know. I spent most of my time trying to enjoy it like Sherry does, but finding myself only getting very frustrated.”

He smiled at her, taking off his hat and rolling it in his hands. “Give it some time. You can’t be good at everything right away.”

She nodded and let her gaze rest on the floor. “I feel like I’m in a totally different country.”

He nodded, his gaze joining hers. “I can understand that.”

She let her gaze drift around the room, emotions churning in her chest.

“Well,” he said, pushing away from where he stood. “I guess we should go eat.”

“Yeah,” she said with a smile. “I guess so.”

He gave a true smile and gestured with the hand that held his hat. “After you.”

A blush slowly crept up her neck as she brushed past him. They didn’t touch, but there was something, a fire of some sort, that swept through her body just by being so close to him. She didn’t understand what was going on. She didn’t know if she wanted it to happen. But she did know that whatever it was felt good.

Entering the dining room and taking her seat, she decided that she needed to stop

worrying. She was on vacation. She was allowed to enjoy herself, even if it had to come to a stop at the end of a couple of weeks. A sly smile of pure woman greediness filled her face as she sat down. And she knew exactly what she wanted.

She just had to decide if she was woman enough to take what it was that she wanted.

Sherry chose that moment to crest the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. She met Abby's gaze and a knowing smile crept across her face, making Abby blush. Sherry's smile only grew wider as she nodded to herself and sat down next to her husband. She looked more like a cat that ate a mouse than a happy, country housewife.

Abby did her best to ignore everyone around her as she served herself to the soup.

"So what are you boys planning for the rest of the day?" Sherry asked.

"Oh, I don't know," Chuck said, grabbing the platter with the rolls. He took two without comment and grabbed his bowl, handing the platter to Abby. "I figure we'll get Abby settled into the cabin and then maybe we'll work on Cable's crib."

Abby passed the platter on to Cade without taking anything.

Cade accepted it and lifted two rolls with one hand. He paused for a moment, looking at them as if they were foreign objects.

Abby's head shrank into her hunched shoulders as she took her spoon and began playing with her soup.

Cade looked at her with raised eyebrows. "Are these your attempts at baking?"

She sent him a glower and hunched her shoulders tighter together. "Like I said, it was a frustrating morning."

"She did a good job for the first time," Sherry said, reaching across the table to take the platter from him. "She just needs more practice."

Cade hefted the rolls and tossed them from one hand to the next. “We could use them to play ball later.”

“Thanks,” Abby said dryly, doing her best to ignore the man.

Cade sent her a smile and set them on his napkin. “I’m sure they taste just fine.”

Abby rolled her eyes.

“Just throw a little extra butter on them, and they’ll be just fine,” Sherry said, sawing into her roll.

Abby let out a deep breath and did her best to ignore everyone’s efforts to eat her baking.

“This reminds me of the first time Sherry cooked for me,” Chuck said with a chuckle.

“Oh stop,” Sherry said with a laugh. “Do we really have to?”

“It was horrible.”

“I remember you saying something completely different at the time.”

Chuck leaned into Abby and whispered loudly. “I was newly married and my dad told me a good piece of advice that I will pass onto any unsuspecting male. When a woman cooks for you, you eat it without complaining.”

Abby looked over at him and smiled shyly. “Yeah, I heard that too.”

“It saved our marriage, I tell you,” he said, rising. He took a knife and started hacking into his roll. After a few moments, he gave up and dumped it into his soup. “You made a good effort, Abby. Some things take a little time is all.”

Her shoulders relaxed a bit as she looked around the table. She chuckled, watching everyone trying to eat one of those horrible lumps of bread. “I guess, if you’re trying to eat them, I should too.”

Cade looked at her and grinned. “They’re not that bad.”

Abby just rolled her eyes and grabbed one, following Chuck's lead and just dumping it in her soup.

"I was thinking," Sherry said, a slight twinkle in her eye, "that since you're done working, Cade, you could take Abby up to the springs."

"What about getting her set up in the cabin?" Cade asked, looking up at the other woman lazily.

Sherry waved him off. "She can stay in the guest room for awhile, unless you want to go to the cabin right away to get away from us."

Abby laughed. "And listen to lonely silence?" she asked. "I don't think I'm quite ready for that yet."

Sherry laughed. "Then it's settled."

"Now, hold on a minute, Sherry," Chuck said, setting his spoon down and chewing what was in his mouth. "The only way up there is by horseback. We should find out if Abby can even ride first."

All eyes turned toward her. "Well, I rode once," she offered. "My ex took me on a trail ride."

"A rent-a-horse," Cade scoffed. "Well, at least it's better than nothing."

Chuck acknowledged the other man's statement with the raising of an eyebrow. "You can take Nutmeg."

"Yeah, Nutmeg'll do."

Abby took in a deep breath and sat back. She wasn't for sure what she wanted to do, but she was pretty sure that riding a horse out in the snow wasn't on the top of her list of things to do.

## Chapter 4

When it all boiled down to leaving, Abby realized that in her packing for a winter holiday trip, she had left her bathing suit at home. Who knew? The little on-line brochure had said nothing about springs. There were just really cute pictures of cozy cabins and a beautiful kitchen that she now realized was Sherry's kitchen and dining room.

But she was all wrapped up in her coat and her hood and her gloves that she had retrieved from the car. She had on her snow boots that worked really well in the city, but apparently didn't do so well on a saddle. Cade wasn't too happy with her choice of shoes as he helped her put her feet into the stirrups. He muttered something about being drug if she ever fell out of the saddle. She had no idea what he was talking about, but let it lie.

Their saddles were pretty packed with stuff. There were bedrolls and something to eat for supper and their swim suits and towels. She couldn't help but think that they were insane for thinking about going swimming when there was about six or more inches of snow on the ground. In the city, she didn't even think of going swimming at the indoor pools that were popping up all over the place. And this was outside? Were they loco?

Cade swung into his saddle, shook his head and muttered something about baby sitting.

Abby decided it would be best to ignore that comment, whatever it was.

The trip was beautiful. The horses walked at a leisurely amble up the mountain. They crossed the highway and continued to trek up the mountain. The tall pine trees were all around them, whispering in the brisk mountain wind. She quickly found out that she didn't know quite as much about riding horses as she thought.

"Cade," she called, watching as he rode smoothly in front of her. She felt like a flopping rag-doll.

He turned in his saddle, one hand on the reins resting on the saddle horn, the other resting on the back of the saddle. "Yeah."

"How do you ride so smoothly?" she asked. "I mean—" She looked down at her horse and gestured one hand to encompass her inability to ride.

A half-grin lifted his lips as he ducked his head, his features disappearing behind the brim of his hat. He reined his horse in a bit and shimmied up next hers. "You use these," he said, patting her thighs.

She frowned at him. "What?"

He rolled his eyes and looked down at his legs. "Do you see how I have my feet planted in the stirrups and how I'm kind of standing?"

"So I have to stand the entire way?"

He shrugged. "It's more like bracing. You know when she shifts to the left and you brace yourself on that side. You know when she shifts to the right and you brace yourself."

Abby concentrated on her legs and tried to do what he said, but all she ended up doing was basically standing in the stirrups, lifting her derrière off the saddle.

"All you're doing there is making it a harder ride for your mount."

"Oh," she muttered. "Sorry."

“You want to remain sitting in the saddle; otherwise, what’s the point?” He watched her for a long moment before sighing loudly. He took her hand and placed it on his thigh. “Here, feel this.”

Startled by this gesture, she sat there and felt his thigh tighten and relax, tighten and relax, following the movement of the horse.

“See?” he asked, his voice dropping a degree.

She looked up at him, but it was hard to discern what he was thinking. It was as if he had shields covering his expression, and she suddenly understood what people meant when they said that a person’s emotions were walled off.

She licked her lips and nodded. She actually spent more time trying to figure out how to ride than she did actually enjoying the scenery.

Cade looked back to her periodically to watch her progress as he directed the horses to cut a path across the mountain. “So, you’re an architect,” Cade called back to her conversationally.

“Yeah,” she said, directing some of her attention his way.

“What exactly does that mean? You design all the buildings and stuff?”

“Well, yeah,” she said. “But we all specialize kind of, I guess. I get the tougher stuff, like the hospitals. Every once in a while they’ll throw me a house, but for the most part, I get the hospitals.”

“What’s so special about hospitals?” he asked. “It’s just square building with a bunch of little rooms.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, it starts out that way, but then it gets more complicated. There’s what the owner wants, and what the users want, and what we can guess would be easiest for the clients. There’s a lot of details.”

He nodded with a hmm that she barely heard.

“So what do you do?” she asked.

“Well, I do just about everything around here but the cooking. I can cook, but Sherry likes it better when she cooks. I fix the fences and the barn. I care for the animals. I birth the cows and horses. I doctor them up when I have to.”

“Sounds very busy.”

“It’s fulfilling.”

“I bet it is.”

Silence hung in the air between them.

“I’m not going to be a field hand forever,” Cade said.

“What do you want to do?”

He was silent for a long time. “I’m starting up my own ranch.”

Abby nodded. “It’s a lot of work?”

“Yeah, it is,” he said with a tone that implied that it was an understatement. “But I just want to have my own house, with my own porch, and to hear my cattle in the distance, to have my own horse.”

“That would be a great feeling,” Abby said with a smile. “How close are you to getting to that point?”

“Well, I have my own land and I’m working on the house right now.”

“Really?” she asked.

He nodded. “Yeah. I’ve got the basement poured and the fireplace laid out. I’m working on the chimney right now.”

“Really,” she said, her interest totally peaked. “I’d really like to see it. Did you design

the house?”

He sent her a backwards glance. “I’m sure its nothing as fancy as what you do and that there are things that I did wrong.”

She waved him off. “The reason we don’t do a lot of houses and only, really, the mansions is the fact that it’s so easy to design a house. I’m sure you did a fantastic job.”

He chewed his lips for a long moment before nodding. “I’d like to have someone look at it anyway.”

“I’m sure you did a great job.”

He just shrugged and pointed his horse on a diagonal path back down the mountain. “The springs are just up above the house.”

“Then it’s perfect,” she called to him. “And if we don’t make it to the springs, oh well.”

He laughed. “Why don’t you want to go to the springs?”

“Well, for a couple of things.”

“And those would be?”

She took in a deep breath. “Well, okay. Number one, I don’t like water that much, and number two, it’s winter. I really don’t want to freeze my ass off while getting in and out of the spring.”

He threw his head back and laughed.

“And number three,” she added under her breath. “The swim suit that Sherry lent me doesn’t cover my ass very well.”

Whether he heard her or not, he turned toward her and threw her a grin. They continued down the mountain in silence.

Abby had to admit that once she had taken her attention off of riding, it had gotten a lot

easier. She didn't know if she was imagining it or not, but the horse seemed to be having an easier time of it, too.

She and her horse followed Cade down the mountain to a beautiful, small valley that was buried in untouched snow. Pine trees and scrub brush dotted the valley and the high mountain walls of his land. The clouds were vacant in the sky and the sun was bright overhead, sending the entire scene into a fairytale wonder.

"This is gorgeous, Cade," she breathed.

He smiled at her over his shoulder. "Thanks," he said, his western twang thick. "I'm rather proud of it myself."

They rode into a small copse of trees where small animal prints broke the snow in light, fast tracks. When they exited, his house stood before them in majestic wonder.

"Oh, Cade," she whispered. "You've done a bit more than you claimed."

He just shrugged and rode the horse to the step. "There's still a lot to do."

Cade's house was two stories and wide. The exterior was white with brown trim and complete with finished roof and windows.

"I just completed the chimney. I suppose it should have been done first, but I've never been one to do a thing in order. I needed to get the walls up first before the snow fell."

"I could see where that might be a problem."

He dismounted and tied his horse lightly to one of the supporting columns. "This is going to be an enclosed porch eventually."

"What do you have to do on the inside still?" she asked.

"Well, all the interior walls, really. I have a kitchen, kind of. I have a toilet, but I'm still working on it all. The stair is complete. I just have to put up the railing."

“And you did this all by yourself?” she asked as she dismounted and followed him.

He took her reins and tied the horse off. “Well, Chuck helped me, and when the other field hands were here, they helped as they could, too. Winter really is the time to build a house when you’re trying to run a ranch.”

“Must be cold at times.”

He shrugged and opened the door for her. “Well, it can be, but I’ve got enough heaters that it helps. The trouble, really, is getting the supplies up here because of the driveway.”

“You mean the lack of a driveway.”

He chuckled and let her through. “Yeah.”

She stepped into the house and her breath was taken away. She had designed many homes and hospitals, but she had never had the chance to visit them as they were being built. She was instantly held captive by the entire aura of creative energy the house held. A saw horse table held some plans on them. Tools were scattered around the unfinished wood floor. The house was open and homey.

“I’d love for you take a look at the drawings, but I’ve got to get you up to the springs.”

“I’d rather do this,” she said sending him a smile.

He smiled back at her, and dug his hands in his pocket. “Have you ever built a house?”

She shook her head.

He shrugged. “If you have some work clothes and don’t mind doing some work, we could come up here so you could help me out tomorrow after chores.”

Her smile widened. “What kind of chores do you do?”

His eyebrows rose. “Are you offering to help with those, too?”

She laughed throatily. “If it means keeping me out of the kitchen, I think I’m all for it.”

“Well, we just feed the animals.” He looked at her, penetrating her gaze. “You need practice cooking anyway. If you just give up, you’ll never know how well you might have done.”

She shrugged wryly. “Yeah, I guess.”

“I’ll wake you up so that you can help Sherry.”

She chuckled. “Are you going to be crotchety about it?”

He shrugged, a grin on his face. “Might.”

“I’ll wake up on my own, thanks.”

He gave a quiet snort. “You’re taking all of my fun.”

“Sorry.”

“Well, we should get up the mountain.”

Abby sucked in a deep breath and pasted on a big grin. “Great. I can’t wait.”

Cade laughed as he ushered her out the door. “You would think you’d never relaxed before. You’re not scared of the pool are you?”

“What do you do in the pool?” she asked, walking toward her horse and getting situated.

He closed up the house and mounted his horse. He paused and looked at her, handing her her reins. “You sit there and you relax.”

She nodded, thrilled beyond measure. “Great.”

He rolled his eyes and turned his horse. “Come on. I see I have a lot to teach you, city kid.”

She hunkered down and threw him a look that could have smoldered. “You just wait until you fall in my area of expertise, Mr. Cowboy Country Man.”

He just turned in his saddle and smiled.

She’d just have to find something that she actually had the upper hand.

## Chapter 5

The springs ended up being in a cave with an antechamber. So by the time they went through one cave and into the one with the springs, it got quite a bit warmer, she had to admit. But there was still a breeze. Not a big one, but a breeze none the less.

However, Cade came prepared. He settled the horses in the entry cave, took off their saddles and fed them. Then he took out the bedrolls and began fastening them to clips that had been somehow attached to the rough opening of the cave. She watched him, a little bewildered.

“Chuck’s father actually found this spring. When he was a kid, he’d come in and smooth out the opening. I guess it didn’t used to be this big.” He turned toward her, his arms in the air, trying to attach the blankets to the opening. “Chuck and Sherry actually came up with the idea of gluing clips to the opening. She didn’t like the draft. You still get a draft, but not nearly so bad.”

Abby smiled and sat down, drawing her knees up to her chin.

He turned toward her as soon as he finished rigging up the door. “Well, that should capture most of the breeze. Anything more and it’ll be stifling in here.”

True enough, it was getting really warm in the cave. Abby unraveled herself and took off her gloves, hat and coat.

“Well, come on,” Cade said. “Let’s get in.” He started taking off his clothes. “Now, no peeking. I’m going commando.”

“What?” Abby asked incredulously.

“Have you ever tried wearing swimming trunks?” he asked as he attempted to pull one boot off. “Those things ride in the most uncomfortable of places.”

“That was more information than I really needed,” she said, turning so that she didn’t see him undressing. She ducked her head in her arms and closed her eyes for a long blink. The heat was making her kind of sleepy. When she opened her eyes again, she realized that she could watch him undress from under the cover of her arm.

He hopped around on one socked foot, trying to get the other boot off. Once that was done, he quickly took off his coat and unbuttoned his shirt. Halfway through unbuttoning, he paused, looking her way. He frowned. “Are you sure you’re not peeking?”

“No, I’m not,” she said. She lifted her head with her eyes closed. “See?”

She ducked her head down in time to see him smile as he took the shirt the rest of the way off.

“Well, if you were,” he said, throwing his shirt to the ground, “that would just mean that I got to watch you.”

She closed her eyes. “Well, that would be *if* I were peeking and I’m not.”

All he had to say to that was hmph. There was some wrestling around with his clothes and then there a splash as he entered the pool. “Whew,” he cried. She looked up in time to see him fling his wet hair out of his face. He smiled up at her. “This water is nice and warm. You’d better get in here.”

She stood up and stared at him pointedly.

He gave her a boyish smile, but obediently hid his eyes.

She shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. “Nuh-uh. I don’t think so.

Turn so that you're back is to me."

"You didn't," he said, looking at her through one eye. He brought his hands up to his face. "There. Is this better? It's as good as you did."

She rolled her eyes and sighed. "I guess, but looking."

The cave was silent for a few moments. Only the sound of the water moving through the cave was heard.

"How upset would you be if I did look?" he asked.

She looked up at him in horror, her pants off and her shirt in her hand.

He smiled through his hands. "Just a little?"

Something had shifted inside of her from the day before when she thought he was nothing but a big jerk and this morning. She didn't know exactly what. Maybe it was because she was seeing a different side of him and the fact that he was pretty hot. But she realized that she wouldn't be that upset, she supposed.

But still, he was a stranger and she didn't know him. Well, duh. If she knew him, he wouldn't be a stranger. She rolled her eyes to herself and continued to undress.

"So it wouldn't bother you that bad?"

"I'm still thinking."

He chuckled.

She reached into the bag and pulled out the bathing suit, holding the two piece contraption up for inspection.

"You don't have to put it on, you know."

She looked over at him. He was blatantly peering through his fingers. She shrieked and covered herself with the bathing suit. "Cade McPherson," she said hotly. "You're not supposed

to look.”

“You didn’t say that you’d be that upset,” he said with a grin that was barely hidden behind his fingers.

“I was still thinking.”

“Which means no.”

She let out another shriek, but this one was more of outrage than anything else.

“If it helps, the water isn’t that see-through.”

She glared at him, glared at the suit that wasn’t hiding anything anyway and looked to be too small. She didn’t know where Sherry had dug it up, but it didn’t look like anything the woman would wear.

“I think it used to belong to Katie when she was in high school.”

“Great,” she said. “I really should have paid more attention to it before.”

He raised his eyebrows in acknowledgment of that statement. As she stood contemplating how to put the suit on, he took her gaze in his and slowly dropped his hands.

Abby’s breath caught in her throat. She couldn’t think. She couldn’t move. She was held pinned in place by the power of that fiery gaze. She blinked, trying to gain control of herself.

“Why don’t you just get in the water. I’m getting quite the show here.”

She swallowed and dropped the suit beside her and slipped into the water. “Wow,” she exclaimed, allowing her body to sink in slowly. “Whoa, this is warm.”

“I know,” he said with a sultry smile. “Isn’t it great?”

She smiled at him hesitantly and found a sort of natural shelf to sit on. It was a little low for her, but her head was above the water.

“Why don’t you come over here?” he asked. “The shelf’s a little higher and you won’t look like you’re about to drown.”

She looked over to where he was draped. His torso was half above the water and his arms were stretched out along the wall. “Only if you move over.”

He shrugged and pulled himself off the wall.

She started moving along the wall to go to the other side. She had no idea how deep the pool was and she was terrified of deep water. The heat came from the center of the earth somewhere. Who knew how deep it was?

“You’ll want to go the other way,” he said. “There’s a really deep spot over there,” he said pointing to one portion of the wall. “I think that’s where the vent’s at.”

She swallowed and clung to the wall.

“You’ll want to come over here,” he said, pointing to the other side of him. “The shelf ends right here.”

She gave him an are-you-kidding look and let go of the wall to float over to the other side. “I thought you were moving,” she said as she settled herself into place, slouching a bit so that her breasts were under the water.

“Boy, I’d love to, but I have a hard time sitting over there. I can’t stretch out the same as I can over here.”

She glared at him and sat slouched in the water for a long moment. “What are we supposed to do in here?” she asked.

“Sit. Relax.”

She rolled her eyes.

“Lean back,” he told her softly, his arm sliding to rest over the wall behind her. “Get

comfortable.”

She frowned at him. “I don’t know about getting this friendly this early in the game.”

“Playing hard to get?”

She looked away from him.

He sighed. “I promise not to do anything.”

The tone in his voice told her that he had his fingers crossed or that he had added something to the end of that promise like the word yet. She threw him a look that told him under no uncertain terms that she didn’t believe him.

He cocked his head at her and gave her one of the most angelic looks that she thought she had ever seen. “Just lean back. Trust me.”

“Trust you, he says,” she muttered to herself, but she leaned back, resting her head against his arm.

He smiled at her and leaned his head back against the wall relaxed. “I love the feel of water.”

“I prefer a good shower,” she said grouchy.

“Here,” he said, sitting up a bit. He took a hold of her arm and lifted it slightly.

“What are you—“

“Just trust me,” he said softly, smiling at her with eyes that could melt cheese. “Okay?”

She took in a deep breath, unable to break eye contact and nodded slowly, drawn into the dangerous web that he was weaving. “All right, but as soon as you—”

“I won’t,” he said firmly.

Again, his tone left her feeling as if he had only stated part of that promise.

He looked down at her arm and brought it to the surface. It just barely crested the warm,

clear water. “Feel,” he said simply. “Feel the difference of the air and the water.”

The air was cooler than the water and was almost crisp, even though warm moisture filled the cave. The water beneath it felt almost like a warm blanket that fit her skin perfectly. She closed her eyes and really felt the warmth of the water as it surrounded her and melted the ice that had been residing inside of her. She felt it reach toward her core, trying to reach her center and thaw out her inhibitions.

He took her arm and moved it along the surface. That’s all he did. He just moved it back and forth and back and forth, so that the water moved over and around nerve endings that she was only now aware of.

She took in a deep breath of a sigh and felt her entire body relax into the wall behind her.

“There you go,” he said softly in her ear. “That wasn’t so bad was it?”

She smiled at him lazily, her eyes still closed.

He let her arm fall back into the water. “Do you know how beautiful you are?” he asked, his voice husky.

That sure opened her eyes. She stared into his face, watching his lips. They were poised so close to her own.

“Do you want me to stop?” he asked softly, capturing her gaze. “I don’t understand this attraction I have for you. You’re not my type. You’re everything I hate in a woman. But I can’t help the fact,” he said, pausing for a moment to gather his thoughts, “That I really need to kiss you right now.”

She swallowed. Those weren’t exactly the most romantic words she’d ever heard come from a man before, but they worked. She traced one hand up his back and pulled his head toward hers. “Then stop thinking about how you don’t like me and just kiss me.”

He gave her a boyish smile and did just that.

## Chapter 6

His lips settled, softly but firmly, on hers. He moved them over her lips with a quiet demand that made her melt into the wall behind her with a moan. He moved, using the weightlessness of the water to guide him, so that he now straddled her body on the thin ledge-like shelf around the pool. Both hands were on either side of her head as he deepened the intensity of the kiss, letting Abby know exactly what he wanted to do.

He pulled back, burying his hands in her hair. As she slowly blinked her eyes open, he smiled down at her, his green eyes filled with worry. “You can tell me to back off anytime.”

“This is supposed to be a relaxing vacation,” she reminded him. “And this is very relaxing.”

He sent her a grin and stooped to devour her lips with his. He ground his body into hers and groaned. “You are the most beautiful woman I’ve ever met.”

She smiled against his lips, feeling as his hands roamed over his body. “You’re not too bad yourself.”

“Oh, a woman of many words,” he growled. He pulled back and looked into her eyes. “I don’t know what this means.”

She stared deeply into his green eyes. “I don’t either. We’re from two totally different

worlds.”

“I’d ask—” He shrugged. “But I don’t know if you’re that type of woman.”

“Normally,” she said with a grin she’d never worn before in her life, one of power and sexual exuberance, “I’m not, but today I feel carefree and wanton.”

“One step at a time?” he asked with one eyebrow raised.

She nodded. “One step at a time?”

“No bad feelings?”

She shook her head.

“Cause I don’t know if I’m ready for a relationship.”

She shrugged. “I don’t know if I am either. I don’t know if I’m the type of person who *can* have a relationship.”

His eyes narrowed at her. “How could you not?”

She chuckled. “I don’t know how to live with people. I’ve been by myself for my entire life.”

He knelt on the ledge, looking deep into her eyes for a long moment. “We’ll get into that later.”

She shrugged again. “It’s nothing. I’m okay with it.”

He just hmm’ed to himself and gently stroked her arm. “Do you think you could have a vacation fling?”

“I’ll try my best.”

He grinned at her, age slipping away with the simple smile. He raised one eyebrow. “I’ll try my best as well.”

She sent him a smile that begged a challenge. “Oh really?” she asked, taking his head

firmly in her hands, feeling a confidence that she'd never experienced before in sex. She brought his head to hers and murmured against his lips, "Are you all talk, or can you actually act on those words?"

A chuckle slipped into a growl as he swooped down upon her and devoured her lips, the passion more intense than before, as if afraid of not experiencing everything he could with her before she left.

He pressed her head against the rock wall and slipped his tongue inside of her mouth, causing sensations of fire blazing through her veins, flowing through her entire body. She was surrounded by calming warmth, and was being shown worshipping devotion from one of the hottest men she had ever met. She closed her eyes and fell into the magic of his caresses.

He drew his mouth along her chin bone to her ear. He took her earlobe in his hot, wet mouth and rolled his tongue along it, hitting nerves she'd never known existed. "Damn, you feel good," he murmured, sending hot shivers coursing to the pit of her stomach.

She arched into him, a wild smile on her face. Her hands settled on his waist, sliding along its watery-smooth surface to his chest, marveling in the firm, pure-maleness of his body.

He pulled back and looked at her, his green eyes smoky. He grinned mischievously as he grabbed her wrists in one hand and pulled them out to the wall on either side of her. He settled her hands along the wall and released her.

She stared at him with a look of question.

He cocked one eyebrow at her, his grin superior. "I need room to roam and can't have you reining me in quite yet."

She threw her head back and laughed. "I hadn't realized I was reining you in."

He shrugged and buried his head in her breasts. He licked along the inside of one breast.

Her head fell back as the sensations rolled over her. Her breath became uneven as her breasts, which were half in and half out of the water, hungrily drank in the attention. With each breath, her nipples rose into the slightly chilly air and then were dipped yet again into the protective warmth of the water.

He kissed his way up to her collar bone and looked up at her from his position. "There's so much that I want to do to you."

She could do nothing more than moan at him. Her mind was a squishy pool of enflamed sensation. Thoughts were not coming readily to mind and complete sentences were completely out of order.

He pulled back and lightly skimmed his fingertips down her body along the sides until they came close to her apex. "You seem so innocent," he murmured, his fingers trailing along the top of her thigh, coming close, so close to her throbbing and willing pussy. "You seem so sheltered. I wonder what you've experienced."

Her chuckle almost seemed desperate as she gyrated beneath him. She moaned at him, arching into hands, opening for him without slipping off of the shelf. "How deep is the pool?" she asked breathlessly.

He smiled at her, his fingers teasing her soft thatch of dark hair. "Not too deep. Why?"

"I'm scared of deep water," she said, her breath catching in her throat.

One finger slipped between her folds.

She cried out and clutched the wall behind her tighter. "Cade," she begged, her voice pained.

He nodded. "I know, but not in the pool."

Breath barely entered her lungs as his finger explored hesitantly. With her precarious

perch on the small ledge, there was little room for him to actually work.

He slipped one finger inside of her.

Her body stiffened, her fingers going nearly white. Her eyes locked on his. She whimpered. His entry wasn't exactly smooth with the water taking away her natural lubricant, but her body didn't care. All she knew was that she needed more.

His finger slipped away as he captured her dark brown gaze and held her head in his hands. "Do you trust me?"

She swallowed and nodded slowly.

His grin widened. "Take in a deep breath."

Her eyes grew wide. "Cade, I don't think—"

"Then don't," he said. His hands went to her waist as he slowly pulled them away from the wall. "Kick your feet and keep your hands out for control."

She kicked with all her might and pushed her hands down, keeping them afloat.

"The vent is shooting water upward anyway, so it'll be easier to float, but," he said with a grin, as they danced in slow circles, the water hitting them at the neck in soft waves, "there's something that you just have to experience."

She smiled at him tentatively. "And we're not going to drown."

He shook his head with an intimate smile on his face. "We're not going to drown."

She nodded. "Okay."

"Take a deep breath," he said and took one of his own. He waited for her and then took them beneath the water. His hair flared out around him as he watched her. Her hair fluttered about her shoulders and face like tendrils of black silk.

She blinked at him with a slight smile.

He smiled back and brought her close for tight kiss. He pushed them toward the wall and just when Abby thought her lungs were going to explode, they crested the water. He lifted her out of the pool and laid her down gently on the towel he had laid out.

The stone was amazingly warm against her flesh, though not nearly as warm as a real bed would have been. He didn't give her much time to think about that though. He kissed a path down her body to her pussy. There, he pushed her legs open and smiled at her. "God, you're beautiful."

She rolled her eyes and flushed with embarrassment, gyrating under his touch. She was on fire. When tongue found her wet folds, she nearly exploded. Her arms were flung wide as she attempted to grasp at anything.

He wrapped his arms around her hips, folding his hands over her abdomen to keep her from knocking him away from his feast.

She bucked underneath him, unable to withstand the onslaught. His tongue flicked, licked and delved, finding every nerve she had. She was practically weeping. "Cade," she whimpered, her eyes closed, her fists clenched. "Cade, please?"

He rose, placing his hand on either side of her shoulders. "Do you need me inside of you?"

"Yes," she said vehemently.

He chuckled. "I didn't bring a condom."

"Damn it, Cade," she rasped. "Just—" She stopped herself. A person had to be careful. A cry of desperation escaped her. "Damn it, Cade. Why did you start this if you knew you couldn't finish."

"I wasn't exactly thinking."

“No,” she said, trying to gather herself back together. “Really?” She closed her eyes, failing in her attempt to bring herself under control. She could feel his legs settled so perfectly within her own. She could feel his arms brush against her soft shoulders. She felt the brush of his hot breath as he fought with himself.

“I can’t enter you even for a little bit, Abby,” he gritted out. “I’m afraid I’ll come inside of you.”

She nodded, clenching her teeth.

He brought one hand down and rested his hand against her mound.

She cried out and leapt at his touch, her eyes flying open.

“Ride my finger.”

She rolled her eyes at him as he entered first one then two inside of her and started thrusting them into her core.

“Find release,” he commanded her. “Relax and just let go.”

She closed her eyes and found the rhythm she needed. Her hips ground into his hand. “Harder,” she demanded. “Deeper.”

He was quick to obey, slamming his fingers deeper into her. His fingertips twitched from the strain, sending near orgasmic sensations skyrocketing through her body.

“Again,” she panted forcefully. “Wiggle your fingers again.”

“Like this?” he asked as he crooked his fingers.

She melted, her hips thrust up for his ministrations. “Yes,” she whispered. “God, yes.” The sensations built higher and higher, his fingertips reaching and finding the spot of outright glorious climax. She shot toward it, elusive and all consuming until she rocketed over the top and exploded in a guttural cry of passion spent.

His fingers slowed as the walls of her pussy continued to rhythmically close around them. As the rhythm slowed and slacked, he withdrew his fingers, lay down next to her and held her close. “When we get back, I’m going to need a very, very cold shower.”

Abby just smiled as she snuggled into him. She wouldn’t need one. That was probably the best climax she’d had in a really long time. And who knew a cowboy would be so damned good in bed?

She opened her eyes and looked around. Well, not in exactly in a bed.

She chuckled softly to herself, content as she snuggled closer to him. She didn’t want to leave the complete warmth of the cave for a long time.

## Chapter 7

The ride back was pleasant. There was a difference in their relationship. They weren't ready to admit to being soul mates, but they were getting along a lot better. Dinner wasn't filled with quips and put-downs. It was filled with gentle banter and questions about life in general. Conversations were flowing that Abby had never experienced before. And that night, she slept really well. She felt lonely without him by her and she was disappointed when she woke and didn't see him next to her, but she'd never had that.

So it wasn't as if it was something that she knew and missed. It was as if there was something that was burgeoning inside of her that he was awakening. She no longer felt more comfortable alone. She liked being in the kitchen with Sherry, learning how to make pancakes. She didn't even think of turning on her computer once. Before this vacation, she could always be found on the computer, looking at some sort of plans.

"So, what are your plans for today?" Sherry asked as they all sat at the breakfast table.

"Well, after chores," Cade said around a mouth of pancakes, "I was going to take Abby out to the house and show her how to build the houses she designs."

Chuck laughed, cutting a link of sausage and spearing it with his fork. "That sounds like it could be fun."

Abby smiled happily, getting her stack ready. "I kinda think it could be."

"You'll enjoy yourself," Sherry said decisively. She looked over at Abby and smiled a secret smile as her gaze slid over to Cade. "It looks as if you're enjoying your vacation."

Abby nodded, a sure smile on her face. "Yeah. I am."

"That's good." Sherry smiled smugly. "I take it that the springs was a good idea."

Abby blushed and pretended to ignore the woman.

Cade smiled cockily and continued to eat his breakfast.

Sherry and Chuck shared a conspiring smile.

"Well, while we're at chores," Chuck said happily, "I guess Sherry could continue with Abby's cooking lessons."

Abby groaned.

"You did good with the pancakes," Cade offered, nudging her with his shoulder. "You just need more practice."

Abby rolled her eyes. "Yeah, I guess."

Sherry smiled. "We'll prepare something simple."

"Sandwiches?" Abby asked hopefully. "I know how to make sandwiches."

"Not vegetarian, I hope," Cade said.

She sent him a dagger-filled look. "There is absolutely nothing wrong with vegetarian meals. They're very healthy for you and taste pretty darned good."

"We're carnivores," he argued. "We're meant to eat meat."

"They used to be living animals," Abby said.

"You don't have to think of it that way if you don't want to," Cade said, his tone grim.

"As long as they don't suffer."

“Just wait until a cow steps on your foot,” Sherry said matter-of-factly. “Or a chicken attacks you or the pigs break through their pen and trample your garden. Then you won’t have a single problem with killing an animal in order to eat.”

Abby shrunk in her chair. “I don’t know . . . “

“I think she should help with chores one of these days,” Cade told Chuck.

The older man laughed. “Maybe, but not today. We have a fence to repair.”

Cade rolled his eyes. “Is Martin attacking the fence again?”

“That man should have his license taken away,” Sherry said, grabbing the platter and helping herself to more. “He can’t keep the damn car on the road.”

“Have we forgotten that I’m on vacation?” Abby interjected. “I’m supposed to be resting.”

Cade, Chuck and Sherry all looked at each other. “This is resting,” Cade said.

Abby snorted, thought about that for a moment longer, picturing the three of them vegging in front of the TV, and then threw her head back and laughed. “Okay. I can see that.”

Sherry shook her head. “Well, if you’re going to work on the house, you two,” she said at Chuck, “need to get a move-on.”

Chuck sighed, but obeyed. He rose, picking up his plate to set in the sink. He went toward the front door and readied himself for work.

Cade stood and planted a light kiss on top of Abby’s head. He bent down to her ear and whispered, “I missed you last night.”

Abby blushed brightly as he departed, leaving her to face Sherry’s knowing smile. “You’re not playing matchmaker, are you?” Abby asked.

Sherry smiled brightly and shrugged. “Who me?” she asked angelically.

Abby rolled her eyes.

That morning was spent making fried chicken and potato salad. Abby had to admit that she was pretty good at it. The fried chicken worked out pretty well. The second batch was much better than the first, which was a little over cooked, and the third batch had to be put back in the pan because she had taken it out too soon. But all in all, it was a good morning.

Cade and Chuck came back just before noon, laughing to each other. Sherry had lunch packed up and ready to go and Cade and Abby were out the door soon after. He decided to take his truck, so at least they didn't have to ride. Abby was still sore from riding the previous day. She was walking a little stiffly.

He noticed her walk as they went to the truck. "Did you stretch?"

Abby shook her head. "I rode a horse. I didn't work out."

He shrugged. "Sometimes, it's the same thing."

"I'm beginning to understand that," she muttered, slamming her door shut behind her. "No wonder cowboys look so damned good in tight jeans."

He slammed his door shut and threw a smile at her. "There is that."

She rolled her eyes. "Don't go getting a big head," she told him. "It takes more than a tight butt to turn my head."

He raised his eyebrows at her, starting the truck and sliding it into gear, turning the truck around so that he didn't have to back out of the driveway. "What was it that turned your head yesterday?"

She sat there, watching the trees pass by and bit her tongue. He had her there. They hadn't gotten along well at all. They had nothing in common except for his house and her love for architecture. All they really had was the fact that he looked really good in a pair of jeans.

She looked over at him. “It was the house.”

“The house.”

“Yeah.”

He nodded and turned into his driveway, which by Abby’s standards was a long road and not just a driveway. The snow had melted the previous day, but not enough to clear the road or the driveway. It just made the layer of snow shorter and it crunched more under his tires. He pulled to a stop in front of the house and looked over at her. “Are you ready to put in a hard day’s work?”

She took in a deep breath and looked over at him with smile that said without words that she couldn’t be much more ready than she was.

He smiled at her and nodded, getting out of the truck. “Well, come on. There’s a lot to show you.”

He took her into the house, and the first thing that he asked was if she would look at the plans and see if anything popped out at her. It was a complete set of plans with structurals, heating, and electricals with the architecturals. She nodded, looking it all over as he worked towards the back of the house. They were good. They were damned good.

After she had looked them over and made a few comments—it was hard not to—he showed her how to read the plans from a builder’s point of view, and together they worked on putting up the stud wall that separated the kitchen from the living room. It was a small wall and was meant only to put the refrigerator in an alcove. The wall between the fridge and the fireplace was open and the one on the other side of the fireplace was open as well.

“I plan on putting bookcases all along this wall,” he said as they moved to another wall, separating the living room from the entry. “And the colors are going to be soft and rustic.”

She nodded, concentrating on her measurement. She'd already gotten half the measurements wrong. They were either too long or too short. Cade wasn't getting upset. He was patiently waiting for her. She started up the table saw and made her cut on the two pieces of wood and then turned it off, putting her safety glasses on top of her head. "That'll go well with the fireplace," she said, walking her cut pieces to the wall. "Where'd you get the rock?"

The rock of the fireplace looked natural. Rocks were natural, but they weren't put together like a neat little package. They were different and none of them shared the same colors and or shapes or sizes. It was beautiful.

"You're getting better," he said as he hammered the stud into place high above her. He handed her the hammer and a couple of nails and held it in place while she pounded it into place at the bottom. "I got them from the land around here. I wanted to keep things realistic, and I'm kind of on a budget."

"That's a great idea," Abby said, concentrating on not hitting her thumb. "I wish my clients would think like that."

He chuckled. "I take it they all have money?"

She nodded. "And they know how to rub your face in it."

They worked in comfortable silence for a bit. "Why are you alone?" he asked suddenly as they put up the drywall on the few walls that they had completed.

She shrugged, stepping back to look at what they had accomplished. "My tummy is rumbling."

"Let's eat," he said executively, throwing his hammer on the ground. He headed into the kitchen and they spread out their late lunch on the floor. He looked around. "I think tomorrow we can lay down the floor in here."

She nodded. "That'd be cool."

He shrugged. "It's hard work. I have a hard time keeping the tile spaced correctly."

"Ah," she said. "I would have no idea."

He chuckled. "Back to my question. Why are you alone?"

She looked at him and finished chewing what she had in her mouth. "Well, my parents split when I was really young. Mom left with another man, and that just left me and Dad." She set her chicken down on her plate. "Then Dad died when I was about ten. Mom couldn't be bothered with a kid at that time, so I went to live with her mother. She wasn't really happy to have a child thrust on her, so I learned early to keep quiet and how to entertain myself."

"That's gotta be pretty rough."

She shrugged, picking up her fork and toying with her potato salad. "I guess it could have been, but it was okay. I had more time to study, and I got good grades." She looked around. "I've always loved architecture. My dad got me into it, I guess. He used to be an electrician, so he was always talking about building things, mostly office buildings, I guess. But I've always loved it. Grandma didn't approve of women doing manual labor, so I decided I'd build with a pencil." She shrugged with a smile and looked at him. "And here I am."

"And you have no friends because?"

She looked away. "Why do I need friends?"

He studied her for a long moment. "Don't you enjoy talking to Sherry?"

Loneliness crept into her brown eyes. "Yeah. But—" She shrugged again and looked away. "You can't miss something you never had."

He nodded.

"What about you?" she asked.

His expression closed and he said nothing.

Her black eyebrows rose. “Wow, it’s like that, huh?”

His lips tightened.

“Bad break?”

He nodded.

“I’m sorry.”

“I’m not.”

She nodded.

He finished eating and then set his plate down. “Well, if we’re going to get to the floor tomorrow, we have a lot more work to do.”

She set her plate aside and decided that she was going to crack that nut he carried on his head if it took all vacation.

## Chapter 8

They worked together for the rest of the week on the house. Some days went well and they accomplished a lot, but then there were days when they didn't accomplish hardly anything. They talked a lot and grew more and more comfortable with each other.

They had just finished the floor of the living room. The walls were mudded and the wooden floor was laid down. The tile floor was laid down in the kitchen. Abby found that she had a real knack for tile.

They both stood, looking at what they had finished with pride, their hands in their pockets, standing shoulder to shoulder. "Wow," Abby said with a huge smile. "This looks great."

"Thanks for the help," he said.

She ducked her head and wrapped a tendril of hair past her ear. "You're welcome."

They were quiet for a long moment more. He turned toward her. "You know," he said softly. "Your vacation is nearly over and there is something that I've been aching to do to you for days."

She looked up at him and caught the heat in his eyes. A slow smile spread across her face. "Really?" she asked as his hands slid up and down her arms. "And what might that be?"

He closed his eyes and smiled with barely contained mischief. He bent close to her ear and whispered, "I brought a condom."

Her eyebrows rose as she pulled back a bit and stared up at him, an amused smile on her face. "Cade McPherson, I think those are the most romantic words any man has ever said to me."

He chuckled, his hand settling at her neck. He brushed her cheek with his thumb. "Well, that didn't come out exactly the way I had wanted it to, but—" He tossed his head back and forth, his gaze flickering on the wall behind her, his smile boyish. "It was the best I could do on short notice."

She looked at him expectantly. "Short notice?" she asked. "Are you trying to tell me that you haven't been thinking of me all week?"

He nodded. He stopped and looked at her startled. The expression on his face was completely open and he looked like a man who had just fallen into a trap. "No. I mean, I've been thinking of this all week."

She sucked her lips in, trying to hold back her smile as she nodded disbelievingly at him.

"No, really," he said, pulling back from her a bit to look earnestly into her face. "I have. I've thought about what I would say and—"

She couldn't control herself anymore. She threw her head back and laughed, shaking her head. "I'm giving you a hard time."

He opened his mouth to speak, closed it and cocked his head. He opened his mouth again, but nothing right was tempted to come out, so he shut it again and sent her a look of self-kicking chagrin. "Well, I guess the real question is, Abby, if you'd like to use it?"

She laughed again and shook her head. "You're so romantic," she exclaimed.

“You want romance?” he asked in surprise.

Her smile widened at his look of disbelief. She nodded. “Yes,” she said, semi-imperiously. “I want romance.”

He sighed and licked his lips, looking around the room. “You mean, like poetry and stuff?”

She tipped her head at him. “I want to be swept off of my feet.”

He thought for a long time, a look of being lost on his face. His lips formed an “o” as he thought. Finally, he rolled his eyes, shook his head and literally swept her off of her feet. “I’m not a poet,” he murmured into her lips. “I’m just a cowboy and this is the best I can do.”

She smiled up at him, slipping her arms around the back of his neck. “This is just fine by me.”

He placed a gentle kiss on her lips and set her down next to the fireplace, where a warm fire was burning. He shook his head as he took his hands and ran them inside of the red and black flannel shirt that he had let her borrow. He slid it off her arms, watching as her figure was exposed, hiding beneath the tight white t-shirt she had worn underneath. “Women,” he muttered. His eyes flamed with passion as his gaze caught and held hers.

Smiles and jokes were instantly forgotten as her gut tightened with unrestrained passion. Her nipples tightened under his gaze, preening for his attention.

He shook his head, amazement flooding his expression as he continued to gaze at her. “I love looking at you.”

She swallowed at his words. She set her hands tentatively on his chest and slowly unbuttoned his blue and grey flannel shirt.

He closed his eyes as she laid her palms flat against his white t-shirt. His hands fell on

top of hers. "Touch me," he whispered, opening his eyes and staring down at her. "Explore."

Something akin to fear filled her. She'd never touched a man before, seeking to give him pleasure. She received pleasure from men. She licked his lips, unable to break away from his gaze.

"Just touch me," he coaxed gently, moving her hands beneath his. "I love the feel of your hands on my body."

Her breath caught in her throat as she watched his reactions to something so simple as skimming her palms down his abdomen.

"Do you doubt me?" he asked, looking down at her.

She shook her head, concentrating on the feel of his body underneath her palms as she ran them back up to his chest. He was so firm.

He took one of her hands and cupped it against his dick. "Do you feel what you're doing to me?" he asked.

Heat coursed through her entire body, lighting the forge of her pussy as she felt his well formed, hard cock in her hand. She looked up at him in surprise. "I just touched you."

He raised one eyebrow. "And what does this do?" he asked as he ran his fingertips along her arm, up her shoulder and along her neck.

She closed her eyes, unable to control herself. She was barely able to stand and he hadn't done much of anything yet.

He smiled. "If I were to put my hands down your pants right now," he murmured in her ear, flicking his tongue and touching it briefly, sending nerves into a tizzy, "What would I feel?"

She stood there, letting the sensations of his words and gentle touches run over her. She opened her eyes and smiled seductively up at him, taking her hands away from his and

unbuttoning her jeans, opening them for him. She took his hand and placed the palm along her abdomen, fingers down. “Why don’t you stick your hand down my pants and find out?” she asked.

His smile widened at the challenge. His hand traveled slowly downward, the fingertips brushing their way across her soft tuft, teasing her lips, delving deeper to play with her clit.

The fire that he was building with his teasing was too much. She whimpered softly in the back of her throat, her knees about to give out.

His other hand settled at her lower back. He held her up as she sagged into him, his fingers delving deeper into the passionate recesses of her wet and willing pussy.

Her hands clenched as she grabbed a hold of his shoulders, trying desperately to maintain some sense of control.

“Do you like this?” he asked.

Her whimper told him all he needed to know. Her face was filled with pleasurable torment as she tried to remain in position so that he had room to play.

He brought his mouth to her throat and kissed it gently, running his tongue from the base of her ear to her shoulder. “Damn, you taste good.”

She clung to him, unable to do much more of anything.

He withdrew his hand suddenly and tore at her clothing. “Damn it, you’re wearing too much.” He pulled her shirt over her head and worked on the front clasp of her standard white bra. “I can’t stand this anymore. I need your body, and I need it now.”

The need flooded over Abby. She had to agree with him. She took hold of his shirt after he had freed her breasts and had begun to work on her jeans and shoes. As he knelt in front of her, she pulled his t-shirt over his head. She heard the material tear somewhere, but she didn’t

really care about that.

He got her shoes and pants off. His hands came up to cup her ass as he pressed a warm kiss into her abdomen. Abby felt free and needy. She hugged his head close to her and closed her eyes, filled with happiness.

He pulled away from her and nuzzled his face into her pussy. His tongue flicked out, barely teasing the hood that sheltered her clit. He grabbed one thigh and settled it over his shoulder.

She held onto his head for support for a moment as he settled her for better access. Then he buried his head in her pussy and devoured her like a starving man. His lips clasped hold of her clit and sucked it into the warm recess of his mouth, barely scraping it with edges of his teeth. Abby leapt from the sensations. His tongue came and gently laved the area he had raked before dipping it lower. It ran along the outside rim of her pussy. Abby was shaking and moaning, her hips gyrating into his movements. She couldn't restrain herself.

"Cade," she begged. Her fingers buried themselves in his hair. "Cade, please. I need—" She stopped as his tongue dipped into the warm welcome of her pussy. Her fingers clenched tighter in his hair. "More," she panted. "I need more. I need you," she cried at last.

His hands worked furiously to take off the rest of his clothes. Failing at that, he freed his cock and sheathed it in a protective condom, his lips and tongue never leaving her demanding pussy.

He rose and gently laid Abby in her sex-crazed state on the floor. "I need to feel what you feel like."

"Yes," she whispered, her hips rising to beg entreaty of his cock. "Please. Now."

He took his hand and placed the tip of his dick at the entrance of her womanhood. He

looked at her, her eyes closed, thrashing to the sensations of passion as they trampled through her system. He grasped her hips and easily slid into her tight vortex.

She stiffened, passion that she'd never experienced laying her flat. She was unable to move as he slowly pulled out, the tip of his dick nearly slipping back out before he slowly pushed it into the hungry recesses of her pussy. She whimpered from the overwhelming pleasure.

"Damn, you're so tight," he growled.

Abby opened her eyes and watched him. His head was bowed as he fought for control. The veins of his neck stood out as he controlled his movements, keeping them slow and steady. He raised her hips a little higher and leaned back a bit, sending the head of his cock to slide more firmly on the front walls of her pussy. In and out. Painfully slow.

The energy built to a high crescendo before sending her over the top. She arched into his movements and cried out in release. He picked up the tempo, but it wasn't quite working the way he wanted.

"Flip over," he said, his voice filled the husk of barely contained passion.

She opened her eyes, her system happy and ready for more. "What?"

"I need you on your hands and knees, Abby," he begged. "Please."

Her breath caught in her throat and she felt the passion rise to nearly a state of climax once more as she complied. His dick left her as she turned over and settled on her hands and knees, presenting him with her firm ass.

His breath exploded from his chest. He grabbed her hips, spreading her legs with his knees. He guided his cock to her pussy and slid in to test for comfort. The passion and the feel of her tight pussy constricting around his hard cock was too much for either of them. Her hips firmly in hand, he slammed into her, building the crescendo. Harder. Faster. Deeper.

She gentled herself onto her elbows and widened her legs even farther, more on her toes than on her knees. His balls slapped against her clit as he thrust deeper inside of her. His breath came out in hot pants. She cried out with every powerful thrust home. His hips ground into hers. He spread her ass cheeks a bit and slammed even further into her.

The walls of her pussy throbbed around his hard cock in the most powerful orgasm she had ever experienced, making the springs pale in comparison. After a couple more thrusts inside of her, a mangled cry escaped from him as his seed was released.

They stayed that way for a long moment, reveling in the feel of spent passion. Her hips moved slowly, taking all that she could. She could feel him shrink inside of her and she smiled, knowing that she had pleased him.

As they settled onto the floor, cuddling together, a sudden thought entered her mind.

She had absolutely no wish to go home.

And that scared her.

## Chapter 9

Things got a little weird for Abby after that. Cade was giving her strange glances as they worked or while they sat at the table. She wasn't for sure what type of vibe she was getting from him, but it was almost a feeling of longing or yearning. She wasn't entirely for sure what she wanted from him either.

The things she was feeling toward him had her all off-kilter. She didn't know if she should be feeling these . . . things toward him. She was on vacation. What would she do if she decided that he was the man she was supposed to marry? Marry? Geez! Where the heck had that idea come from? Men were skittish when it came to the "m" word. Shit, for that matter, so was she. Would he expect her to stay here and learn how to live in the country?

She looked around the kitchen as she helped Sherry wash the morning dishes and prepare for the baking that she had planned. Would this be so bad? She thought about that for a long moment and shook her head. No. She didn't think it would be.

But what would she do about her job? There wasn't a lot of work for an architect in this

area. She doubted if there was any work to be had in this area. Where would she have to commute for a job? Or would Cade prefer that she stay at home?

And what would she do at home all alone by herself? She still had no hobbies. Granted, she hadn't turned on her computer since she'd been there, but . . . She shrugged to herself and put a dripping plate in the dish drainer.

"You're deep in thought," Sherry said, taking the plate and drying it with an already fairly drenched dish towel.

Abby glanced over at the woman and gave her a half-hearted smile. She lifted one shoulder and let it drop, her hands full of silverware that she was wiping down. "Yeah, I guess."

Sherry studied the girl for a long moment and set down her towel. She rested a comforting hand on Abby's shoulder. "I know you've never really had a mother figure, and you look as if you could really use one right now."

Abby shrugged again. "I don't know."

"I do." She turned and reached into the cupboard, taking down two cups. She walked over the coffee pot and poured two cups. "Come on, Abby," Sherry coaxed. "Come sit and talk to me. The dishes can wait."

Abby looked at the woman and chewed her lip as she rinsed the silverware she'd just washed. She put them in the drainer and dried her hands. "I don't know how good I am at this talking thing."

Sherry nodded and sat down, putting Abby's cup down on the high kitchen island. She waited for Abby to settle into one of the high stools. "Why don't you just try it and we'll see."

"Chuck and Cade'll be back soon."

Sherry leveled her a look that Abby guessed was saved for her kids. "You know what?"

she said firmly. "I'm sure that Cade can manage on his own today. I think you need to stay with me for the day."

Abby grimaced. The thought of not being with Cade and sharing the soft sharing that they had been enjoying the past week as they worked on his house almost hurt. And she didn't know whether she was really happy about spending the day with Sherry in the kitchen, baking or talking.

As if on cue, the boys stomped through the door in a rush of good humor. "Hey, Abby," Cade called from the door. "You about ready?"

"She's staying with me today, Cade," Sherry called back. Cade crested the door from the dining room, taking off his work gloves. Sherry looked at him and smiled. "I have a lot of baking to finish today. We're going to make rounds tomorrow, and I still have muffins and bread and a few cookies that I have to finish."

Cade's eyebrows rose as he gave Abby a good-natured smile. "Are you sure she'll be a help?"

Abby rolled her eyes at him, her mood far from light. She wasn't as good at pretending to feel differently than she did, so her smile failed miserably.

Cade frowned and walked toward her. He leaned up on the island next to her and clasped his hands in front of him. He brushed his lips close to her ear. "Are you okay?"

She turned toward him and smiled a little better. "Yeah, sure."

He searched her eyes and chewed on his lip. "Things are getting serious, aren't they?"

She stared at him, afraid to admit to her true feelings. She searched his eyes for something that would give her some sort of guidance, but found only confusion that mirrored her own. "I don't know. Should it?"

“Are you the type of person who commands her heart?”

She shook her head in confusion. “I’m trying,” she whispered.

He nodded and looked down. “I guess I am, too.”

She swallowed as Chuck came in and talked quietly to Sherry. “What does that mean?”

He looked at her pushed away from the island counter a bit. He turned so that his elbows were resting on the counter behind him. “I don’t know.” He looked at her, resting his stubbled chin on his shoulder. “What should it mean?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know.”

They sat in silence for a long moment as she stared into her coffee cup and stared at the sink.

He broke the silence. “I can’t have a vacation fling with you,” he murmured.

She looked up at him startled. “Do you want to stop?”

He turned toward her, his face filled with self-directed upset and a deep sense of falling out of control. He let his gaze fall along her arm as his fingertips traced small patterns along it where her shirt sleeves fell short. Her fine, dark hair rose as if welcoming his attention. He grabbed her honey-brown gaze with his intense green eyes. “I don’t think I can,” he whispered. His jaw tightened. “That scares me.”

She took his hand in hers and ran her fingertips along the pad of his thumb. “Yeah,” she whispered back. “It scares me too.”

He nodded, looked up and met Chuck’s gaze. “I’m heading to the house.”

“Need some help?” Chuck asked.

Cade nodded, lost in thought. “Sure.”

Chuck nodded and bent down to whisper something in Sherry’s ear. She patted his arm

and gave him a warm, concerned smile.

She waited until the boys had left with lunch in their hands before beginning her talk with Abby. “All right. Spill it. What’s going on in your head?”

Abby’s eyes searched the room, shaking her head. “I-I don’t know.”

Sherry waited patiently, sipping her coffee.

“When I came here,” Abby started, “I was so filled with my career and everything was hurry, hurry, hurry. I was comfortable being alone. I was fulfilled by work. I had two thoughts, really. Work and what kind of car I was going to get the next year.” She shrugged. “Then I came here and it was like a whole new world was opened to me.”

Sherry nodded. “I can understand that. When I first met Chuck, I was in Grand Junction and I knew that I wanted to get out of the valley. I was going to college and trying to find a career that would get me as far away from here as I could possibly get.”

“What happened?”

Sherry smiled, remembering. “Well, I met Chuck and we had a really wonderful month. He drove out there about once a week and we wrote and called a lot. But then I got a job in California.”

“You left?” Abby asked.

“Yeah. I left,” Sherry said. She shrugged her eyebrows. “It didn’t last too long,” she said. “I went out there and tried to live the life for a good month, only to find that it was too empty for me. I called Chuck one night and asked him if he wanted to get married.” She laughed. “He said yes. I came home, and we’ve been married ever since.”

Abby chuckled. “That sounds pretty romantic.”

Sherry looked at Abby. “What’s holding you back right now?”

Abby looked up at the older woman.

Sherry leveled her a don't-beat-around-the-bush look. "I can tell that the two of you love each other. So what's the problem?"

Abby ducked her head and pulled her cup closer to her. "I—" She stopped and looked toward the ceiling. "I don't know, Sherry. I mean, he makes me feel—" She shook her head and gestured toward her heart with one hand. "—things that I've never experienced before. He looks at me like I matter. He listens. We talk about the craziest things." She shrugged.

"Do you just enjoy the sex or do you enjoy the man?"

Abby looked over at Sherry in embarrassment. "You could tell?"

Sherry let out a chuckle that started deep in her gut. Her face was filled with warm, womanly knowledge. She nodded. "Yeah. I could tell."

"How?" she asked mortified.

"The looks," Sherry said knowingly, a self-assured smile wrapping her expression. "The intimacy. A woman knows."

Abby rolled her eyes and hunched her shoulders. She mentally kicked herself. She started to say something, but stopped, then tried to start again. "I—I mean—It's good." She nodded and glanced at Sherry under her dark eyelashes. "Yeah. I mean, the sex—" She was bouncing in her chair with discomfort. "The sex is good. He's very—" She shrugged, her face filling with rapture as she studied the curtains in the other room. "He makes sure that I'm taken care of and that I'm enjoying it, and he makes me very comfortable with the situation." She looked over at Sherry, her face red. "I mean, like in the springs—"

"Ha," Sherry exclaimed, her expression bright. "Have a hard time putting on the suit?"

Abby's face was filled with disbelief. "You did that on purpose?"

Sherry shrugged angelically. “Who, me?” She shook her head, a self-righteous look on her face. “I would never stoop to such levels.”

“Do you have any idea how embarrassing that was?”

Sherry raised her eyebrows at the younger woman. “And were you complaining after the fact?”

Abby pointed at the woman, opened her mouth, stopped, looked around, pursed her lips with a slight start of sound and ended up slumping into her chair, shaking her head. She looked over at Sherry with a wry smile on her face. “You’re dirty.”

Sherry chuckled with innocent evilness. “I do what I have to.”

“Why did you do that?”

Sherry sobered up. “I could tell that you needed warmth of a different kind than what the springs could give you.” She paused and stared into her cup. “And Cade needs some of that, too.”

Abby looked down, bringing her cup to her lips. “What is the deal with him?” she asked.

Sherry raised her eyebrows. “Normally I would say that he needs to tell you, but I know that he won’t.” She sipped her coffee and then set down her cup, spinning it on the counter-top. “There was this woman that he met in town,” she said, nodding. She licked her lips. “Let’s just say that she ran right over him. Took him for his land, his money. She left him with his truck and the clothes on his back,” she said.

“Oh, my God,” Abby exclaimed.

Sherry nodded. “I can see that you’re not that type of woman. You’ve had a life filled with emptiness and coldness, but—” She shook her head and stared around the room. Her grey gaze lit on Abby. “You’re the type of woman who is blossoming into a true beauty, and I would

be honored to call you daughter.”

“Daughter?” Abby asked, her mind still struggling under the mass of compliments that had just been thrown her way. “I didn’t know Cade—”

Sherry shook her head. “He’s not, but I treat him like he is.” Sherry smiled. “He’s the son of my heart.”

Abby smiled at her. Suddenly leaving the city didn’t seem so bad if she knew that it meant being close to people like Cade and Sherry and Chuck. She took in a deep breath. The rest was just details, and if they decided to make it happen, she’d figure out what to do.

*I don’t think I can*, she recalled, his voice filling her mind. She didn’t think she could, either.

## Chapter 10

“I hear that you don’t believe in Christmas,” Cade said as they drove to Grand Junction. It was an hour-long drive.

Abby was supposed to have left the day before, but after this wonderful vacation, she really didn’t want to spend the holidays at home by herself. She had called up her boss and had asked for a couple of extra days. Brian’s only response had been, “I’m losing you to the mountain life, aren’t I?” Abby had just laughed and asked if that meant that her vacation extension was approved, and he had said yes. She had a couple more days and she was really getting excited about seeing what Christmas was like with a real family, even if she weren’t a part of it.

However, the thing that she had forgotten was that Christmas meant needing gifts for the people you cared about, and she had absolutely nothing but a big checkbook.

“Well,” she said, “I suppose if I’d had someone to share it with, I would. It was fun with my dad when he was alive,” she said, a warm smile spreading across her face. “It’s been a really

long time since I've thought about that, though."

Cade nodded. He took the exit he needed and pulled into the mall parking lot. "Do you know what you're looking for?"

She shook her head. "I have no idea. What do Sherry and Chuck need?"

"There's a couple of things that I can think of."

They walked through the mall and came up with a couple of ideas for her to ponder. He had to talk her out of buying things just because it was expensive and nice. "You don't have to buy their affection," he told her as he took the expensive clock out of her hands and put it back on the shelf. "You forget that they're simple people. They don't need fancy things to make them happy."

Abby shrugged, her eyes searching the store. She finally sighed in defeat. "The thing is that their house is filled with love, and anything that I give them won't—" She shook her head. "It just won't reflect that." She looked over at Cade, her eyes lost in remembering. "I remember with my dad, I would make him things like pictures and stuff that told him what I most enjoyed with him." Her eyes were sad. "I'm going to miss Sherry and Chuck so much."

"And me?" Cade asked softly.

She looked up at him, caught in his gaze. What she found there was love. She swallowed. "Yeah. I'll miss you, too."

He nodded. He licked his lips and looked around. "What if we find something that reminds Sherry of helping you cook?"

Abby stashed away her open emotions for Cade and nodded. "Yeah. That sounds good, but what?" she asked.

Cade turned to leave, holding his hand out to her almost unconsciously. "I have an idea."

She licked her lips and hesitated for a split second before taking his hand in hers and following his lead. “Great,” she said, trying her best to act as if holding his hand was an everyday thing that she wasn’t going to cherish the memory of. “What?”

“You’ll see,” he said, throwing her a smile.

She smiled back at him.

The last couple of days, Sherry and Chuck hadn’t given them any time alone. But every spare moment they had, they’d sit close together and talk in hushed tones, trying to take every moment they could get. It had been nice and relaxing. She felt comfortable with him, as if what they were sharing wasn’t just about sex. It was about two people willing to get to know each other and just spend time together without the rush of sexual intimacy.

He took her to a culinary store that was kind of tucked away in a corner. As they perused the merchandise, they would pick up something here and there and laugh about the memories that popped up with it.

“So, what about us?” Cade asked suddenly.

“Us?” she asked, a rolling pin with a rooster on each end in her hand. She was captured in his gaze. “Us?”

He nodded, his green eyes intense as he looked at through the shelving. “Do you think there’s something between us?”

She nodded slowly, holding the handle and spinning the pin in her hand slowly. “I think so. Do you?”

He nodded. He came around the shelves and took the rolling pin out of her hands. He put it away and took her hands. He studied them for a long moment as she studied his face. He licked his lips and thought for a long time. “Do you—” He blinked and looked around. “I can’t

move to the city.”

She nodded. “I know. You’re a part of this land, and there’s your house.”

He nodded and looked down. “But there’s really no work to be had here.”

“I might be able to pick something up in Junction. Or I could maybe help out at the ranch.” She shrugged, really thinking that through. “Though what I don’t know, and I doubt they’d be willing to hire another person anyway.” She shook her head. “I’m sure I could get something here.”

“It’s a long commute.”

She shrugged. “I’d be willing.”

He looked deeply into her eyes. “I don’t have a lot.”

The pain of that one statement filled his eyes. She cupped his cheek, a warm smile gracing her lips. “I don’t need a lot.”

He smiled back at her. “You say that now.”

She shook her head and took his hands. “You don’t understand,” she said. She closed her eyes for a brief moment and stared at his chest. “I’ve worked for everything I have. I have a new car every year. I have all the clothes and shoes I could want. I buy the most expensive food. But none of it compares to the simple life that I’ve experienced here.” She looked into his desperate green gaze. “I would trade all of that emptiness for just one more week here.”

His expression grew wry as he ducked his head. “Are you in love with the place and with Sherry, or with me?”

She threw her head back and laughed. “I’m in love with it all.”

He looked at her and his gaze grew sad.

She took the gaze he was about to drop and held it. “But I would willingly live with you,

with or without Sherry and the ranch.” She gripped his hands tightly and breathed as emotions churned inside her heart. She shook her head and stared intently at their clasped hands. “I—” She swallowed hard, her gaze raking his chest. “I love you,” she said, looking up at him.

His smile grew wide as her words visibly ran over him. He nodded. He paused and then nodded again. He took her hands and placed them over his heart. His smile took over his expression, his eyes lighting with joy that she had never seen him wear before. “I love you, too.”

Her smile was giddy. It felt as if her lips were being pulled to her ears, it was so large and happy.

He nodded one more time and let go of her hands. “You pick out what you want and I’ll be right back.”

She watched him leave, a smile still on her face.

He paused at the entry and turned to look at her, his expression more like that of a boy. His hands were held in light fists and he kind of bounced on the balls of his feet. His smile grew wider. He pointed toward her and said just loud enough for her to hear, “I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.”

It took her awhile to figure out what she wanted to get for Sherry, but she finally decided that the utensils she was buying for Sherry might not all be usable. She was making a memory box for the woman who felt like her mother. She picked out things that had memories attached to them and she planned on attaching small notes to each of them, telling Sherry just what each object was for.

Cade came through the door, a huge smile on his face just as she was completing her purchases. He seemed to be bursting with energy. It was contagious. Abby felt herself smiling outrageously as he took her hand and led her to the middle of the mall, where a large fountain

was spewing water. There were a lot of people milling around, some of them moving anxiously from one store to the next in the Christmas count-down rush.

He took her bag and set it on the floor beside them.

“What’s up?” she asked him.

He wrinkled his nose at her, taking off his cowboy hat. He placed it on top of the bag and smiled at her. He took her hand in both of his. His gaze caught hers for a long moment, thoughts floating across his eyes. He licked his lips and then sank to one knee.

Abby’s face immediately settled into an expression of shock. Her light brown eyes widened as she stared at him.

He reached inside of his coat and pulled out a small black velvet box.

“Oh, my God,” she whispered, her other hand trying to slow her rapidly beating heart.

He stared up at her with eyes filled to overflowing with love. “Abigail Williams,” he said, trying to screw his face into some semblance of solemnity. His breath caught in his throat as he stared up at her.

A smile brimming with tears filled her face as she gripped his hand tightly in her own.

His smile grew as the answer to the question he hadn’t even asked yet was given to him. He closed his eyes and tried to erase the smile from his face. Failing, he opened his eyes and peered up at her. “I love you with all my heart. The life I’m offering you is simple,” he said. He took his hand away from hers and opened the box.

The people who had been milling around them stopped and gave them some space, each watching this happy moment with eyes filled with romantic empathy.

Cade tried to breathe around the emotions choking his throat. He looked up at Abby and blinked. “I would be honored if you would be my wife.”

Abby was unable to contain her happiness, and tears of joy flowed down her cheeks. She tried to speak, but her throat was closed with emotion. Finally, looking deeply into his eyes, she nodded, her expression filled with immense joy.

His eyebrows rose as happy surprise slammed into expression. “Yes?” he asked.

Her smile split, overtaking her face as she nodded happily again.

“She said yes,” he whispered to himself. He looked down at the box and with a shaking hand, took the ring out and slipped it onto her finger. He stood up, still shaking. His smiling face went out to the crowd. “She said yes,” he exclaimed. He scooped her up amidst a round of applause and happy cheers.

And that was how Abby found and kept her Christmas cowboy. And as far as we all know, they both lived happily ever after.