

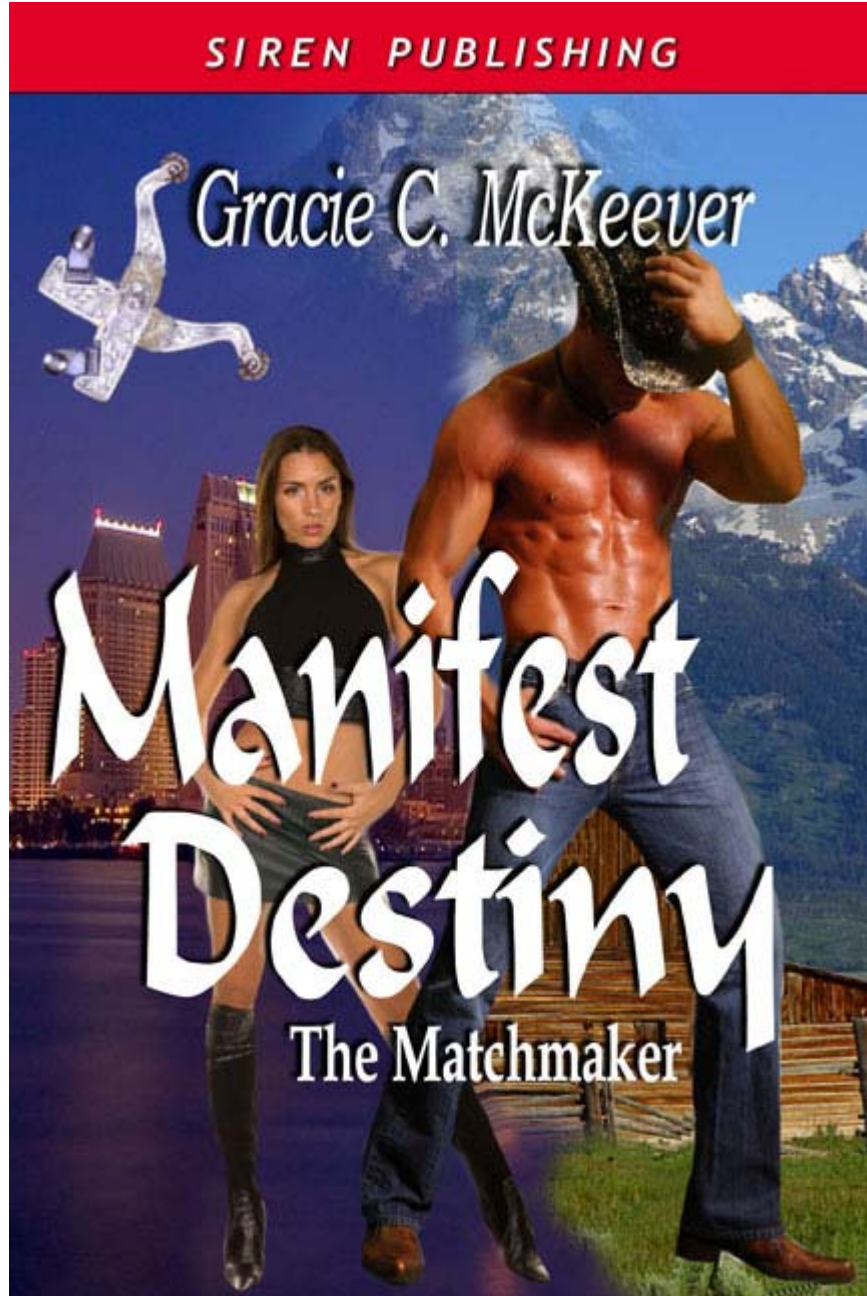
SIREN PUBLISHING

Gracie C. McKeever



Manifest Destiny

The Matchmaker



The Matchmaker, Book 3

Beneath the Surface : Terms of Surrender : Manifest Destiny

Angela Calminetti, mother of five, New Age practitioner and gifted psychic and telepath, is proud of her family ties and does everything she can to make sure that all of her younger siblings are as happy in love and marriage as she is...whether they want her to or not.

Note: Each book is written to stand alone.

Manifest Destiny

Just-turned forty-three Evelyn Vega is beginning to wonder if her time for love and romance has past. No one who knows her would believe the heart of an idealist beats beneath the tough-as-nails, Wall Street broker exterior. No one, that is, except her oldest matchmaking sister Angela Calminetti who negotiates a deal with Freeborn ranch owner Montana Phoenix to get Evelyn and Freeborn's cow boss, Jason Makepeace together.

Orphan at eleven, divorced at twenty-one and lovelorn after Montana falls for Seth Phoenix, Jason has been as unlucky in love as he has in every other facet of his existence. The two things he wants most in life but that have eluded him for the last twelve years are a spread of his own and a woman to love and share the rest of his life with. This is all about to change when sexy city slicker Evelyn struts into his life.

Sensuality Rating: SCORCHING

Genre: Contemporary Paranormal/ May-December

MANIFEST DESTINY

The Matchmaker, Book 3

Gracie C. McKeever

EROTIC ROMANCE



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com

ABOUT THIS E-BOOK: Your non-refundable purchase of this e-book allows you to **one LEGAL** copy for your own personal use. It is **ILLEGAL** to send your copy to someone who did not pay for it. Distribution of this e-book, in whole or in part, online, offline, in print or in any way or any other method currently known or yet to be invented, is forbidden without the prior written permission of both the publisher and the copyright owner of this book.

MANIFEST DESTINY

Copyright © 2007 by Gracie C. McKeever

ISBN: 1-933563-43-5

First E-book Publication: April 2007

Cover design by Jinger Heaston

All cover art and logo copyright © 2007 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED: This literary work may not be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, including electronic or photographic reproduction, in whole or in part, without express written permission.

All characters and events in this book are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual persons living or dead is strictly coincidental.

PUBLISHER

Siren Publishing, Inc.

www.SirenPublishing.com

Manifest Destiny

The Matchmaker, Book 3

By Gracie C. McKeever

Copyright © 2007

Prologue

Wantagh, Long Island

“You really think getting Jason and your sister Evelyn together is such a good idea?” Montana Phoenix asked warily.

Angela Calminetti almost laughed at Montana’s tone, thought how much she sounded like Evelyn when confronted with one of Angela’s matchmaking plans.

“I mean Jason’s an old fashioned, outdoorsy type connected to the land and the cowboy life with a passion. From everything you’re telling me about Evelyn, she’s a city slicker, and a modern woman through and through. No offense. I am too. A modern woman, I mean.”

“None taken. And aren’t we all modern women?” Angela chuckled. “But If Freeborn ranch can turn my two city slickers around, I have every faith that it can turn my sister around.” *Freeborn and a certain strong and silent cowboy will turn Evelyn around.*

“Your two girls came in here as if they were born to the land. Plus, they’re kids and kids tend to adapt quickly.”

Montana had her there. Adults didn't always adapt to change as quickly and as well as children, especially when the adult was as set in her ways as her youngest sister. As well as being a city slicker, Evelyn was a Philistine through and through.

"Trust me, Monty. They just need to get together and meet each other once. We'll let nature take its course after that."

"He's still fragile from...from what happened between him and me. Except for his staunch loyalty, it's a wonder he's stayed on this long..."

Angela waited, knew there was more. She could feel the other woman's protectiveness and reluctance to do what she thought was the equivalent of feeding her friend to the wolves, and a pair of overbearing New York City wolves at that.

"I don't want to see him get hurt," Montana murmured.

Angela well understood Montana's hesitation. She didn't want to see her sister hurt, either, and wouldn't have dreamed of setting Evelyn up with someone who would emotionally bruise or disappoint her like her ex had.

She had met Jason Makepeace when she'd dropped her two youngest kids off at the ranch at the beginning of the summer, had an instant pure vibe from him, as she had from Montana, and she sensed his latent psychic gifts.

Angela bet she knew just the trick to kick-start his abilities into gear, too.

"For the time being, Jason's staying put. I've convinced him to stay on and personally show Seth the ropes. And he's so attached to the ranch and everyone on it anyway, I'm sure it won't be hard to get him to stay on for a while after that."

Angela smiled at Montana's sweet southwestern twang, heart beating hard at the prospect of making a love match for one of her siblings. The thrill of happily ever after never waned. "Thanks, Monty. I promise you won't regret helping me with this."

* * * *

Freeborn Ranch, Colorado Springs, CO

Montana hung up the phone, hoping she hadn't made the biggest mistake of her life.

"Trouble?"

She glanced up to see her husband strolling across the threshold into her office and changed her frown to a smile at the sight of his tall, broad-shouldered physique filling the room.

They'd been married a year now, had one baby and an adopted teen. Her wonder at having him in her life never dwindled. He, their children, were her life. She only wished Jason could attain the same sort of happiness that she had; he deserved it, deserved to find a decent woman who loved him as much as he loved her.

"Was that who I think it was?" Seth slid his arms around her waist and bent his head to plant a lingering kiss on her lips.

Montana kissed him back and nodded when he let her up for air. "Angela Calminetti."

"Why were you looking so worried when I came in? You saw this woman's sister Evelyn in your visions. Do you not believe she is the right one for your Jason?"

"You know how I feel about my visions, Seth. They haven't always been reliable."

"They are reliable. You just need to have more faith in them."

"You sound like Alyosha."

"The Fair Elf is wise." He bent his head to kiss her again. "He helped bring us together."

"I know, Seth, but this is different."

He raised an eyebrow. "In what way?"

"Jason isn't exactly...you know..."

"Gifted?"

Montana nodded again. "And I don't know how all this psychic phenomenon stuff is going to go over with him."

Seth pulled back to stare down at her. "You have not told him?"

"Of course not."

"You do not think he will be able to handle it?"

Montana shrugged. "I'm not sure."

"Alyosha is."

Ah, yes, Alyosha the Fair Elf, all knowing and all seeing, and the one responsible for helping Seth and Montana break the spell that Demogorgon, the Black Elf, had cast on Seth. Without Alyosha's help, Seth would probably still be transforming from man to horse and back again for twelve hours each day. Without Alyosha, Montana would probably never have survived Demogorgon's lightning strike to the chest in order to be with Seth.

But would the Fair Elf be able to help Jason with his love life? Would he even want to? For that matter, would he need to?

"You've spoken to him lately then?" Montana asked.

Seth nodded. "He seems to be under the impression that Jason is fey, that his abilities are sleeping and just waiting for the right catalyst to wake them up."

"That catalyst being Evelyn Vega."

"So it would seem."

"That Alyosha is one wise and scheming elf." Montana grinned.

"He misses you, too. Says you are one of the few people he will venture out into the human world to visit with."

"Next to you, of course." She pulled him close and squeezed his middle. "I miss him, too."

"So," Seth squeezed her back, "you will tell Jason about...about us and your abilities."

“I suppose I’ll have to eventually. Although to tell you the truth, I think he halfway suspects things anyway.”

“Most of the ranch does, but Jason is the only one who counts in this.”

“You’re right. He’s family. He needs to know.”

“Alyosha believes he will need your help to make the adjustment when the time comes. He says that the time will be when Jason falls in love with this woman and that love is the catalyst.”

Isn’t it always?

At least they had a year to prepare, because Lord only knew that if Jason and Evelyn’s courtship was as rocky as Seth and Montana’s had been, then the couple would need all the time and help they could get.

Chapter 1

Wantagh, Long Island—One Year Later

“You’ve got to be kidding me, right?” Evelyn glanced from the itinerary and plane tickets in her hand to her sister’s glowing face. *A dude ranch?* Had Angela lost her mind!

Their brother Nick leaned in to mutter in Evelyn’s ear, “I told her you wouldn’t like it.”

“Oh, you shush, troublemaker.” Angela took a playful swipe at his head. “Don’t try to talk her out of it.”

“I haven’t been talked *into* it, Angie. For Christ’s sa—”

“Watch your language. There are little ones present.”

“Don’t use the kids as an excuse to keep me from appropriately reacting to this...this bombshell.” Evelyn said, but still lowered her voice as she leaned in to grumble—only half-serious because she didn’t really expect her sister to purchase her a cruise, but if Angela was going to give Evelyn a trip—“You couldn’t give me a trip to the Caribbean? Bermuda’s nice this time of year I hear.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, missy. Besides, the whole idea of a birthday gift, of any gift, is to give you something that you would never buy yourself.”

“You’ve got that right,” EJ murmured and ducked as Angela took a playful swipe at his head. “Why don’t all you busybodies leave so we can discuss this...in private?”

Evelyn watched as their four brothers and sisters obediently filed out of the living room and gathered up their kids and cousins and significant others for some playtime and more food outside

where the Vega patriarch, Joe, had finished setting up the volleyball net.

Sometimes, she thought Angela had really missed her calling. She should have been a drill sergeant or someone else in the military whose orders were followed explicitly and without question. Even though she admirably held her own, Evelyn could use some of that pull herself in handling the bears and bulls she daily worked with on Wall Street.

As soon as they were alone, Evelyn turned to her sister sitting opposite her at the kitchen table, took one look at that innocent face and wanted a cigarette badly. She knew she should have taken her opportunity earlier and gone out on the deck when her scheming siblings had all been gathered in a corner of the living room with their heads together like a bunch of defensive football players planning a blitz and making Evelyn feel like the opposing quarterback without an offensive line. “Okay Angie, what are you up to?”

“Every year, you take a two-week cruise to the Caribbean around your birthday, no fail. I just thought this would be a nice little change of pace.”

“I like lazing in the sun on the beach and swimming. Sidestepping cow patties and getting saddle sores is a far cry from that.”

“Don’t exaggerate and stop being such a snob, Evie.”

“I’ll be a snob and I’ll still take the trip to the Caribbean any day.”

Angela tsked and shook her head. “Danni and Tina will be so disappointed.”

“What do your daughters have to do with this?”

“They came up with the idea after they spent last summer at the ranch. They had all sorts of fun there and—”

“Lest we forget your daughters are rough and tumble tomboys.”

“You used to be one, too.”

“‘Used to’ being the operative words.”

Angela leaned forward and took one of Evelyn’s hands, got that serious, can-we-be-frank look on her face, the one she pulled out whenever she got ready to move in for a kill. “You’re such a workaholic, the girls and *I* thought this would be the perfect getaway for you, thought you’d like to get back to nature.”

“And the beach and Caribbean ocean aren’t back-to-nature enough?”

“You know what I mean, Evie. This is different. The Wild West, rugged country ready to be conquered and tamed.”

“Sounds like a lot of work to me. And you know the most I want to do on my vacation is lift a tropical drink, preferably delivered by a cute cabana boy, to my lips.”

“Replace that cute cabana boy with a cute cowboy.”

“Oh, please.” Like *she’d* have a snowball’s chance in hell of meeting the Marlboro Man, him and Sam Elliot her ideals of the masculine animal, icons that yet creamed her panties when she saw them. The mere thought of Mr. Elliot’s deep gravelly voice-over extolling the virtues of beef for dinner in those TV commercials was enough to make her run to the kitchen and start rustling up a steak and potato meal.

“Don’t knock it.” Angela smiled. “Stranger things have happened.”

“Yeah, right,” Evelyn muttered. It wasn’t like she actually had time to indulge anyway. She barely had time for a five-day-a-week workout, only managed them getting up an hour earlier just to make sure she got her exercise in since by the time she got home after a ten, sometimes a twelve-hour day, she was pretty much no good for anyone or anything except sleeping.

“Don’t be that way.” Angela slapped her hand. “There’s no refund and no exchanges, and the girls pitched in with their own

money to help us pay for the trip. You're not going to be a grinch and not accept their gift, are you?"

Evelyn didn't believe that hogwash for a minute, but she knew her sister knew what a softy she was when it came to her nieces and nephews.

"Why didn't you just throw in the boys too and make the gift one big family affair?" She realized before Angela answered that her sister was wearing her down. How could she say no after all, when she knew the woman, despite her assurances that Danni and Tina had chipped in, had spent a small fortune on the all-inclusive package? Evelyn knew what a week at a dude ranch went for, and it wasn't cheap. Angela, and probably Freddie after some friendly, wifely persuasion, had purchased a two-week package. Sure Freddie was a successful software designer and made a pretty penny to take care of his family in relative comfort and style, but Angela had gone just a little too far on this trip.

"Oh, the boys helped, too," Angela said now. "They just don't have the emotional investment in it that the girls do. They really, really did enjoy themselves at the ranch. So it's really, really a gift from the heart."

"You are really, really such a bitch."

"I know, I love you, too." Angela squeezed her hand. "So, are you going to accept it in the spirit that it is offered and do us proud and become a little Annie Oakley out in the wilds of Colorado?"

The wilds were right. With cowpokes, horses and clean fresh mountain air to traumatize her city-polluted lungs...Evelyn peered at Angela, probed the sincere smile to see what plots lurked behind it and those not-so-innocent brown eyes. She couldn't detect a thing.

Since she couldn't figure out how Angela planned to make a love match for her all the way out in Colorado, Evelyn figured she was safe from any unwanted romantic entanglements, unless they were entanglements she initiated herself.

Who knew, even if it wasn't Bermuda or Jamaica where she could meet her Winston or Dexter St. Jacques, maybe she could still do like Stella and get her groove back, rocky mountain style. Stranger things had happened.

"So, you'll go and make us all happy and not insult my girls?"

"Okay, you win, Angie. I'll go."

Angela grinned, looking all too pleased with herself as far as Evelyn was concerned, before sweetly saying, "I knew you'd see things my way."

Chapter 2

Colorado Springs, CO

He must be plumb out of his mind.

A couple of weeks had turned into a couple of months. A couple of months had slid into six months, until six months had become nearly two years after he had threatened to resign that Jason was still functioning as cow boss at Freeborn.

“I need you now...to stay...”

No, he wasn’t out of his mind. He was just plain out of backbone, at least where Montana and her requests were concerned.

He’d never been able to say no to her, always had a hard time denying her anything, especially when she bat those big brown eyes at him. Which was why he was in the predicament he found himself in now, on his way to the airport to pick up some lone, “VIP” ranch guest.

Something always came up to keep him at Freeborn. Some new request—Seth and several new ranch hands needed training—some more sweet talk about no one else being able to run the ranch like him, and could he at least stay until they found a suitable candidate?

Jason promised himself at the end of this summer, no later, he was on his way out, and not to work for someone else on another ranch, but would strike out on his own. It was past due, and why else had he been saving his money and working like a dog on Freeborn if not to have his own spread?

He'd already started looking at spreads that he could call his own, but none of them worth having without someone working hard by his side and enjoying it with him

He had to start somewhere, though, and if that meant having the land and a home first before he found a woman, then so be it.

Jason knew there was someone out there for him, a woman with the same values and love of the land as he. He had thought he'd found that in Montana, but Montana's heart and allegiances belonged to someone else.

Jason made a right turn at the next intersection leading to the Colorado Springs International Airport. He turned up his CD player, tapping his fingers against the steering wheel and singing along to Shania Twain's bouncy and playful *Any Man of Mine* blaring from his pick-up's speakers as he tried to get his mind back on the situation at hand.

He was not looking forward to catering to some highfaluting city slicker from New York and wondered why Montana would ask him of all people to do so.

Oh, she hadn't said anything in so many words, just put the request out there in her usual, innocent, can't-refuse-her way. Jason, however, had known her long enough to learn how to read between the lines and knew that there must be some reason she wanted him to pick this person up rather than going the normal route and picking Miss Vega up herself. Not that he had anything against New Yorkers, he just couldn't understand Montana's reckoning since he wasn't the most sociable or entertaining chauffeur.

He communicated a whole lot better with critters than people any day. Animals were simple, had no artifice, ulterior motives or hidden agendas. Critters just behaved the way nature intended, nothing more, nothing less.

Jason checked his watch as he pulled onto Drennan Road at exactly twelve-forty-five p.m., lucky to have arrived only forty-

five-minutes later than Miss Vega's plane was due to arrive, since Montana had hit him with her request at the last minute.

That wasn't like her. Montana was organized to an extent, at least usually. When her kids came up for the summer, however, she tended to get a little scatterbrained settling everyone in and the kids had only just arrived a few days previously. Montana liked to give them the personal touch as much as possible, took time off from her Forest Service duties to spend time with them.

Jason was ready to drive down to the lower level outside the terminal where the taxis and other car services were located before he spotted the lone woman at the curbside sitting on a piece of her abundant luggage in the summer's heat.

He instantly knew it was Evelyn Vega. Despite the sleek simplicity of her outfit—a flowing cream peasant skirt and a prairie sun yellow, silk tank-top—the woman had that big-city look to her, the duds, expensive-looking, undoubtedly designer and totally unsuited to the Colorado heat and ranch life.

She had on a pair of big dark sunglasses of course, but wasn't wearing a hat to protect her head from the hot Colorado sun. She probably didn't have on any sunscreen either and except for a pair of pricey stylish pecan cowboy boots, she didn't look prepared, one iota, for life out on a ranch, especially not Freeborn.

No hat and a silk top. Now what kind of dadgum sense did that make?

At least she had on the boots, Jason thought. Though their fanciness made him reckon they had only been a concession to her trip west since they looked like a brand new purchase, as if they hadn't seen a minute of city asphalt much more the red dirt and mud that she would encounter at almost any cattle ranch in Colorado.

Jason sighed and shook his head as he put his pick-up in park and got out. He took off his hat as he approached. "Miss Vega?"

She took off her glasses, stared up at him and raised an imperial eyebrow.

Jason noticed, except for a light touch of glossy bronze lipstick, she had on barely any make-up.

For some reason, this surprised him. It surprised him also that his cock instantly reacted to her slick but uncomplicated looks, twitching in his jeans at her flawless olive skin, the light veneer of moisture giving her complexion an ethereal sheen that made him want to lick her like a mango ice cream cone.

Jason caught himself following a single drop of moisture as it made a path from her neck down to her luscious cleavage, and had to consciously stop his mouth from watering.

His cock throbbed behind the zipper of his jeans as if he hadn't let it out off a leash in centuries. Sadly, this was almost close to the truth, nearly eight months since he had been with Jennifer Brighthart, a twenty-five-year-old (much younger than he liked tangling with), New York bound waitress from town with dreams of hitting it big in modeling and acting.

Okay, maybe eight months wasn't exactly centuries, but it was getting dang near close for him. He hadn't realized how close until this very moment surrounded by Miss Vega's raw feminine appeal and heat.

"And you would be?"

He started, shook his head to clear it of all the horny-dog thoughts going through it, and quickly stuck out his right hand. "Jason Makepeace, ma'am. I'm the cow boss at Freeborn."

"Cow boss," she repeated as if trying it on for size and put a perfectly French-manicured hand in his. "Is that anything like a cowboy?"

She had a strong grip. He liked that. "It's a highfalutin name for foreman, or a cowboy in charge of cattle operations. I mostly run the buckaroo crew."

"Ahhh." She nodded. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Makepeace."

“You can call me Jason, ma’am. Almost no one calls me Mr. Makepeace.”

“And you can call me Evelyn. Almost no one calls me...ma’am.”

Jason put his hat back on, stopped himself from grinning at the difficulty she had getting that last word out of her mouth. “No disrespect ma—I mean Evelyn. It’s just an address of respect around these parts, like Mr. and Miss around your parts.”

“Respect, huh?”

She said the word as if it was an alien concept and made Jason wonder if common courtesy and respect were unknown qualities to someone from the big bad city. He’d heard horror stories about cold and rude New Yorkers, sure. Granted he didn’t travel much outside of the Midwest and Southwest but he was almost certain Evelyn Vega pulled his leg.

She stood from her bag. “Shall we go?”

“Ready when you are.” Jason hungrily watched her, the skirt flowing down around her legs to reach the top of her boots in sinuous waves. She turned to lift one of the bags, an expensive leather designer tote and then smoothly draped a matching handbag across her chest.

Jason inhaled, her scent wafting out to him as she passed, a combination of some spicy sandalwood cologne laced with a touch of vanilla musk and a lot of female.

He reacted as if he had been gut-punched, hissing as his cock hardened and grew to painful proportions in response to the mix of the aroma and Miss Vega’s proximity.

What was that about? He hadn’t reacted so strongly to a woman in a long time. In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a carnal response except...Heck, he had barely been in his twenties, nothing but a dumb pup back then, hormones running haywire and vulnerable to the attentions of almost anything on two legs and female.

Evelyn headed for the front passenger door of his truck and paused. “Are you coming?”

Jason looked at her and at the stack of bags she’d left behind—two of those large wheelie bag do-dads that were all the rage among the sophisticated set, and a matching backpack.

He gathered the bags, grunting at the unexpected weight as he hefted them into the backseat of his pick-up. “Dead body in any of these?”

“No. Just essentials.”

More like half her fancy New York City wardrobe. “You’re only staying a week right?”

“No, two. Why?”

“Just curious. Most people stay one.” Jason sauntered around the front of the truck to get in the driver’s seat and caught her looking around in awe as if she couldn’t believe the pristine condition of the cab. He stopped himself from smiling at her reaction and asked, “You were expecting some smoke-filled honky-tonk?”

“Actually, I was looking for your gun rack.”

“I don’t know what you’ve been told, but that’s a myth. All us hillbillies and rednecks ain’t card-carrying members of the NRA.”

“It wasn’t meant as an insult.”

“Contrary to all the westerns you might have seen, being a cowboy is a lot of hard honest work that doesn’t involve shoot ’em up, bang-bang poker games in the town saloon.”

“Oooo-kay, you made your point.”

Jason closed the door and started the engine, glanced at her as he pulled from the curbside and headed for the highway, the full brunt of her allure hitting him within the confines of the air conditioned cab despite his being five different kinds of irritated with her presumption.

He secured his seat belt, trying to get a handle on his responses and change the subject before he said something more ungentlemanly. “Wait long?” he asked.

“A little while.” She turned her head to glance at him. “So, was there a problem back at the ranch? You don’t seem like you’re used to playing chauffeur to the guests.”

“Actually, I’m not. Monty asked me to do her a favor. She usually shuttles ranch guests from the airport personally, likes to give the individual touch when she can. That, or her husband Seth will make the trip, but he wasn’t available, either.”

“Lucky you to get the duty today, huh?”

“Yep, lucky me.” Jason shrugged, thought it really wasn’t so bad, not with the view of her profile he got to enjoy from the driver’s seat. “So what brings you out to a dude ranch?”

“My nieces spent the summer here last year and loved it. Got it into their heads that I’d love it too and convinced their mom to buy a two-week package as a birthday gift for their auntie. So here I am, enjoying my present.”

“They must love you a lot,” he said and watched a smile light up her entire face. The contrast to her previous stern expression was breathtaking.

“Yes, they do. And I love them all right back. I just wasn’t expecting anything so—”

“Boring?”

“I was going to say extravagant.”

“It must have been a surprise. You don’t seem like the dude ranch type.”

She turned to glare at him. “And what’s that supposed to mean?”

“Whoa-whoa there, little lady. I was just making an observation. When I first rolled up, you didn’t look too happy to be here.”

She sighed and grumbled, “It’s not exactly the Caribbean.”

“Reckon not.” Jason watched as she pulled a pack of cigarettes out of her bag.

She extracted one from the pack before he could say anything and was about to light it before motioning to him with a, “You don’t mind do you?”

“Actually, I do.”

She arched that brow again, this time as if she dared the peasant to dictate to his queen. “I’m sorry?”

He understood Montana’s the-customer-is-always-right, anything-to-please-the-guest mentality, but he had to draw the line where his lungs were concerned and refused to back off of this stance. He’d come this far without succumbing to the big “C” and didn’t intend to succumb in the near future. “I’d prefer it if you didn’t light up in here.”

“Well, excuse me.”

“You’re excused.”

She sat back in her seat with a huff, her full lips stuck out in a sexy pout that he tried not to notice and that took ten years off her already smooth, unlined face.

Jason suddenly wondered how many miles were on her, noticed the very fine lines around her eyes, ‘character lines’ Mrs. Harper used to call them, didn’t think she was much older than him, maybe thirty-four, thirty-five tops.

He tried not to enjoy the sight of her olive-toned face blushing and almost decided to give in before she leaned close.

God, that scent she wore went a heck of a long way to camouflage the redolence of her smoking habit and was about to drive him wild.

Jason hadn’t been this turned on in a long while, his cock pressing against the front of his jeans with a vengeance and as if it had a bone to pick with him for keeping it under lock and key for so long.

Down little doggie, down!

“Just a couple of puffs. I’ll open the window and—”

“Let in all that hot muggy air and defeat the purpose of the AC.”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re an evil tyrant?”

Jason smirked. “Not lately, no. Most folks ’round these parts think I’m a real pussy cat.”

“I doubt that,” she muttered.

He swallowed hard as he watched her fold her arms over those full rounded breasts he imagined his hands cupping. He could already feel her hard nipples against his thumbs, his lips wrapped around the pink (or would they be brown?) nubs, tongue rasping against her aureole...

Jason shifted in his seat and said, “I hate to break it to you, but the ranch is mostly a smoke-free zone.”

“You’re exaggerating, of course.”

He was, but he wouldn’t tell her that. Of course there were designated cottages and areas outside where guests could indulge, but after the stable fire a few years back, the habit was frowned on. Not to mention, Montana had cut back considerably on what she would allow on her premises and smoking was one of her major cutbacks.

The guests were all forewarned in the brochure ahead of time about the restrictions as well as the amenities and most were agreeable. They came to Freeborn to enjoy the fresh country vibe and get away from the pollution and congestion of the city.

Miss Vega, however, probably hadn’t read any brochure and looked ready to get out of his truck and suck on the exhaust pipe just to get her fix of poison.

The weird thing was, until she pulled out the cigarettes, he wouldn’t have taken her for a smoker, and he was usually pretty good about spotting one.

To say the least, she had an attractive smile, teeth straight and white, and didn’t have the telltale yellow stains, nor did her fingers

from what he could see. Maybe she was one of them-there social smokers.

After several minutes of quiet, he asked, "How was your flight?"

"Smoke-free, if you must know."

He almost laughed at her peeved tone until he realized it meant their ride back to Freeborn would be twice as long as his ride had been coming to the airport.

Aw heck, he had known no good could come of him picking up Miss Persnickety instead of Montana doing it, had almost said no despite his employer and friend's request.

Usually he was so much more diplomatic too, but there was just something about the New Yorker that made him want to goad her, made him want to say no just to see her reaction. This and he refused to jeopardize the health of his lungs for her vice.

"May I?" she asked, already reaching for the dashboard where the dials for his CD player were, and jumping when Shania's voice resounded through the cab in her lively rendition of *Man! I Feel Like A Woman!*

Jason watched her fiddle with the dials, evidently trying to find something more suited to her urban sensibilities before she finally turned to him and threw up her hands.

"You wouldn't happen to have any real music in this truck, would you?"

He scowled. "I take it country music ain't to your liking?"

"Whoops, didn't mean to insult you."

"Again," he muttered, reaching for the CD player and lowering the volume. He glanced at her out the corner of his eye and knew very well that she had intended to insult him. "Sorry, don't have any Snoop Doggy Dog or Fifty Cents."

"Do I look like I listen to Snoop Dog or Fifty Cents?"

Jason turned to glance at her, held her angry gaze for several seconds. “Don’t rightly know what you listen to, ma’am. I just thought all New Yorkers listened to rap music.”

“No, they don’t. Just like all hillbillies and rednecks don’t have guns. So I guess we’re even then, huh?”

“I didn’t know this was a can-you-top-this-stereotype contest.”

“Listen Jake—”

“Jason.”

“Yeah, right. Jason. Look, we got off on the wrong foot. Let’s just agree to disagree and call a truce now before this goes too far.”

“Sounds like a plan,” he agreed despite the lack of apology anywhere in her address. As for going too far...heck they had done that the minute he’d introduced himself to the little firebrand.

“Now, can you please pull over?”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Mind if I ask why?”

“Can you just do it please?”

Jason sighed, made a right and pulled over to the shoulder of the road, watched her get out of the truck and immediately light up a cigarette and take a deep puff.

God, the way she looked, the rapturous way she closed her eyes as she inhaled those poisonous fumes made him wonder what her face would look like when she was in the throes of an orgasm. Made him wonder how tight and hot her cunt would feel around his fingers.

Jason gritted his teeth, opened the door and got out of the truck to join her, a glutton for punishment and sure she would know the condition he was in with just a brief glance at his fly.

“I would think you’d want to protect your uncontaminated lungs and stay in your truck far, far away from the pariah.”

“Has it been that long?”

“What?” She gawked, paused with the cigarette midway to her mouth.

Jason wondered what she would do if he leaned in and ran his tongue along her slightly parted lips, willing to risk the tobacco taste on his tongue, just for a fiery taste of her. “That you had a cigarette, Evelyn” he clarified, wondered what she thought he meant until he saw the flush coloring her prominent, high cheeks.

“Oh.”

“What did you think I meant?” he murmured, goading again, wanted her to say it out loud but knew she wouldn’t.

“Never you mind, Mr. Make-war-not-peace.”

“You’re just about the only one who thinks so.”

“I’m thinking no one else has seen this anti-smoking side of you.”

“I’m thinking you’re right.”

She took another deep drag, turned her face away from him to exhale the smoke.

Jason was oddly touched by the maneuver, watched her toss her butt to the concrete and firmly stamp it out beneath the heel of her boot before she peered up at him with those bright hazel eyes that liked to suck the oxygen right out of his lungs as surely as if he’d taken a puff of her cigarette himself.

“See. That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

“I wouldn’t know. I didn’t smoke it.”

She huffed and shook her head as she headed back to the passenger side door.

Jason followed, and by the time he got round to the front of the truck, she was already firmly strapped into her seat with her arms folded across her breasts as she stared straight ahead.

He opened the driver’s side door and got behind the wheel telling himself it was going to be a long two weeks.

Maybe he should speed up his ranch-hunting deadline by a few weeks.

Chapter 3

Had she pissed him off so thoroughly he couldn't wait to dump her off on his boss?

Whatever the reason, Evelyn had found herself alone in a cozy cottage with her bags soon after arriving at Freeborn.

She'd watched the mouthwatering sight of Jason's broad-shouldered back, lean waist, and round tight ass as he'd exited the premises and wondered briefly why she was so mad at a specimen that filled out a pair of Wrangler's so miraculously.

No sooner had he left in what could only be described as male pique, than the proprietors of the ranch showed up at her door to introduce themselves and give her a little tour of the grounds and accommodations.

Nothing Angela had told her had prepared her for the sight of the young black couple who turned up at her door. They were, quite frankly, a breath of fresh air, simultaneously surprising and a familiar touch of home.

Montana Phoenix was an exotically beautiful woman with a soft-spoken southwestern twang to warm the heart.

By contrast, Seth Phoenix looked like a bit of a homeboy with his short copper 'locs, light goatee and mustache and a tiny gold hoop in his left ear. That is until he opened his mouth to speak in his precise, contraction-less deep baritone that could have rivaled the Queen's English.

Evelyn was not only amazed that African-American people lived in Colorado, but that an African-American couple owned one of the largest cattle ranches in the nation.

Angela had explained the ranch had belonged to Montana's adoptive parents and had been passed on to her when they were killed in a plane crash. Montana had gotten married to Seth a little more than a year ago, hence the Phoenix surname.

Evelyn wasn't surprised that they were still practically newlyweds. The vibe came off of them in palpable waves, made her crave that kind of connection, that kind of intimacy. She craved a connection until she remembered that aggravating cowboy who had picked her up from the airport.

Evelyn stopped her unpacking and paused in the middle of the bedroom when her pussy spasmed in reaction to her memory of Jason Makepeace. She hissed through her teeth as if this could check her desire or stop the flood of juices rushing to her thong.

It should be illegal for one man to look that good! He was the epitome of The Marlboro Man, her quintessential image of a rugged cowboy. Tall, lean drink of water—at least eight inches taller than her 5'6" frame—slightly bowlegged, with wavy chestnut hair (that was probably the same color and sheen as his horse's coat), Caribbean blue eyes (that reminded her of the ocean cruise she was missing) and a five o'clock shadow that just barely hid a pair of dimples.

It wasn't as if he had smiled all that much for her to see them, but the dimples were so deep, he didn't have to smile, just moving his jaws in the act of talking was enough to show them off to half-effect. A full smile would probably be devastating to the senses, Evelyn decided, same as would a clean-shaven face.

The whiskers were just the right, rough-hewn touch to keep him from being too 'pretty,' because God only knew what additional havoc he could wreak on her over-forty hormones with those long-lashed baby-blues, that burnished silken hair, the inviting golden-tanned skin and...

Evelyn plopped on the king size, four-poster bed and squeezed her legs together to stanch the flow from her cunt. It had been in a

continual state of gushing since Jason had taken off his hat, stuck out his hand and introduced himself to her in that rich, butter-melting drawl at the airport.

She closed her eyes, expanding on and tuning into the vision of her and Jason Makepeace getting busy between the sheets or, better still, him taking her against the wall of one of the ranch's stables that she had visited earlier.

She knew he would be gentle, but sensed an inner roughness that she wouldn't mind encouraging, could picture him pinning her down in a bed of hay, stray straw in her hair and clothes as he straddled her, the earthy smell of horses and a clean fresh man in her nostrils. Maybe she could even get him to tie her up with his lasso and...God, what was she thinking? She barely knew the man and what she did know of the arrogant, surly cowboy, she wasn't sure she liked.

He'd called her ma'am! Okay, as if she didn't know she was older than him by more than a few years, he'd had to rub it in her face. Really, if he was going to defer to her age and show her respect, why not let her smoke to her heart's content?

Evelyn stood to finish unpacking her bags into the room's bureaus and closet, still thinking about the age gap between Jason and she.

Practically a boy, he probably hadn't even been born when The Marlboro Man was at his commercial peak and probably didn't know The Marlboro Man from a hole in the wall .

She'd put Jason at no more than twenty-six, twenty-seven tops. This would have made him an infant when she had been a sophomore in high school drooling over The Marlboro Man. *Hell.*

And what was that crack about her staying two weeks? Remembering his disdain when he'd asked her how long she was staying snatched her right out of her *How Stella Got Her Groove Back* cradle robbing fantasies. Had he been intimating that she had packed way too much?

Well, screw him. She may be vacationing on a dude ranch, but she had her standards and intended to keep up some appearance of urbanity and civilization. Just because she had been given this trip didn't mean she had to go all native on a body. She'd conceded quite enough packing more than her usual share of jeans and shorts and T-shirts to accommodate this dusty rocky mountain heat.

Evelyn finished unpacking, wondered if maybe she *had* overpacked when she saw how much of the room's bureaus and closet she had managed to fill, and she still needed to have room for the requisite souvenirs she intended to buy. Not that Jason was right, mind you. No way. She was a grown woman and had gotten this far in her life without the smartass voice of reason of some demanding cow boss to guide her down the straight and narrow.

Evelyn sat down again, abruptly reached across the bed and opened the top drawer of the nightstand, needed to relieve some frustration and knew exactly how to do it.

Since Angela had so thoughtfully booked her a non-smoking cottage, getting a couple of drags wasn't an option. Not that she had enjoyed her last cigarette at the side of the road all that much with the new altitude for which her system hadn't yet made any adjustments. It wasn't like she smoked all that much anyway, not quite a pack a week, just that when she wanted that burst of nicotine and tobacco on her taste buds and in her bloodstream, she wanted it.

No, no cigarette would do. For this, she needed 'Jack' and pulled out her rabbit-eared vibrator—like her Amex, she never left home without it. She didn't like to count on getting lucky when she went abroad, or just on a weekend getaway to the Jersey shore. She liked to be prepared for a lack of eligible candidates, not that she'd ever indulged all that much on a trip.

When she had purchased Jack, her second such vibrator a couple of years ago, the box it came in read "Rabbit Habit" on the outside in small red print, and boy was it. It was so much of a

habit, in fact, she wondered if she'd be able to have an orgasm without it. She wondered if a man at the helm of her erogenous zones would be able to bring her to climax the way Jack did.

Normally, she had no qualms about using it, no shame, but she hesitated now, picturing Jason's big cowboy cock in her hand instead, feeling his hips thrusting against her, his dick throbbing inside her.

God, she did love men!

There was just nothing like that solid masculine weight covering her, the feel of a man wedged between her thighs, a pair of round firm male cheeks clasped in her hands as he pistoned against her, his wide hard chest sensually pressed against her erect nipples.

Evelyn closed her eyes, pulled up her skirt, slid down her thong and lay back on the bed. She flipped up the 'On' switches that controlled both the dildo and the rabbit's ears, hypnotized by the low steady hum that suddenly filled the room as she guided the vibrating mushroom head toward her creamy cunt.

Usually and amazingly, she didn't use the dildo part, only the ears to simulate her clit, especially when she was short on time and in a hurry to get off. This time, however, she wanted the full effect, the full package, needed that feeling of being filled. Stuffed.

Evelyn teased her labia with the head, rubbing it against her vulva until the latex head was thoroughly moist with her cream before easing the dildo into her opening. She was so wet she barely had to push before it slid all the way in.

She skated her free hand up under the hem of her tank top and under her bra, gently squeezed and pinched a hardened nub, moaning with unresolved lust as the sensation zinged straight to her center. She slid the false penis further, inch by torturous inch, until it was hilt-deep and the pulsating ears pressed against her swollen clit. She ground her hips against the instrument,

simultaneously driving the dildo and ears into herself to get the double whammy effect of penetration.

She whimpered as the pearls in the center of the dildo caressed and stimulated her inner walls like continuous rolling thunder, felt herself creeping towards an orgasm and bit her bottom lip as she turned the power up a couple of notches.

“Mmm...oooh...” Evelyn licked her dry lips, rubbed and squeezed each nipple now, pinching them almost painfully hard between her finger and thumb. She was so far gone, lost in her approaching climax until her awareness had shrunk down to the vibrator’s hum and the throbbing inside her pussy and against her clit.

She turned the power up another notch and bucked her hips off the bed, legs bent at the knees and spread like a wanton, thrusting the vibrator in and out before she suddenly stiffened. Stars exploded behind her eyes as an icy-hot wave rose up from her toes and crashed into her center, sending continuous violent tingles to her pussy and burgeoning up and out to encompass her aching nipples.

Take that, Todd Cole, you bastard!

Evelyn almost laughed out loud at her errant thought, wondered why after so many years she still let that man get to her when it was obvious he wasn’t, had never been, worth her time, energy, or even the tears she had shed after the separation and divorce.

She didn’t need his cool approval, or narrow-minded attitude. And she certainly didn’t need him in her life making her feel self-conscious with his antiquated views of gender that had her pegged as some sort of nympho because she enjoyed sex with her husband.

She shuddered inside and out with afterglow and as if in defiance of Todd’s memory. Her spasming pussy and the low drone of her vibrator reminded her that she was in a pretty compromising position.

Had she even bothered to lock the door? Or had she fallen prey to the countrified, Mayberry vibe of the ranch and left it open?

Evelyn shut off the rabbit and lay still for several silent moments catching her breath before slowly sliding out the vibrator, the image of a smirking cowboy, hat pushed back on his head at a rakish angle, filling her mind's eye. Unconsciously, she expanded on the vision, saw Jason leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed over his broad, hard naked chest, long lean legs crossed at the ankles.

"I could have handled that for ya, ma'am, if you'da let me..."

Evelyn sprang to a sitting position at the sound of his deep twang in her ear and swung her eyes to the empty doorway.

Damn, talk about a vivid imagination!

She was relieved it hadn't really been him, on so many levels, but the main one being that she didn't want to give the cowboy the wrong idea and think she was some wild, wicked city woman, suitable for stoning, especially since she hadn't been with anyone in a little more than two years.

Not that he'd believe that. Not that she should care what he believed.

Yeah, tell that to your still dripping and wanting pussy.

Usually, she was a lot more sated after a session with Jack, but not this time.

Something was missing. Someone.

Hell.

How could she be so turned on by someone she wanted to throttle? Someone who instantly pissed her off?

Idiot, angry does not preclude desire.

She ought to know.

She had fucked her share of men that turned her on and pissed her off at the same time, not in the name of research or to figure out what she wanted in bed.

She'd always been precocious from a young teen, had known quite well what she liked and wanted, well acquainted with what ignited her erogenous zones, and willing and assertive enough to do what needed to be done to ensure her own pleasure whether with a partner or without.

She had suffered a few stumbles along the way, most specifically with her ex-husband, Todd, the egotistical jerk who had given *her* ego a blow insinuating towards the end of their marriage that Evelyn had loose morals. How convenient for his inadequacies.

Evelyn knew, however, that Todd's actual, biggest problem was his inability to handle his wife's success, his inability to accept his pupil surpassing her teacher, especially when Evelyn started to make much more money than he.

It took a while for her to get back her self-confidence after Todd's scathing indictment, but she'd never lost sight of her turn-ons.

What turned her on besides outright screwing, what always got her hotter than anything? A nice big hard body to cuddle up next to at night, the clean, spicy smell of a man just out of a shower, that glistening hard six-pack above a towel riding low on a pair of slim hips...

Whoa, girl, sensory overload!

Wouldn't Jason just think he was all that and a bag of chips if he knew how hot he made her, the naughty things she wanted to do with his body, the naughty things she wanted him to do to her, especially with that lasso.

Slowly, Evelyn glanced around the room and finally sunk back onto the bed with a sigh, enjoying the cushy firmness for the first time since she arrived. She realized this was her first true moment of solitude and quiet since leaving New York. It was also her first moment to enjoy the room's Native American-Western décor,

Navajo patterned comforter and matching pile rugs on the finished parquet floors and complementary curtains at the windows.

The cottage was fully self-sustaining and first-rate—Montana's cheerful stamp evident in every piece of furniture and accessory—with full porch, living room, kitchen, and grassy yard within a three minute walk from the other cottages on the ranch, affording comfort and privacy in one fell swoop.

Maybe this vacation wouldn't be so bad.

She'd noticed during her tour with Montana and Seth that there were several spring-fed lakes and looked forward to dipping her feet into some body of water. It wasn't the Caribbean ocean, but she'd just make the best of it, something she'd been good at since graduating from Wharton University more than two decades ago to compete with the big boys in business.

Evelyn suddenly smiled as she sat up, ready to do battle.

If she could broker multi-million dollar deals, placate cantankerous and seasoned businessmen and handle arrogant, chauvinistic and downright misogynistic traders and investors on Wall Street day in and day out, then she could damn well handle a haughty, reticent, too-sexy-for-his-own-good cowboy/cow boss from Colorado.

Re-energized, Evelyn smiled, planning to get up at the crack of dawn tomorrow for orientation, despite a severe case of jet lag and culture shock, determined to show Jason he wasn't dealing with some spoiled and pampered Yankee who didn't know a bull from a heifer on a good day.

She'd show him exactly what she was made of. Show him what he was up against in one Evelyn Lily Vega!

Chapter 4

Jason didn't realize how much that woman had chafed his hide until he burst into Montana's home office and caught himself in the middle of pacing a ditch in her plush crimson carpeting and ranting a hole in her eardrums.

He had to give it to his friend, she let him go on for a good five minutes before she finally interrupted the ruckus to find out what the heck kind of snake had crawled up his jeans leg.

"I gotta say, I don't think temper tantrums suit you at all, Jace."

"This isn't funny, Monty, and it's your fault I'm in this state to begin with."

She arched a brow. "Colorado?"

"Don't be smart."

"If you're talking about your emotional state, how is that *my* fault?"

"For asking me to pick up that...ornery woman from the airport."

She leaned forward in her executive chair her hands folded on her desk as if she was a psychotherapist about to ask a client to share his deepest darkest secrets, and fully expected him to give up the goods.

Not in this lifetime.

"Ornery? What happened, exactly?"

Jason flung himself back into the high-back leather chair in front of her desk and sighed.

Now that he had some distance from the source of his vexation, he had a better perspective.

At least it was a little better. He was still pretty dadgum riled.

“Jace?”

He rubbed his eyes with a thumb and forefinger, shook his head. “I don’t know why I’m making such a big deal about this. It’s about what I expected.”

“Did something happen between you two?”

He raked a hand through his hair and caught the expectant look on Montana’s face.

What the heck was going on?

“Nothing a good...shower won’t cure.” He had almost said ‘cold shower’ before he remembered to whom he was talking.

“You obviously had something on your mind when you came in here, although with all the hooping and hollering, I didn’t get exactly what it was.” She chuckled, then instantly turned serious. “Jason, talk to me. I can’t help you if I don’t know what’s wrong.”

“Your latest guest and I just don’t see eye to eye on some things.”

“You don’t like her?”

He frowned at her anxious tone. Why would she care one way or the other whether he liked one of her guests? For that matter, why had he opened his pie hole to mention his experience picking up the Yankee? “I didn’t exactly say that. I don’t rightly know her, but what I do know just reminds me of m—” He cut himself off, realized he’d never spoken about his ex before. In fact, no one at Freeborn knew about Bette, not even Montana. Not that he had been keeping his past a secret. He’d just never found a time or reason to share the part about his marriage.

“Reminds you of whom?”

“No one.” He shook his head.

Montana, however, wasn’t letting him off the hook that easily. She stood up, came from behind her desk to approach and put a hand on his shoulder, her expression sympathetic.

Once he used to get all hot and bothered when she touched him like this, hormones leaping to life and making him hard. Now he just got the warm and fuzzy feelings that a big brother might get for his sister. His cock didn't even react to her nearness.

Either he had officially turned into a eunuch, something his buckaroo crew had been claiming he was in danger of becoming if he kept up this unheard of layoff from women, or he was finally over Montana.

He hadn't even seen it happen, had hoped and been told by countless friends and co-workers that he'd get over her but had never really believed it would happen, didn't believe the feelings he'd entertained for Montana for so long would ever fade.

He guessed time really did heal all wounds.

Now what was the secret to getting him through two weeks of that galling city slicker?

"Secrets Jason?"

He grinned and stood at hearing her ironic tone. It was a well-known fact that he didn't confide in too many people. Montana was among the privileged few and even she didn't know all there was to know about his sordid history.

"I take it Evelyn Vega is like some ex that used to drive you nuts?"

Jason averted his eyes and shuffled his feet at her coaxing voice, unaccustomed to being put on the spot about his love life, especially put on the spot by a former unrequited love.

"I'm right, ain't I?"

"Ex-wife," he admitted.

Montana's eyebrows shot up as he'd known they would, and he resigned himself to come clean now, at least partway.

"It was a long time ago. We were barely in our twenties, not married quite a year."

"Well, still waters really do run deep."

If she only knew. "I reckon."

Between his cheating bride Bette Farmer and one of his most infamous foster mothers, Mrs. Harper to whom he'd lost his virginity at sixteen, Jason had been turned off of younger women but good.

"I still don't think that's any reason to try and convict one of our guests without due process, Jace. You're usually a little more open-minded than that."

Didn't he know it! He wasn't open-minded about Evelyn Vega, though. Or should he say Eve from the Garden of Eden here to tempt him out of his chaps?

"Is there something special about this woman, maybe?"

There was that coaxing tone again. What did she have up her sleeve or had that Yankee's urban paranoia rubbed off on him? "Specially vexing," he mumbled, and slammed his hat back on his head, "but I guess if I could adapt to your husband, I can adapt to anything."

"Now, now. Be nice."

Jason chuckled as she walked him to the door.

"Speaking of which, I've been meaning to discuss easing Seth into your position."

"I thought that's what we were doing."

"I know, but I want to take a more aggressive approach. You know, like letting him sink or swim on his own without you there to back him up."

As much as he knew it was inevitable, Jason still felt a wave of possessiveness hit him for his job. "I'm listening."

"You know we don't want to see you go, but we need to prepare and now would be as good a time as any to let Seth go it alone."

"You think so?"

Montana nodded. "We've got a new jigger boss starting tomorrow. Highly recommended, lots of experience, one of your recommendations."

“Uh-huh.”

“I just wanted to run this by you so that you’re not surprised when he comes in.”

Surprised? They had someone starting tomorrow? How long had this been in the works?

“That’s kind of sudden.”

“I just finally decided to follow the boss’s orders.”

“Seth?”

“No, silly. You.” She wrapped an arm around his shoulder and squeezed him in a one-armed hug. “You know how much we all love and need you here, Jace. But, I’m finally facing the hard facts that I have to let you go.”

That sounded so final!

Jason felt a hitch in his chest, had no idea it would be so hard leaving, and he wasn’t even gone yet. He would need to stay on at least a month or more to smooth things out and before he found his own place.

Why did he feel like a baby bird being pushed out of the nest too soon?

He glanced at Montana and could see his own sadness mirrored in her dark almond eyes.

She took a deep breath before speaking again, tears evident in her shaky voice. “In the meantime, and since I know you’re in the middle of house and ranch hunting, we’ll gradually scale back and change your duties, give you a chance to get settled elsewhere...”

She outlined what she and Seth had planned, how they wanted him to lead the upcoming season’s cattle drives starting with the one this week and Seth would take over his duties with the buckaroo crew.

“That way you’ll have more time to devote to your rawhide braiding and saddlery.”

“They’re not that big a deal, Monty.”

“You say,” she scoffed. “I know the kind of work you do and it’s in great demand. Hell, you could make a living on your craft alone and never have to work a ranch again.”

He grinned, appreciating her praise, but knew her and Seth’s plans boiled down to one thing and one thing only: they were easing him out.

Wasn’t that what he wanted though, what he’d been telling them they needed to do since soon after they had gotten married?

Only problem was the cattle drive would more than likely put him into contact with the Yankee. Sure other families and couples would be going out, but he had a feeling she would stand out in any crowd of gunsels and greenhorns, her allure already calling to him, his hormones on alert now, especially susceptible.

He told himself he could handle her, more than could handle her, just didn’t want to deal with the headache of trying to break in the ornery filly.

Not to mention you don’t want to deal with your attraction to her.

Yep, he could handle her but the truth was, and despite her advanced years, she reminded him too much of Bette for him to keep an unbiased outlook.

He hadn’t told Montana the entire story, not that there was much to tell.

He’d been searching for the elephant—drifting, going over the next hill, and looking for something new, something that was never there—across the Mid-western states. He took odd jobs here and there for several years before finally joining the rodeo circuit and meeting Elizabeth, “Bette”, Farmer soon after.

And he had yet to meet a filly since his ex that he wanted to make a commitment to, had yet to have one woman catch his fancy for any real length of time.

A woman hadn’t caught his fancy like this until today that was.

He hadn't even had Evelyn Vega once yet and already contemplated multiple encounters. Maybe because he knew that Evelyn was the kind of woman who *could* keep his interest for longer than it took the leaves to change and drop off a tree in the fall, keep him coming back for more and more with her hidden depths and prickly New York attitude.

He needed to tread carefully though, knew she could hurt him if he let her, if he opened up too much, as he'd been known to do in the past. He recognized, also, that he welcomed the opportunity for his heart to feel more than just the familial affiliations he'd so far allowed it in the years following Bette and more recently Montana.

Wait, had he just heard Montana right?

She was recollecting last year's cattle drive camp and it sounded like she knew these Vegas pretty well, affection and familiarity dripping from her voice as she mentioned Angela's girls, Danni and Tina, who had visited the ranch last year and participated in the youth programs.

Montana was nothing if not affectionate, however, especially with 'her kids,' a particular weakness for the otherwise tough ranch owner.

Jason turned to peer at her, everything suddenly clicking into place—her concern about how things had gone between him and his passenger on the ride back from the airport, her anxiety about whether or not he and Evelyn had gotten along.

Montana, and it sounded like this Angela Calminetti back in New York, had set this whole thing up more than a year ago! That these two woman—one he vaguely remembered meeting and finding charming and alarming at the same time—had been plotting his and Evelyn's meeting for so long was astounding to him, their determination, drive and foresight equal to that of a serial killer.

The idea was enough to scare a lesser man who wasn't privy to all the things that had happened on and around the ranch in the last couple of years, or enough to scare a man who wasn't acquainted with Montana's history of clairvoyance.

Despite all this, Jason was not pleased by Angela and Montana's presumption.

He did not need to be fixed up, especially not out of pity, certainly not by a former unrequited love, and most certainly not with a flashy, materialistic, snobby gunsel who probably didn't know the back end of a horse from the front to save her life.

Why anyone, his friend and boss and especially a disconcertingly insightful New Yorker he barely knew, thought he and Evelyn Vega would make a good match was beyond him.

Should he give himself away and let Montana know that he knew what she was up to?

When he stared at her, she didn't flinch, her look so innocent and sincere Jason didn't have the heart to pop her bubble. He decided to just go along with the program and see where things went now that he had already met Evelyn.

Fleetingly, he wondered if Evelyn was in on the whole thing until he remembered her mentioning this trip had been a birthday gift.

Good cover, or was she as much in the dark about her sister's and Montana's good intentions as he had been?

Jason believed it was the latter. A woman looking for romance and love certainly wouldn't peeve off a prospective partner. But then again, she was from New York, and who knew how those Yankees operated back east?

"So how do things look for the orientation tomorrow? I know it's kind of short notice..."

"Again."

Montana blushed. "You've always worked well on the fly."

“Thank the Lord,” Jason quipped, enjoying their back and forth talk.

“So, are you good to go?” She clapped him on the back before moving her hand up to give his shoulder an affectionate squeeze.

“I’ve got it covered.” He grinned.

He’d been bronco-busting and breaking in fillies since he’d been this high to a caterpillar’s belly. And he could certainly handle a little city slicker with more attitude than cow sense.

He’d wake up that Yankee filly bright and early tomorrow morning to show her what it was a cow boss really did on a ranch.

Chapter 5

Evelyn sprang out of bed before the first crack of dawn the next morning eager to dig in and get this dude ranching thing on the road..

By five-thirty, she had done twenty minutes of aerobic exercise and twenty minutes of resistance, taken a shower, and dressed in a cream western shirt tucked into a pair of black jeans, and her brand new cowboy boots, ready to get this dude ranching on the road.

When she left her cottage, digital camera around her neck, the sun had barely broken through the indigo sky and Evelyn decided to take a walk along the route she'd followed with Montana and Seth yesterday evening.

She was pretty good with directions, had a photographic memory and once someone showed her around the information was there to pull for future reference.

This little talent used to drive Todd's macho sensibilities mad when they drove anywhere out of town and he had to rely on her for directions because he simply did not like admitting that he was challenged in that area when she wasn't. He especially didn't like that she was a better navigator than he, and that she always instinctively knew the best way to get where they were going.

Stop thinking about Todd. Todd is thousands of miles away and years ago.

In the early morning light, everything looked so different than it had yesterday before dinner, things so fresh and rose-touched. With no one accompanying her to point out all the sights and

details of interest, Evelyn was free to enjoy her surroundings at her leisure.

The views were spectacular, even in the early morning light, with lush salmon-hued landscapes ripe for photographing.

Evelyn lifted her camera when she spied an antelope charging across the prairie, the closest she had come to wildlife since taking one of her nephews and two nieces to The Bronx Zoo a couple of years ago. Of course the experience now was infinitely more exciting and gratifying as the animal wasn't behind a fence with hundreds of yards separating them.

She took a few shots of the animal as he (or she) joined up with a herd several yards in the distance and grazing in the lavish grassland before continuing her walk.

Not quite five minutes later, Evelyn froze in her tracks and sucked in her breath as the sun began to peak on the horizon, all pink and yellow with shades of lavender and red, as shocking as a rainbow and just as rare for her to see.

Damn, she couldn't remember the last time she had seen the sunrise, if she'd ever seen one at all, and certainly not one over a breathtaking mountain view; this was a real shame.

Maybe Angela and the girls had had the right idea sending her out here.

Evelyn snapped off several shots of sunlight streaking through the billowy clouds to light up the lush forest below, the trees turning a burnished gold from the sun's kiss.

God, this kind of stuff went on all the time when she was up in New York stressing herself out in a stuffy office, buying, investing, and trading other peoples' assets.

Evelyn sighed as she abandoned her camera to let it dangle around her neck again and backtracked the way she had come.

She slowed as she passed the other three cottages, smiling when she didn't detect any signs of life within them yet.

She was determined to hunt up that arrogant cowboy on her Mr. Rogers' jaunt and make her morning all the more beautiful. She was sure he wouldn't expect her to be up so early, with the chickens, and wanted to see the look on his face when she found him.

Evelyn made her way past the stables where she thought he'd more than likely be but saw no signs of him though there were a handful of night wranglers and other assorted cowboys going about their various duties.

She stopped to watch a few of them work, almost tempted to ask one of them where she could find the cow boss, but didn't want to bring attention to him that way, somehow knew he wouldn't take too kindly to her putting his business out on the street.

A couple of the wranglers tipped their hats with a muttered 'ma'am' when they noticed her and Evelyn smiled at the title, not as insulted as she had been when Jason had addressed her. She couldn't be insulted. The cowboys' tones were so natural and deferential, and they were all just so damn cute!

Sure she had eyes for Mr. Makepeace, but she could enjoy the other eye candy, couldn't she?

Evelyn passed the stables before she reached another building that looked like some sort of a tool shed or other workroom.

She paused at the door when sounds of rustling within reached her ears.

Common courtesy said to knock, but when she lifted a fist to do just this, she noticed the door was unlocked and already opened enough for her to look into the room housing stacks and stacks of saddles and other cowboy paraphernalia.

This must be the saddlery that Montana had told her about. Evelyn also remembered her mentioning that a couple of the cowboys made their own saddles, one of whom was Jason Makepeace, who also taught classes in saddle making.

She hadn't thought she'd been paying much attention yesterday, automatically tuning out when Montana mentioned anything to do with her cow boss.

Evidently, she hadn't tuned out as much as she'd thought.

Evelyn pushed the door in further and stepped into the room, spotted Jason immediately—recognized that rich chestnut hair shimmering beneath the light of the room—hard at labor at one of the room's worktables.

She went closer, careful to be quiet and fascinated with the way the leather took shape beneath his long, surprisingly elegant fingers.

He had an artisan's hands, his movements skilled, smooth, and unhurried.

Evelyn stood watching him for several long moments before she thought to take out her camera and snap a few shots.

She might as well have not been there for all the reaction she got. He didn't even flinch, didn't seem to know she was in the room. Which was great since it gave her a quiet moment to just look at him in action, take in his strong and silent masculinity all over again.

Evelyn didn't know how long she stood there calmly watching him, didn't come out of her daze until he turned and frowned at her.

Lordy, they certainly didn't grow them like him back east, his spurs making her jingle when he jangled. There was nothing about him that wasn't perfect, except for maybe his attitude.

"Don't folks in New York knock?"

She grimaced and put a fist on her hip. "The door was open and I didn't see any harm in coming in to watch you work."

He just grunted and turned back to what he was doing.

Evelyn used the lull to come closer, was just about to sit on the stool adjacent to him when he said, "Be quiet and don't touch anything."

"I won't. Sheesh." She glanced around at all the saddles hanging on the walls and sitting on shelves around the room. "Did you make all these?"

"I wish." He shook his head. "Most of them though."

She reached for one without thinking, running her fingers along the intricate stitching on the edge of the seat. "This one's yours."

He glanced at her, grinning for the first time since she had met him. "Yep, ma'am."

"I thought we agreed that you weren't going to call me ma'am."

"I thought we agreed that you weren't going to touch anything."

Evelyn jerked back her hand, face immediately heating with her blush. "Sorry," she mumbled. "I couldn't help myself. It's so beautiful."

"Thanks."

"Do you sell these, M&M?"

He frowned at her again and Evelyn realized she'd slipped.

"Some are made to order. Some are just for the ranch. And why are you calling me Eminem? Do I look like a rapper to you?"

Evelyn chuckled, an arrow of desire spiraling down from her chest to her lower belly in a flood of warmth when she saw the innocent look in his Caribbean blue eyes. "Not that Eminem. M&M like the candy."

"Like the candy, huh?" he murmured.

"No, you don't get it. It's like the candy, M&M but short for Marlboro Man."

"Ah, you've given me a nickname already. I guess I'm glad it's not Asshole or Arrogant Cowboy." He turned to stare at her. "You think that's who I look like? The Marlboro Man?"

Or Sam Elliot's cuter, much younger brother, yes.

Not that she'd tell him that. His head was already big enough. "There's a resemblance."

“You’re forgetting one major difference.”

“What’s that?” she asked but knew the answer before he opened his mouth to respond.

“I don’t smoke.”

“Yes, well there is that.”

He let a few beats go by before he asked, “Why do you?”

She stopped herself from snapping at him, glanced into his solemn gaze and sighed.

Shit, it looked like he honestly wanted to know. There was no judgment or criticism in his eyes, just straight-up curiosity. “I picked it up when I was a teen and never stopped. But it’s not like I smoke all that much anyway.”

“One cigarette is too much.”

“You sound like my sister, Surgeon General.”

“Sounds like a smart woman to me.”

“Yes, yes, I know.” She waved her hand dismissively, didn’t want to get into the pros and cons of her dirty little vice. “In answer to your question, I smoke because I like the taste.”

“You think you like the taste. But your body’s actually addicted to the nicotine.”

“Can we change the subject?”

He shrugged in a ‘suit-yourself’ gesture and turned back to his work.

She watched him for a long moment before the silence got to her. “Why is it such a big deal to you?”

“Your smoking?”

“Yes.”

He shrugged again, quiet for so long she didn’t think he would answer. “Someone I know died from cancer.”

“Was this someone a smoker?”

“To tell you the truth, I don’t really know. I was pretty young when she died.”

“Who?”

“My mother.”

“Oh. I’m sorry.”

“It was a long time ago. I was two.”

“So young.” She had the sudden urge to hug him, her arms fairly aching with the sensation, but knew that would probably embarrass the hell out of them both. Besides, she didn’t know him all that well, though she was learning more and more by the minute and what she did know, she kind of liked.

Damn, this wasn’t good at all. She just wanted to have a little fun, a vacation fling. She didn’t want to like him. “Your father must have been devastated.”

“He was.”

That was it, no elaboration, no little anecdotes or views into his childhood coming up in a single-parent household. It was like pulling teeth and they had been on such a nice little roll, too.

“My mother had cancer,” she blurted and blinked when he stared at her with a questioning look on his face, hungry for more. “She’s been cancer free for several years now.”

“You’re lucky.”

“Believe me, I know it.”

“Do you?”

“Look, I could quit whenever I want. I just haven’t found the time.”

“No time like the present.”

She didn’t like the way he looked at her, like he was challenging her to a duel or something, or about to make a wager. And she was a sucker for wagers, didn’t like losing either. “What do you have in mind?”

“No smoking during your time here on the ranch.”

“Two weeks?”

“You just said you could quit whenever you wanted.”

“Don’t use my words against me, you.”

He chuckled, a deep, full-bodied sound that sent shivers riding up and down her spine and moistness to her panties.

“So, is this a bet?” she asked.

“If you want it to be.”

“I don’t smoke I get...”

“Good health and a long life.”

She slapped his shoulder and he caught her hand and jerked her forward. She fell against his chest, giggling until she looked into the lust-filled depths of his blue eyes. She shuddered at his sudden intensity, his erection pressing against her lower belly, the clear evidence of his arousal making her inexplicably speechless and shy.

“What do you want?” he whispered.

She gaped.

“For not smoking,” he clarified.

She averted her eyes from him to glance around the room, admiring all the saddle work anew, noticing too the intricate rawhide and leather braiding hanging on some of the walls. “I want a customized, personalized saddle.”

He chuckled. “To take back with you to the concrete jungles of New York?”

“There are plenty of places to go riding in the ‘concrete jungles.’” She shrugged. “I might take up horseback riding when I get back. Who knows?”

“Done.”

“That was easy.”

He curved an arm around her waist, pulled her flush against him and stared down into her already heated face. “You think so?”

“What do you get if I don’t quit?”

“That’s not an option. You’ll quit.”

“I appreciate your faith in me, but it is a wager.”

"I don't want to think about your not quitting." He leaned in and ran his tongue along her slightly parted lips before slowly dipping it in for a taste.

Evelyn automatically opened up to him, her tongue meeting and tangling with his as she pressed herself closer, rubbing her pointed nipples against his hard chest and moaning.

He pulled back slightly, breathless as he pushed a silken, jet-black curl that had escaped from her ponytail away from her face and smoothed a palm down her left cheek. "Did you eat yet?"

She licked her lips. "Huh?"

He grinned. "Did you have breakfast yet?"

"The kitchen's not open."

"I know." He slid his hand down between them to intertwine his fingers with hers. "C'mon. I'll go rustle us up a little something to tide us over until orientation. Remind me to take you to the general store on the grounds to get you some breakfast and snack provisions to have in your cottage."

"Oh...okay." She let him lead her out of the woodshed, trailing behind his long, bowlegged gait as they traversed the ranch grounds towards a bungalow about fifty yards from the rest of the cottages and the main house.

"The evening meal's a little family doodad with the Phoenixes either at the main house or out by one of the lakes." He opened the door and stepped aside to let her enter in front of him.

"Yes, they mentioned that, and I saw it in the brochure." Evelyn ducked to avoid the unexpected wind chimes he had hanging from the shingle over the front porch, entered his bungalow and was immediately struck with its coziness, the surprising personal touches in addition to the chimes that screamed "Jason Makepeace lives here!"

A western shirt and black cowboy hat were carelessly flung over the back of an old-fashioned rocker, a threadbare pair of jeans

lay over one arm of the wooden chair and a pair of well-worn cowboy boots sat beneath it.

She took a deep breath and closed her eyes, connecting with the clean, earthy smell of him and leather in the air. She knew that she would be able to find him in a crowded room even if she was blindfolded. She would just follow her nose to his distinctive spicy scent.

Evelyn opened her eyes to take in the room again.

There was the obligatory Native American-western décor, but samples of Jason's rawhide and saddle work were also scattered throughout the living room—on bookshelves and hanging on a couple of walls. Across the room on the opposite wall were framed sketches of centaurs at work and at play.

Evelyn drifted over to one, traced the outline of the image with a finger before turning to Jason who had sidled up behind her. "Don't tell me you did the pictures, too."

He laughed, brought his hands from behind his back to plop a black cowboy hat on her head. "I noticed you didn't have one on yesterday or today. The sun gets pretty intense out on the prairie and you don't want to get heatstroke."

"Thanks."

He slid his hands down to her shoulders and gently ran his thumbs across the tender skin that connected her neck to her shoulders, making her shudder.

Oh, he was a toucher, seemed to like keeping physical contact when he talked. At least it seemed so this morning, and this surprised Evelyn. He'd been so standoffish in the truck on the way over. This morning, he'd already done a three-sixty.

Was it something she'd done or said that had broken the ice? Or was he just being his unaffected, warm self?

Evelyn didn't care, just naturally leaned into his touch, moaning and never wanting his little impromptu massage to stop.

“Actually, the centaurs were gifts, sketched by one of Montana’s kids from the mentoring program. I should be so lucky to draw like that.”

She stared at the sketch a moment longer, couldn’t help thinking that it reminded her of Seth Phoenix, something in the subject’s sculpted features, the intense expression in the eyes.

Evelyn shook herself of the sudden eeriness and stared up at Jason who hadn’t stopped kneading her shoulders. “Mentoring program?”

“Every year in the summer for a month about twenty disadvantaged kids come up for the horseback riding and the camps. It’s been Monty’s pet project for quite a few years now.”

Her heart hitched in her chest with what could only be described as jealousy at the soft and loving way he said ‘Monty.’

What was wrong with her? It was too soon to start getting attached, especially to some young cowboy she would probably never see again after her two weeks were up.

“Why don’t I go get breakfast started?” He turned, headed for the kitchen and tossed over his shoulder, “How do you feel about a couple of western omelets?”

“Homemade? I’d feel wonderful.” Evelyn followed him into his kitchen, no longer surprised by his domesticity. She took in the immaculate condition of the linoleum floors and wood counters, the homey touches—lemon, cream, and brown flowered curtains at the windows, the calico apron hanging on the door handle of the fridge that Jason easily donned.

“Ah, we’re about to get into some serious cooking.”

He grinned. “I might throw on some flapjacks and country sausages if you’re a good girl.”

“I’ll be a good girl for some tasty country...sausage.” Evelyn licked her lips and took a seat on a barstool at the maple wood island in the center of the room as Jason paused in the middle of the floor to leer at her.

"I'll bet," he murmured then moved about the kitchen getting out the ingredients he'd need to whip up his omelets.

"You want any help?"

He glanced at her over a shoulder and gave her another rakish grin. "I've got it."

Hey, who was she to argue? She subsisted on cold cereal, Chinese take-out, and pizza back in New York. Cooking just wasn't her thing.

To watch a man tooling around in the kitchen with the same ease and confidence she assumed he possessed horseback riding and in saddlery, melted her insides directly into her panties until she felt ready to float away on the wave of her hunger. "How old are you?" she asked, curiosity finally getting the best of her.

He smirked as he cracked an egg into a mixing bowl with one hand, just like the chefs on TV. "Couldn't hold out any longer? Needed to know I'm legal?"

"Don't be coy. I already know you're...considerably younger than me. Just tell me how much younger and cut the crap."

"Well, when you put it that way..." He paused for a second, pinning her with his stare. "I'm thirty-three."

"You...oh..." If she'd had a drink in her mouth, she would have spluttered it.

For some reason, and she knew exactly what it was, she was relieved, as if she wouldn't be committing that horrible a sin against nature if she fucked him. As he had put it, she'd wanted to know if he was 'legal,' and he more than was, out of his twenties and well into his thirties.

Still a ten-year gap, but at least it wasn't the sixteen or seventeen years she had first thought.

"And you?"

"Me?"

"How old, Evie?"

Evelyn gawked, surprised by the sound of her family nickname sliding so easily from his luscious, full-lipped mouth. She swallowed then asked, “How old do I look?” and immediately wanted to rip out her tongue.

“Now who’s being coy?” he murmured.

She felt heat quickly rising to her cheeks again, didn’t think she had blushed as much in her entire life as she had in the last day and a half.

She was appalled at her behavior. She didn’t do coy. Batting her eyelashes and widening her big hazel eyes for a man’s attention had never been her thing. But with Mr. Makepeace, she had turned into a shrinking violet, a retiring southern belle.

Shit.

She glanced at him expectantly, waiting for his answer as he peered at her beneath those impossibly long curly lashes as if he was trying to read her soul. She felt exposed, totally vulnerable and fidgeted in her seat.

He’s a boy! Okay, not such a boy, but you do have ten years on him. A whole decade. Don’t let him put you on the defensive.

“Oh, c’mon! It shouldn’t be that hard.”

“I don’t want to get this wrong.”

Like he cared about her feelings?

The thought sent another wave of heat crashing into her lower belly. Good thing she was sitting or she would have collapsed to the floor on her wobbly legs.

Evelyn watched him watching her, knew from experience most men either over-estimated on the side of honesty or grossly underestimated, playing to a woman’s ego and trying not to insult her, especially if he wanted in her panties and bed.

Jason Makepeace didn’t seem like the latter, artifice, even for the sake of her feelings, not in him. She knew whatever came out of his mouth would be the honest to God truth and was

unaccountably encouraged and flattered when he finally said, “Thirty-five?”

“Now you’re being kind.”

His eyes widened, and he was already so youthful-looking that she could imagine him twenty-six years younger with a broken piece of china hidden behind his back as he tried to tell his daddy that he hadn’t broken anything playing ball in the house.

She shook her head against the vision—too personal, too nostalgic, too appealing—liking the game despite coyness not being her.

Evelyn hadn’t flirted this extensively with a man in a long time. Oh, there were the business lunches and dinner parties where she flaunted her womanly wiles for the sake of an account, but she hadn’t done any flirting with what she called intent.

She was going to fuck this man. She didn’t know when or how, but she knew she would and the knowledge suddenly suffused her, heat swirling to her center and making her cunt gush, the dam broken long ago. Her panties were ready to be rung and hung out to dry.

“I’m reckoning you’re not much more than thirty-five, are you?”

“I just turned forty-three a few days ago.”

He didn’t miss a beat, simply grinned and leaned over the island until his face was an inch away from hers. “I ever tell you how much I like older women?”

Chapter 6

He should have known more than just two years separated them from the confident, no-nonsense way Evelyn carried herself, the bossy way she talked to him. She acted like someone used to giving orders, like she often got her way.

But heck, he had a bit of bossiness in him too, had always been mature for his age, his peers instinctively pegging him as the leader in any group. He'd had to grow up so fast to take care of an emotionally ailing father unwilling to face the hand that life had dealt him.

Jason had always been attracted to older women. He reckoned this might have been a holdover from his days at one of several foster homes with Mrs. Harper. She'd broken him in but good, ruining him for younger women the world over. Mrs. Harper and his experiences with Bette told him he didn't want to deal with younger gals' mind games and horsecrap.

He couldn't for the life of him remember why he had thought Evelyn reminded him of his ex-wife. Aside from some surface mannerisms and her superior attitude, she really was nothing like Bette, the thin veneer of cool, hardened New York City career woman just barely concealing a soft heart, just barely concealing her vulnerability.

Tarnation, this was getting sticky, age issues aside, but since he was on the subject, he would have never guessed her anywhere close to forty. A fun-loving glow of youth and openness to new things surrounded her body like a halo.

Ten years was a sight more than the two he'd pegged her, but if she didn't have a problem with it, he reckoned he didn't, couldn't, especially not with her sitting a hairsbreadth away from him with those delicious ripe lips puckered and begging to be kissed.

She grinned suddenly, impish and seductive. "Oh, do you?"

"Ever since I was a young tyke."

"I can't imagine you ever being young."

He drew back and lifted his eyebrows. "No?"

"Little maybe, but you strike me as someone who's always been older than his years. When you were a kid, I bet you were like a grown man trapped in a boy's body."

He nodded. "Couldn't wait to grow up."

"I have to say, without having known you as a boy, you seemed to have grown quite nicely." She got down from the barstool and came around the island. She put a palm against his chest and circled a forefinger against a flat male nipple through his denim shirt until he closed his eyes and groaned. "Quite nicely."

"You think so, huh?" He leaned in, paused a centimeter away from her mouth, licked his lips as he waited for her to answer.

"Yes, siree."

Jason wrapped his arms around her and bent his head as he pulled her against him. He slanted his mouth across hers and caught her gasp, hungrily thrusting his tongue past her parted lips as his cock throbbed hot and hard in his jeans.

God, when her tongue came out and greedily met his, he felt like his head would explode. He closed his eyes against her drugging scent and held her tight, desperate for her touch, her soft curves against his hard edges, desperate to be inside her, feel her heat. Now.

He felt her hands slide up into his hair. He groaned and stopped short of wincing as she latched onto a clump at the back of his head with both hands and held his face against hers.

When she lifted one leg and wrapped it around his hip, pulling him close enough to grind her slit against his scalding erection, he thought he'd come in his pants right then and there, but in the next instant, she pulled away from him.

"What in tarnation...?"

"We're moving too fast."

He blinked at her, panting, his entire body thrumming with need as he took in the dazed look on her face. She genuinely looked confused, at least as confused as he felt. It almost made him feel sorry for her, almost, except he was too busy feeling sorry for himself. "Too fast?"

She stepped back and put a hand on her hip, her face changing from confused to hard and defensive in a blink. "I'm not some desperate old lady, you know."

"Who in the Sam Hill said anything about you being desperate?"

"I don't want you to get the wrong idea about me."

What, that she was easy?

He wasn't thinking it, but he could tell from the look on her face that she thought he was. He guessed he should count his lucky stars he hadn't entertained her 'old lady' remark, which actually could have been a good or bad thing, one of those can't win for losing scenarios.

What had just happened? Wrong idea? Her legs had practically been wrapped around his waist. He for dang sure had had the right idea. They'd been about to commit one of his favorite seven deadly sins and enjoy it before she'd called an abrupt stop to the party. "The only idea I have is that we're both consenting adults who want each other." At her silence, he stared at her. "You're not denying that, are you?"

"The consenting adults part?"

He scowled. "The want part."

She switched her weight from one leg to the other, obviously uncomfortable and making the butterflies already in his stomach come to vibrant life. “Look, Jace, you’re a nice guy and all, but when we get right down to brass tacks, nothing can come of this.”

That she had used a pet name only Montana called him didn’t lessen the implication of the rest of her statement. “You’re giving me the a kiss off and we haven’t even done anything yet?”

“Don’t you think it’s better that way, before we do something we’ll regret?”

“Speak for yourself.”

“So I guess we’re right back where we started from, huh?”

“Where? Bossy city slicker and arrogant cowboy instead of a man and a woman?”

“I’d better go get ready for orientation.” She turned from him and paused at the threshold of the kitchen when he called her name.

“I promised you breakfast.”

“I don’t really have much of an appetite.”

He watched her leave, frozen to the spot with any number of emotions—anger, confusion, deprivation—thundering through his system like a charging bull but none more conspicuous than a healthy dose of plain old frustration.

Oh yeah, that was front and center.

I don’t really have much of an appetite.

Well dadgummit, he had one heck of an appetite and it had nothing at all to do with a down-home country breakfast. No, siree.

Jason gritted his teeth as he cupped his erection and pressed the heel of his hand against the hard bulge as if to beat it into submission. No such luck.

He knew the only thing that would make the randy critter submit was a foray into that little contrary city slicker’s warm and wet pussy.

Dadgum tease!

* * * *

One cold shower and a lone western omelet later and Jason finally settled in front of the group that was going out on the cattle drive with him and several cowboys beginning tomorrow.

There were the two families. One consisted of parents Aaron and Nancy Davidson and their twin twelve-year olds, Keith and Kevin, all from the Windy City of Chicago. The other consisted of parents, David and Winifred Hammersmith, and their sixteen-year-old daughter, Tammy, all from Connecticut. Part of the group also was Tom and Shelly, a young couple from Boston and on their honeymoon.

Rounding out the group of ten guests for the week was of course Ms. New York, and as Jason had known would be the case, she commanded his attention throughout the introductions and his entire briefing.

He tried to keep his gaze off of her but couldn't. The whole while he stood in the designated conference area outside under several leafy aspen trees, his mind kept wandering back to how she'd felt in his arms, how supple her breasts had been when she'd pressed against him, how much he liked having her hands rake through his hair...Jason cleared his throat. "Where was I?"

"You were going over how we'd each be issued tack?"

He glanced at the blonde, blue-eyed teenager, Tammy, who'd raised her hand from the middle of the gathering and smiled at her obvious infatuation.

The air would be thick with pheromones this trip: the newlyweds hankering for each other, him hankering for Evelyn, and Tammy hankering for him. "Right, the tack..." Which meant he'd already given an overview of the trip, gone over each members' tasks, and given a summary of riding and safety.

Jason lost his train of thought again when he saw Montana come up the walk and settle at the back of the group, arms folded across her breasts as she watched him.

What now?

He peered at her, trying to decipher her frame of mind, only detected mild curiosity.

He wondered if she worried how Angela Calminetti's and her little project was coming along?

Well, she would be sadly disappointed, through no fault of his. He was perfectly willing to take things with Evelyn to the next logical step, but Ms. Vega had other ideas.

Not that he'd tell Montana all that. She was under the impression he was none the wiser about her trying to fix him up and he wanted to keep it that way. Now if she wanted to go blow her own cover sniffing around to see how he and Evelyn were doing, then that was her funeral.

Jason clapped his hands ready to wrap things up. "We'll break for now and start picking out horses for the trip. Then afterward, we'll all take a short ride into the prairie and be back to the houses for the evening before we roll out with the wagon tomorrow."

The group dispersed, the Hammersmiths and the Davidsons following a couple of cowboys to go pick out their horses. The Davidson boys stayed behind to pick the brains of the remaining cowboys, asking questions about spurs and tack and when was the soonest they could get on the cowboy shooting range. The newlyweds didn't look as if they had stopped necking since they had arrived for the orientation, making Jason doubt that they had gotten half of what he had explained. And dear sweet Tammy hung back in the distance, leaning against the trunk of a big aspen beneath its canopy of lush green-gold leaves watching him as Montana approached.

"So, how'd it go? Any problem getting back into the saddle again?"

“Few stumbles here and there. But I made it through.”

Montana gasped and put a hand to her chest. “You? Stumble? Not super cowboy!”

“Yeah, well it happens.” He smirked. *And no doubt will be happening a little more often if I have to deal with Ms. New York for the next two weeks.*

Montana put a hand on his shoulder, stood on her tiptoes and leaned in to peck his cheek.

“What was that for?”

“Always being here when I needed you. Always stepping up and getting the job done.”

“You keep that up you’re going to make me get all misty-eyed.”

She punched him in a shoulder. “Better?”

“Yep, that’ll do.”

“Welp, I’m off to take the kids out on a wildlife expedition. We’ll probably cross paths somewhere along the line.”

“I reckon.”

“See ya.”

Jason watched Montana backtrack the way she had come. He caught the expression on Evelyn Vega’s face several yards away and did a double take.

She looked ready to commit murder.

What in Sam Hill kinda bug had crawled up her patooty?

* * * *

He was turning out to be a little more than she had bargained for, challenging her resolve, challenging her beliefs. And they had only had two run-ins so far! What would happen to her after two weeks around the man? How much more would his aura infiltrate her system?

Already, she acted out of character, reverting to stereotypes, behaving like a prima donna and an insensitive, shameless cocktease.

Okay, maybe the prima donna part wasn't exactly out of character. She could be demanding and had to admit she liked getting her way whether at work or her personal life, but she had never in her sexual history been a tease. She was the type to finish any project she started.

Evelyn's sudden uncharacteristic behavior had her angry with herself. After Todd she had promised herself she would never change her opinions or personality to suit a man or his ideas about what he thought his ideal woman should be.

She had stopped trying to placate and please everyone when she learned there was no way she could and still remain happy and true to herself. She had followed this free mindset from an early age, whistling a happy tune when her mother told her it was unladylike to whistle, and getting her daddy to pay for drum lessons when her mother wanted her to take ballet.

This was what she loved about Angela. Her sister gave her daughters the freedom to be whom and what they wanted to be, and pursue the activities they wanted to pursue within reason.

Not that Evelyn blamed her mother in any way.

Viviana Vega was a woman of her time, with old-fashioned ideals about a woman's role in society. She had gotten better over the years—especially since becoming an Internet junkie in her late fifties—loving and accepting her multi-cultural daughter-in-laws and her latest and youngest nephew and niece with quiet grace and dignity. She did, however, experience a little more difficulty embracing some of her kids' out-of-wedlock sexual relationships and pro-choice views without having the occasional conniption to make her Sicilian forefathers proud.

When all was said and done, Evelyn loved her mother dearly and never doubted reciprocity, but wondered what the woman's take would be on Jason's youth.

Come to that, she wondered what her girlfriend, Gail, at *Saxon Securities* would think, Gail I'm-married-I-ain't-blind Crawford, who appreciated the aesthetics of a good-looking man even if she wasn't looking for one, would definitely appreciate Jason.

God, when Evelyn thought of the way she'd withdrawn in his kitchen, turning her back and walking away from something she wanted—*someone* she wanted—she felt like kicking herself for her demureness.

Evelyn could almost hear Gail's resonant voice chiding her for running away from "that fine-ass young hunk", could imagine her snapping her fingers in Evelyn's face and demanding whether or not her friend had lost her mind pushing away the Marlboro Man.

But then Gail always got on her about working too much and not making enough time for a social life and a good man anyway. Of course she would approve of Mr. Makepeace, if not for marrying, then at least for pleasuring.

"Is he clean and neat? Is he gainfully employed? Is he half-way smart? Good sense of humor? Decent credit? Negative? Can he screw? Then, girl, you got a catch!"

"T'ain't natural for a healthy young woman to be celibate for so long. Don't let that ex-husband of yours turn you off of men like that..."

Evelyn smiled at the memory of Gail's list for potential partners, at her sage advice and favorite anecdotes on how Evelyn could get over her ex-husband.

She and Gail had met five years ago, just after Evelyn's divorce from Todd Cole.

An associate at *Jennet Associates, LLC*, a subsidiary of *Saxon*, Gail reminded her of Angela, a down-to-earth, outspoken maternal type with one small difference: she was African American.

Gail had come across Evelyn crying in a stall of one of the company's executive ladies rooms at *Saxon*. A classic cheerleader, she'd commanded Evelyn to come out of the stall that instant, helped her dry her tears with some hastily snatched paper towels and told her she'd better not be crying over a man unless he was dead. She'd gone on to say that she would be taking Evelyn out for drinks after work whether Evelyn wanted to go or not, an impromptu man-bashing, girls' night out. *"Because I like to keep my husband on his toes, don't you know..."*

They had become and remained fast friends from then on, a rarity for Evelyn who didn't foster relationships with women outside of her sisters, and had very few if any female friends, especially ones she could trust.

Having been a tomboy until her late teens, she'd always gotten along better with boys, had always had more male friends than females growing up, probably why she did so well as a partner at the brokerage firm, a firm where men made up eighty percent of the partners.

Which was probably why she had started to think of Jason as someone with whom she could be a friend. He was the typical macho guy she'd always surrounded herself with as a teen.

However, after what had happened between them earlier, Evelyn wondered if Jason considered her more an enemy than a buddy, wondered how badly her rebuff had damaged his ego, then thought, hell, he'd obviously survived to charm the pants off the unsuspecting females in the group today.

Look at him standing up there in all his rugged Marlboro Man glory, the women in attendance all hanging onto his every word—married, single, young, and old alike—helpless in the face of his soft-spoken casual cowboy appeal.

She refused to give into him just for the sake of fulfilling his older woman fantasies. She had her pride and if he just wanted to

nail a mature ‘highfalutin Yankee’ woman so he could impress all the boys back at the ranch, then he had another thing coming.

Evelyn paused from her ruminations as the group dispersed and Montana made her way up to Jason.

She wished just for a moment that she could read lips, especially when the ranch owner got on her tiptoes and leaned in to kiss Jason.

Okay, it was only a peck on the cheek, but Evelyn unconsciously gritted her teeth at the pair’s easy intimacy and rapport. She had never felt such possessiveness in all her life. And the man wasn’t even hers!

She didn’t realize she scowled until Tammy sidled closer all blushing and dreamy-eyed over Jason and expressed concern for Evelyn.

“Is everything all right, Ms. Vega?”

“Please, call me Evelyn.” After her encounter with Jason earlier, she was already feeling old enough. And watching him with Montana Phoenix—an attractive, younger woman for whom he obviously had strong feelings—supplanted her already waning self-confidence and highlighted just how out of Evelyn’s league Jason was.

“Isn’t he just the dreamiest thing?”

“Oh, yes. A regular McDreamy.” She figured this kid could relate quicker to a current hit show than a reference to the dearly departed Marlboro Man, and boy was she right.

Tammy’s eyes lit up like the neon lights on Forty-Second Street at night. “You watch *Grey’s Anatomy*, too? I love that show! Patrick Dempsey’s my absolute favorite actor.”

Evelyn turned to face the girl, couldn’t help smiling at her enthusiasm and adoring expression, her own jealousy momentarily forgotten.

She remembered the same look on her and her older sisters’ faces when they all used to prattle and slobber over the latest *Tiger*

Beat. At one point, Evelyn had had all of her crushes posters taped to an entire wall in her bedroom, a veritable shrine to teen idolatry.

There'd been Sean Cassidy, Donny Osmond, Parker Stevenson, Eric Estrada, Kent McCord, Randolph Mantooth, Paul Michael Glaser...God, she'd had a particular thing for brunettes and the actor who played Starsky on the TV show had been *her* absolute favorite actor back then. Glaser had been about sixteen years older than she during the show's heyday, but that hadn't stopped Evelyn from fantasizing about him every night, calculating the difference in their ages, estimating how long it would take her to catch up and be 'legal' for him. She used to dream about meeting and marrying him one day and had been crushed when she'd heard he'd married some schoolteacher, closer to his age of course.

"Yes, he is a cutie," Evelyn finally agreed.

"Oh!"

Evelyn turned to see the girl staring at her with sudden realization, eyes bright. She really was a little kewpie doll, probably had the boys from her high school all lined up to date her.

"You're not just talking about McDreamy."

"Huh?" She followed the girl's gaze to Jason and shook her head. "Oh, no. Him and me? No way. I don't even like cowboys."

Tammy gave her a knowing look and giggled. "It's okay. He's closer to your age than he is to mine anyway."

If the girl only knew how wrong she was. "You admit defeat too easily."

Tammy shrugged. "Not really. I saw the way he was looking at you during the orientation."

"What way?" Had she missed something? Had she been too busy shooting visual daggers at him for making every female within a hundred mile radius self-destruct in puddles of estrous adoration to notice how he'd been looking at her?

Tammy gently elbowed her in the ribs. "He thinks you're cute, too."

The subject of their discussion chose that moment to mosey over, those ocean blue eyes almost completely hidden beneath the brim of his Stetson.

Jason put a forefinger and thumb to the brim of his hat. “Ladies.”

“I-I’m, uh...” Tammy stuttered, backed away, most likely overcome by all the dreamy testosterone suddenly saturating the air. “I gotta go catch up with my parents...” With this, she unceremoniously stumbled away.

“Seems I have a habit of running pretty ladies away.”

“You said it, I didn’t.”

“About this morning...”

She turned on him, arms firmly folded over her breasts. “What about it?”

“Dang, woman, want to retract those quills just a little?”

Against her will, she chuckled, hated that he had the ability to catch her off guard so often, so easily and make her laugh when she least wanted to.

“Can we call a cease-fire, at least for the duration of the cattle drive?”

“I guess,” she murmured.

He offered a hand. “Shake on it?”

She put her hand in his, felt electricity shoot up her arm and knew in that moment there would never be a complete cease-fire between the two of them as long as they knew each other.

The fire that lived between them was too intense and palpable to cease. There couldn’t be a cease-fire simply because the fire already raged too big to put out until she had him.

Chapter 7

Jason had managed to steer clear of Evelyn since the cattle drive's first full day out yesterday. He was busy teaching cattle work and horsemanship to the group, stressing the importance of conserving the prairie landscape and the modern rancher habitats.

Afterward, the group had set up camp on the pasture.

The next day, he'd had Jim Bowman lead the group through practicing the herding and horsemanship techniques that Jason had taught them the day before.

Overall, the group wasn't as bad as he had thought, picking up the hang of things pretty quick, playing the roles they had been given, taking care of the area that they were responsible for, labor which would have otherwise been done by Freeborn's working cowboys.

Evelyn had a few difficulties on the first day that still made Jason smile at the memory of her varied misfortunes. He reminded himself not to smile or laugh in front of her for fear of giving her a complex about her horseman skills, or lack thereof.

Already she'd sacrificed a couple of nails of that fancy French manicure to the cowboy cause when she'd tried to mount a horse that wouldn't stand still. She hadn't let the rest of the group hear the end of how badly the cow boss and his crew were treating her.

Jason had to give her brownie points for being a good sport and a trooper about everything, because she'd tried and tried the rest of that first day until she'd mastered mounting her ride with ease and was able to ride out with the group to tend to her chores.

Today, the group had practiced 'loose herding' cattle across diversified terrain in an effort to control the ranch's bottomland and support the alimentary requirements of the cattle. As far as he could tell, Evelyn had made it through with minimal bumps and bruises, not falling off of her mount once.

Afterward, Jason had participated in another instructional session, this one led by field educators with backgrounds in wildlife, bird, and mammal studies who talked to the group before continuing with the cattle drive.

Finally evening time, the group settled around the campfire for cocktails before supper.

Jason sat against the trunk of a large aspen several yards away from the main group and campfire, the scent of pine heavy in the air. He was spitting mad and sorry now that he had ever introduced Jim Bowman to Evelyn.

The pair sat just a little too cozily, chatting just a little too friendly for Jason's taste, not that he actually thought anything would come of all the laughing, arm-squeezing and pats on the shoulders.

Jim was a good man, an excellent cowboy who knew his job and did it well. He was also a devoted family man with a wife and two kids.

If anyone could make a man break his vows, however, Jason was sure the firebrand from New York, flirtatious hazel eyes alight with mischief and husky laugh full of mystery and promise, could do it.

He didn't, for a minute, believe she'd intentionally lead a guy on, but she couldn't exactly stop a man from getting ideas. Especially when she was such a natural tease and had been commanding attention and favor, and been the unconstrained center of attraction the entire time the group had been out on the prairie.

It was okay for her to flirt and flit about from man to man on the drive like a bee from flower to flower in a garden. Let Jason have a friendly conversation with Montana, however, or smile at one of the other ladies on the trail and Evelyn acted like a bull that had seen red.

Evidently, what was good for the goose wasn't good for the gander, according to her, and 'Do as I say, not as I do' was the motto by which she lived and breathed.

It wasn't just the men rapt by Evelyn's bewitching qualities and infectious smile, either. The women had been hanging onto her every word, too.

Jason had listened to Evelyn and Nancy Davidson exchanging horror stories about raising kids in the city, and that's when he found out how often Evelyn took her young nieces and nephews on outings, or let them stay overnight at her townhouse in Brooklyn. It appeared she did each as much as her hectic job allowed. Then he'd caught Winnie Hammersmith expressing her worry about raising a precocious tomboy. Evelyn had explained there was a fine art to it, one her sister had mastered, a method she heartily supported as a former tomboy herself: "Just let the girl do what she wants as long as she doesn't hurt herself or anyone else and it makes her happy."

If Tammy hadn't adored Evelyn before this exchange between her mother and the city slicker, she downright idolized Evelyn after this tidbit of advice.

Sage advice from a sage woman, Jason thought. A former tomboy at that.

Former was right, because there was nothing tomboy about her now, despite the woman being decked out in mud and dirt-stained cowboy gear and engaging in the rough-and-tumble world of ranching for the last few days.

Jason glared across the way at the pair of them, Evelyn leaning on Jim's arm, laughing at some joke he'd evidently told before she

caught Jason's eye over the fire and averted her gaze to finish charming the chaps off of Jim.

Okay, he'd had about enough of this bullcrap and was ready to put a stop to her display right this minute.

Jason stood, dusted off the seat and legs of his jeans and stalked towards the pair. He realized how angry he must have looked when he saw Jim gape at his approach and hurriedly scoot away from Evelyn.

"Jim, what's the mat—" Evelyn cut herself off when she finally noticed Jason's arrival. She slowly got to her feet and slammed her hands on her hips. "Well, what bug crawled up your pants, Mr. Antisocial?"

"Can I speak to you for a minute?" He caught her around an arm before she could answer and dragged her back towards the tree where he had spent most of the evening watching her show and seething.

"What the hell is your problem?" Evelyn tried to jerk her arm out of his grasp, but he held fast, guided her back against the tree and blocked her from the view of the rest of the campers.

Evelyn pushed her free palm against his chest, trying to move him out of her way, but Jason didn't budge, just hovered and crowded her in more as he put his palms against the tree on either side of her head.

"What do you think you're doing, cowboy?"

"Saving you from yourself."

Evelyn arched a brow. "Since when do I need saving by you?"

"Since you're showing your tail with a married man."

She gawked, balling her fists at her sides as a twin flush of color instantly rose to her cheeks.

Jason watched her mouth work for several seconds with no sound coming out. He thought she must have been trying to keep her fury in check when all he wanted to do was lean down, stick

his tongue in her mouth, taste that fury, and make sure she stayed mute.

Finally, she found her voice to say, “You lousy, male chauvinist—”

“You don’t deny you were acting like a hussy?”

“What kind of antiquated, double-standard bullshit are you slinging? Why didn’t you drag your friend off and talk to him?”

“Because I’m not worried about his reputation.”

“And you’re worried about mine?” She peered up at him, her hazel eyes bright, and when he didn’t answer, she continued. “Ever think it’s my wild and wicked New York City ways that had me mauling your friend and that I don’t give a flying rat’s ass about my reputation?”

“You talk tough, but I know different.”

“For your information, I wasn’t sleeping with the man. We were just having a friendly conversation, like everyone else is doing around here, except for maybe you.”

Jason ignored her gibe and said, “Yeah, well you and him might be on different pages on what ‘friendly conversation’ means.”

“And that’s my fault?”

He shook his head, wanted to take her shoulders in his hands and shake her until she got some sense into that fool head of hers. Didn’t she know she couldn’t just work a man up into a lather like she had done him and just expect to walk away without consequences? Some men would expect more than just a peck on the cheek and a pat on the head like a little boy who had done a good deed.

Some men like him, for example, would want more, especially when Jason knew Evelyn wanted him as much as he wanted her.

“What is your fault, is that you’re so dang tempting,” he ground out through his teeth.

She grinned. “You really think so?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know how sexy you are.”

“Even in these dirty old jeans?”

Jason hissed through his teeth at the innocent look in her eyes and the allusion to her jeans. He’d been fantasizing about what was beneath that rough and dirty denim all day, had been caressing and fondling her generous round curves in his dreams at night for most of the drive.

Did she actually not know what a seductress she was in denim shirt and jeans or in a silk top and flowing skirt, or in a cowboy hat or hatless? “Stop fishing for compliments. You know you’re gorgeous.”

She actually blushed more, looking like a sweet naïve girl, and Jason took the chance to pull her back behind the tree while he had the upper hand, a rarity to be sure.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“This...” He lowered his head at the same time he brought his arms up and around to pull her close. He fanned her face with his breath, admiring the luxurious curly lashes right before she closed her eyes and he leaned in and firmly slanted his mouth across hers.

He teased the seam of her mouth with his tongue and when Evelyn parted her lips on a sigh, Jason went in for the kill, sweeping his tongue into the hot cavern of her mouth, searching for and finding her willing tongue.

He brought a hand around her front to cup a full plump breast and Evelyn groaned and pushed herself closer to his palm as she tangled her tongue with his.

Jason circled an erect nipple with his thumb, felt it grow harder through the denim as he ground his hips against her and teased her slit with his hard cock.

Panting, he pulled away from her, didn’t know whether he was trying to beat her to the punch but sure if he didn’t stop now, they would be screwing right here in the open with the rest of the camp just several yards away and in hearing distance.

Jason cupped her face as he leaned his forehead against hers. “Tarnation, you drive me crazy, woman.”

She smiled. “Dang? Tarnation?”

“Don’t make fun of how I talk, missy.”

“Oh, I would never. I think it’s cute, actually. Old fashioned, but cute.”

He smirked, knew darn well she’d be running back to New York and telling all her city slicker friends the first chance she got all about the quaint hillbilly cowboy she’d seduced behind a tree on her vacation.

She cupped his face, and the unexpected tenderness of her touch surprised him, made his heart somersault in his chest as his cock did a little jig in his jeans.

“Want to know what we were talking about?”

“You and Jim?”

She nodded and smiled, eyes twinkling as she looked up at him.

“No, not really.”

“We were talking about you.”

He frowned. “Me? Why?”

“I was picking his brain for information.”

“You could have come to the source and asked me yourself.”

“I could have, but would you have told me what I wanted to know?”

He paused, still reeling from her confession as he watched her cross her arms over her breasts and give him an arched-brow look that dared him to give her anything less than the truth. “Depends,” he murmured.

“Mmm-hmm. That’s about what I figured, so I decided to take matters into my own hands.”

Oh, he’d like for her to take a little more than matters into her hands. Actually, his little critter ached for her to take him into her

hands...and her full luscious mouth and her hot moist cunt... “So did you find out what you wanted to know?”

“Nothing I didn’t already know.”

“And that is?”

She shrugged, turned her head, longingly glancing back towards the camp, then back at him as if she couldn’t make up her mind where and with whom she wanted to be.

Jason had a feeling it was one of the few occasions in her life she allowed uncertainty. He decided to take as much advantage as possible, stepped closer to her, cupped her chin with his hand and tilted her head up so that he looked directly into her eyes.

He peered at her long and hard and she held his look without flinching. When he finally leaned in to steal another kiss, though, she averted her face and his lips landed against her cheek.

She put her palms against his chest and he thought for a moment that she meant to push him away until she fisted his shirtfront and pulled him close. She mimicked his move of a few seconds ago and leaned her forehead against his then bit her lower lip.

Dadgum, his teeth wanted that pleasure!

“What is it, Evie? Why don’t you want to make love with me?” He pulled back to stare at her, and when she didn’t answer after several seconds went by, he said, “I’ve been on my own since I was sixteen. I think we’ve already established I’m not a boy. I’m a man, a man who wants you.”

“It has nothing to do with your age or what you or I want,” she murmured. “I can’t.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“What difference does it make? The final outcome is the same.”

“It makes a difference to me.” He slid a hand up to collar the back of her throat, slowly circled the sensitive skin at the nape of her neck with a forefinger before pulling her face closer. He

paused with his lips a hairsbreadth from hers before he lowered his head further to suck the tender skin that connected her shoulder to her throat. He flicked his tongue against her before he planted hot moist strokes against her neck. “You want me, too,” he murmured.

She arched her throat, moaning while she put her hands on his hips and hooked her index fingers through his belt loops as if to anchor herself to his reality. “I never said I didn’t.”

“Then why *can’t* you? Why can’t we?”

“Don’t you understand? I can’t fuck you because I like you!”

Jason pulled back to gape at her Yankee bluntness, but then he had asked for it. Suddenly, his eyes widened with realization. “Oh, I get it now. It’s not an age thing. It’s a commitment thing. You’re afraid.”

“Give me a break. Afraid of you?”

“Afraid of me, afraid of how I make you feel, afraid that we might actually be able to make a go of this. Take your pick.”

“Boy, did you just take several giant leaps.”

“Tell me I’m wrong, Evie.”

“I didn’t know they taught psychoanalyzing in Cowboy College.”

He refused to be baited, but couldn’t let her little taunt go completely unaddressed. “I don’t need to have gone to college to know you’re running scared.” He glared at her and when she didn’t answer, he went on. “I should be insulted, not just by your college remark—and for your information, smarty pants, I did go, and got my degree in agriculture and agriscience—but by your ability to just blithely brush me aside as some cowboy-toy summer spree and never look back. I thought you were better than that.”

“You don’t know me as well as you think, then.”

“Apparently not.”

She grimaced at him, stepped back and put her fists on her hips. “Look, whoever said our attraction and a few hot and heavy petting sessions would turn into some grand love affair? I didn’t.

Hell, when we first met, you didn't even *like* me! Do you deny that?"

"Things changed."

"Maybe for you."

"You're telling a tall tale if you're trying to say you don't like me too since you just verified as much not more than a minute ago."

"Okay, so I like you!" Evelyn threw up her hands and stalked a few feet away from him before sharply pivoting on her heels to march right back to him. "If I've led you to believe that it means anything more to me than just that, then I'm sorry."

One minute she's grilling Jim Bowman about him, then she's letting Jason kiss her senseless, and the next minute she's cutting him off at the knees.

If she wasn't the most dadgum contrary woman he had ever met, he didn't know who was!

"You know what, Evelyn? When you're ready to be an adult about this and take this to the next logical step, you know where to find me." Jason looked at her a moment longer before turning on his heels and stomping off the way he had come.

Chapter 8

Afraid? *Her?* What did she have to be afraid of from some youngster like him anyway? She ate guys like him every day for breakfast and had whatever was leftover for lunch and dinner.

Ooh. He was just so full of himself, and it irritated her with all his Freudian and Jungian theories about her motivations or lack thereof.

Why couldn't she just plain be attracted to him, curious about him? Who said that attraction had to translate into anything more than mutual appreciation of the opposite sex's allure? Who said she had to jump into bed with him just because she found his tight, round ass so appealing? Who said she had to screw him just because she liked running her fingers over his denim clad chest and wanted to feel his bare skin beneath her palms just once?

Just once? Who was she kidding? She wanted to ravish the man, thoroughly, inside out, from head to toe. She wanted to lasso and hogtie him to her bed and have her way with him until the freaking cows and chickens came home.

Of course she wanted him. What woman wouldn't?

Damn, she hated when someone, especially a man pegged her so accurately, especially when that particular man pegged her with minimal time, effort, and information.

Evelyn was a businesswoman and never went into a situation unprepared, without a plan, or without the ability to operate on the go with the information available to her. Improvising was a skill she had honed to a fine art in her almost two decades on Wall Street and she prided herself on predicting how others would act in

any given situation. She did not, however, enjoy being predictable herself.

She had been interrogating Jim earlier because she wanted to arm herself with information about her target. But her target, damn him, had turned the tables around on her with his assault on her body and her psyche, pushing her to give up something she wasn't quite ready to give up.

Quite a successful frontal assault, she was loath to admit.

Had he learned that in his agricultural studies, too?

Evelyn turned from her side onto her back and glared at the dome-shaped ceiling of her tent like it was at fault for her inability to go to sleep.

She glanced at the illuminated dials of her watch, noted the ungodly hour, and punched her pillow as if beating it into submission would make her drowsy enough to sleep.

She had gone to bed several hours ago along with the rest of the camp, and had been tossing and turning in her bedroll ever since. She couldn't get to sleep because every time she closed her eyes, she saw the vision of that sexy-ass cowboy in all his hard-edged, bow-legged glory as he'd stalked across the meadow to retrieve her from Jim's innocent clutches. And every time she saw this vision, all her limbs flushed with cold heat that immediately pooled in her center and sent a gush of cream to her thong to make her squirm in her bedclothes.

Had she known that flirting with other men would get a rise out of him like that, she would have done it a lot sooner. Actually she had been doing it, just not with the intent of making him angry, only being her extroverted, sociable self.

Flirting was a notorious Vega trait passed down to the most blatant practitioners in Nick and EJ, and to the shiest girl out of their lot in Emilia-the-Saint. Yep, all of Joe and Viviana's kids knew how to use this skill to the best effect and to get what they wanted when they wanted.

Too bad what Evelyn wanted right now was totally inappropriate and forbidden fruit, which she shouldn't want to take a bite out of, but craved oh so badly.

She squeezed her eyes tight as if this could stop her desire, but this only intensified it.

Damn, she could already taste the earthy, salty flavor of his skin, feel his chest muscles twitching beneath her mouth as she circled a flat male nipple with the tip of her tongue.

Evelyn cursed, kicked the covers off and flipped onto her stomach as if to stanch the flow of moisture to her thong, but this only made matters worse, forcing her pussy into direct contact with the rough material of her bedroll and the hard immovable ground. Friction was the only, inevitable outcome with her pussy lips separated from the bedroll by only the thin cotton-lined crotch of her thong.

Tonight, her yearnings were worse than they had ever been since they had started out on this trip three days ago.

Most of the cattle drive, especially during the days, she had been so busy learning a new chore and putting it to use, that she didn't have time to entertain her raunchy thoughts about Jason. By night, she'd been so exhausted from playing drag rider—following the herd and pushing the stragglers—and penning, she usually didn't have a problem falling asleep as soon as her head hit the pillow at lights out. Such was not the case tonight, though.

Evelyn slid a hand into her thong and rubbed her swollen clit with two fingers then jerked her hand out and cursed again.

This was ridiculous when she had a man little more than twenty yards away who was perfectly able and willing to satisfy her needs. All she had to do was show interest and ask and she bet he'd be there in a heartbeat.

Evelyn sighed, knew she wouldn't be worth two cents tomorrow when the chow bell went off early in the morning.

She turned on her side and froze when she came face to face with the biggest, meanest, ugliest snake she had ever seen up close and personal. She let out a blood-curdling scream that she hoped brought the whole camp down on her tent.

Her heart pounded in her chest so hard, it all but obliterated the sound of the scream from her own ears. All she heard was a drumbeat and the hiss of that snake's forked tongue sticking out at her as he uncoiled his head from the rest of his black and yellow striped body.

Calm, be calm, Evie girl. You've handled worse than him at work. You can get out of this, just stay calm. He's probably as afraid of you as you are of him...yeah right!

She slowly eased away from him, crawling backwards on her elbows and heels, surprised he hadn't attacked her when she'd let out that scream. Maybe he had been too drowsy, just coming out of a deep sleep. At least *someone* was getting some sleep around here.

Come to think of it, where the hell was her rescuer when she really needed him?

Evelyn kept her eyes on the snake until she got to the entrance of the tent, leaped to her feet and ran past the unzipped flap right out into Jason's hard chest.

"What in Sam Hill—"

She threw her arms around his neck and held tight, stopped just short of jumping into his arms and wrapping her legs around his waist as the rest of the camp emerged from their tents in varying stages of wakefulness and curiosity.

"What's all the racket about?" Jim asked, wide-eyed, shirtless and with a rifle in one hand and his hat in the other.

Hmm, for that matter, Jason was shirtless too, and Evelyn's nipples noticed it several long seconds before her mind registered his state of undress.

She unconsciously rubbed against him like a cat in heat, purring at the pleasant rasp of his hard bare chest against her cotton-covered breasts.

Jason caught her by the shoulders and pushed her away a bit to stare at her.

“You’re shivering. What’s going on?”

Oh yes, she was shivering but it wasn’t exactly all out of fear. No, siree.

Evelyn closed her eyes and took a deep breath before she calmly said, “There is a snake in my tent.”

“A snake! Cool, can we see?” the Davidson twins chorused and came closer.

Jason put his arm out to keep them back. “You kids hang back now. I’ll see what’s what.”

Both boys whined in protest but stepped back with their parents as instructed.

Jason rubbed Evelyn’s arms with both hands and his touch went a long way to relieving the goose bumps that had broken out on them. “I’ll be right back.” He headed towards the tent, ducking his head to enter and stopped when Evelyn grabbed his hand.

“It’s a big mean one.”

“Mean, huh?” He grinned. “I’ve dealt with mean before.”

“And big.”

“I can handle him.” Jason turned to Jim. “Toss me your hat and rifle.”

Jim instantly complied, and Jason caught each item before heading into the tent.

Evelyn stood with her arms wrapped around her body as if to keep warm when Tammy eased up to her side. She glanced at the girl and gave a shaky smile. “I hate snakes.”

“Me, too.”

“I used to catch turtles and frogs and ladybugs, and dig up earthworms and all kinds of icky stuff like that in camp and...”

Evelyn paused when she realized she was blabbing. She turned to stare at Tammy who was looking at her with an admiring awestruck look that Evelyn was almost becoming accustomed to seeing whenever the girl glanced her way.

"I guess snakes are different. They're just kind of creepy and sinister," Tammy said.

"You can say that again."

"It'll be okay. I'm sure Jason will get him out of there and then you can get back to sleep."

Like she'd been sleeping in the first place? Fat chance.

Evelyn trained her eyes on the flap of her tent, thinking about Jason's big 6'2" body dwarfing the interior and everything nearby as he subdued that snake. She squeezed her legs together at the moistness seeping into her thong from her cunt, her clit growing larger by the minute as she remembered the feel of him in her arms, the woody clean scent of him in her nostrils.

Maybe Mr. Mean and Ugly Snake had done her a favor.

"Here he comes," Tammy said as Jason emerged from the tent holding a suspiciously squirming pillowcase in one hand and Jim's rifle and hat in the other.

Why'd he take the rifle if he wouldn't shoot the damn thing?

He wordlessly walked by her and Tammy and handed Jim his hat and rifle. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it."

Jason turned to address the group. "Everything's okay, guys. You can all go back to bed."

"Awww, can't we see the snake?" Kevin Davidson pouted.

"Boys, stop bothering Jason and go to your tent and back to bed," their mother said.

Jason squatted in front of Kevin and his brother Keith and smiled. "Tell you what. You guys can go with me and watch when I let him go. How's that sound?"

Both boys vigorously nodded. “Yeah, that’d be cool,” they chorused, then turned and glanced up at their mother and father standing behind them. “Can we, Mom? Please?”

Their father Aaron just shook his head and chuckled as he headed back to his and his wife’s tent. His wife looked at Jason and said, “If Jason doesn’t mind, then I guess it’s okay.”

“I’ll have them back in their tents and tucked in tight before you know it, Nancy.”

She smiled and squeezed his shoulder before following her husband to bed.

“You kids wait here for a minute. I’ve got something to take care of.” Jason left them and headed back to Evelyn and Tammy.

Attention rapt by the pillowcase in his hand as Jason approached, Evelyn took a step back when he stopped in front of her and stood between her and Tammy. “Will you please get that thing away from me?”

“It’s not a thing. It’s one of God’s critters.”

“Be that as it may, I’d just like to keep a little distance between this particular critter and me, if you don’t mind, God’s creation or not.”

Jason chuckled. “Don’t you want to face your fear?”

“I think I’m going to mosey on back to bed. See you guys in the morning.” Tammy brushed by Evelyn on the way to her tent, leaned in and whispered, “Go get ’em, girl.”

Evelyn’s face heated and Jason frowned when he noticed her flush.

“What was that all about?”

“Nothing, just one of your adoring fans.”

“Fans?”

“Look, Jace, will you just take that thing into the woods with the little bookends and get it away from me. It’s creeping me out.”

“Why? He’s all wrapped up nice and tight for the night.” Jason held the pillowcase up for her inspection and the snake wriggled inside it.

Evelyn jumped back, stomped her feet up and down like she had ants in her pants. For good measure, she flapped her hands in that ewww-get-it-away-from-me-now, girly dance that she so detested when she used to brandish the slimy, icky fruits of her expeditions at other girls in sleep away camp as a kid. Guess she was getting back a taste of her own medicine.

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry. I shouldn’t tease you like that.” He lowered the case. “Why don’t you come with us to let it go?”

“I’d rather not.”

“Aw c’mon. It’ll be fun. I’ll be there with you the whole time. I won’t let him near you.”

“Jace—”

“He’s harmless, not even poisonous.”

God, that hadn’t even occurred to her when she had been alone and face-to-face with the demon slimeball in her tent. “That should have been the first thing out of your mouth when you came out of the tent with it.”

Jason shrugged. “Sorry. I didn’t think about it until now.”

Evelyn just rolled her eyes at him, hugged herself tighter, glanced at the two pajama-clad twelve-year-olds fidgeting behind him. “Don’t keep your adoring public waiting any longer. Just go. I’ll wait here until you get back.”

“Okay. I won’t be long.”

Evelyn watched him lope over to Kevin and Keith, an enthusiastic and boyish swagger to his step. She smiled as she watched him disappear into the woods trailing the two adoring and eager boys, thought how fatherly he looked with them, the tableau somehow right.

She shook her head at the wild direction of her thoughts, shifted her weight from one leg to the other as she stared at the flap of her tent longingly then shuddered.

Now that all the excitement had died down, she was getting sleepy and more than ready for bed, but the last thing she wanted to do was go back into that domed nylon crime scene.

After several minutes had gone by, she caught herself nodding off just as Jason slid his arms around her waist from behind and nuzzled her neck. She let herself lean back into his firm chest, but stopped herself from getting too comfortable in his embrace, turned to face him and asked, "Did you get rid of it?"

"He's bedded down in the woods for the night."

"What's to stop *him* from coming back?"

"He probably just got lost and wandered into your tent earlier, but I don't think we'll have any more trouble from him."

"I don't care why or how he got there. I just want to make sure he doesn't come back for an encore."

Jason chuckled. "Highly doubtful. Garter snakes like moist places like marshes and wet meadows. Probably the rain we had earlier drew him to the campsite, but I let him out at the edge of the forest where his kind usually like to hang."

"His kind..." Evelyn licked her lips, curious and always open to learning knew things she asked, "You said he wasn't venomous, right?"

"He bites and releases a bad smell when he's attacked. But otherwise he's harmless."

"You called him a Garter snake, right?"

"Eastern Garter snake, to be exact. *Thamnophis sirtalis*. They're pretty common around these parts."

"Too common for my tastes." She shuddered again and Jason pulled her closer, tightened his arms around her. "Why do you know so much about them? You a herpetologist as well as Dr. Phil and Freud?"

Jason shrugged, unsmiling as he held her. “No snake expert, I just pay attention to them—to all animals. But snakes...I guess I kind of admire them, their resilience and adaptability.”

Was he trying to tell her something?

She glanced up at his face, saw the earnest and open look in his eyes and knew he wasn’t being critical or making fun of her in any way, and that she was being too sensitive and paranoid.

Evelyn learned much more about Jason in the last fifteen minutes than her little question and answer session with Jim earlier had netted her. She’d learned more about him the couple of times she had been alone with him, in fact, than anything she could have ever learned from asking the other besotted cowboys on the drive.

From Jim, she had only learned what she already knew, that Jason was a private man who didn’t reveal himself to too many people, even his co-workers and friends on the ranch.

Case and point, not one person that she had spoken to so far knew anything about his parents, specifically that his mother had died from cancer when he was two. Neither did anyone know what had happened to his father and the statement he had made earlier—about being out on his own since he was sixteen—told her that something had happened to remove the man from Jason’s life necessitating the young man’s early independence. Now as to whether or not that removal had been under catastrophic or questionable circumstances remained to be seen.

Something about that knowledge made her want to take his head to her bosom and just hold him there until all his hurt went away.

Like you’re freaking Mother Teresa or Florence Nightingale?

Jason rubbed and patted her back before he slid a hand down to take one of her hands in his. “C’mon, let’s get you tucked in so you can salvage a little of the night and get some sleep.”

Evelyn pulled up short, twining her fingers with his. “I can’t.”

He sighed. "I'm not going to take advantage of you if that's what you're thinking."

"That's not what I meant." She slapped his arm with her free hand. "I can't go back into that tent. I don't care if you did get rid of him. There's no way I'm going to be comfortable enough to get to sleep now."

"You can bunk with me tonight if you want. I'll make sure nothing happens to you."

She turned to face him and immediately noticed the intense flicker in his eyes—hot enough to melt off her French manicure, that is if most of it hadn't already been chipped off by all her drag riding this week. "That's right. *We'll* make sure nothing happens," she murmured, lying to herself and lying to him.

"Nothing you don't want to happen."

She peered up at him, skeptical, especially when she remembered that dark sizzling look he gave her, and the way her pussy spasmed in response to his ocean-blue eyes.

The minute she stepped into his tent, all bets would be off, and she knew it.

Despite all her reservations, she squeezed his hand and said, "Okay," right before she let him lead her back to his tent.

Chapter 9

The vision of Evelyn fleeing her tent like a mad woman before running smack dab into his waiting arms made Jason smile despite his tortured libido. The irony of the serpent visiting Eve in Freeborn's backyard not exactly lost on him. Maybe Freeborn wasn't the Garden of Eden, and maybe he wasn't Adam, but Evelyn...she was definitely the ultimate temptress. Heck, he'd eat the apple off the Tree of Knowledge if she offered it to him and gladly leave paradise to be with her. What was one more transgression on top of all the others he had already committed with her in his head?

Jason glanced at Evelyn as she slept, her shimmering black hair spread out on the pillow beneath her head and haloing her sculpted olive features to maximum effect.

He leaned close, inhaling her spicy scent and trailing his nose down her cheek, barely brushing her skin as she released a light snore.

Jason jerked up his head and slapped a hand over his mouth to keep a laugh from escaping.

Okay, he had to admit it had been a slight dainty snore, but a snore nonetheless and he knew that if he told her about it, she'd heatedly deny that she could emit anything close to the low drone of a chainsaw.

He leaned up on an elbow, glanced out the tent flap, and noticed early morning beginning to dawn, the sun about to start its ascent behind Pikes Peak in the distance.

Jason anticipated the glorious sight, one he tried to catch whenever he could.

Way back before she'd met Seth, and long before her parents had died, Jason used to go out to an elevated patch of the meadow with Montana on clear mornings like this to watch the sunrise and talk about what was going on in their lives. Or, more accurately, Jason would listen to Montana talk about her studies at Auburn School of Forestry, enthusiasm so evident in her voice, it was infectious and had him smiling for most of the day at the memory.

Then there were the times, years later, when they came out to their favorite spot to watch the sunset, and on those evenings they would share their grief over Dusty and Michael's deaths, Montana's parents, the closest thing to parents that Jason had known since his father died.

It was Dusty and Michael Freeborn who had encouraged him to go to college to get his degree in agriculture. They thought he was too smart to just waste his talents being a 'plain old cowboy,' they saw the potential in him to be so much more.

He wasn't sure if they were right, but he knew he did have dreams of owning and cultivating land of his own, maybe start small with several head of cattle and some horses.

He thanked Dusty and Michael every day after he graduated and was able to hold up that degree and say he had finished college, the first in his family to accomplish it, the first in his family that he knew of to even go. Even though he couldn't immediately see the benefit of that piece of sheepskin, he had enjoyed the experience of university life, knew that the knowledge he'd picked up would be invaluable in his job as cow boss at Freeborn and beyond once he went out on his own.

Dusty and Michael had acted like proud parents at his graduation, snapping off dozens of shots as he'd walked down the aisle and up on stage to retrieve various awards of achievement and finally his diploma. They'd continued on their picture-taking

spree outside, beneath the trees beyond Foothills Campus at Colorado State University as he'd posed with Montana in his cap and gown and out of it.

Home from her first year away at college, and looking forward to the day when she would be following in Jason's footsteps and getting her degree, Montana had been just as ecstatic as her parents at Jason's accomplishments.

Her graduation a few years later, however, had been a much different affair, the pall of Dusty and Michael's deaths a palpable reality hanging over the ceremony for a still-grieving Montana. Jason and Richard Wheeler, her parents' lawyer, attended the event, representing what there was of a family to Freeborn's only heir.

By that time, Jason had taken over the day-to-day operations of the ranch, acting as cow boss, general manager, and oftentimes cowman in Montana's frequent absences as she pursued her passion with the Forest Service.

He hadn't realized until this moment that there was so much history between Montana and he, so much emotional water under the bridge, so much shared pain.

Most of the sharing, however, had been Montana's since Jason had never found it in him to divulge his mother's death, or his feelings about the loss.

He'd just barely managed to tell Montana about his father and this only under duress one evening when they'd gotten drunk lounging against the trunk of a towering pine tree beneath the waning sun and celebrating one of Montana's first assignments with the Service.

He missed those easygoing days now, but knew Montana had Seth now with whom to celebrate her successes, had Seth with whom to watch the sunrise and sunset. They were a family—Montana, Seth, baby girl Thyra Michelle, and adopted teen son, Jamal.

There was no place for Jason anywhere in the equation and he knew it.

He glanced down at Evelyn now, admiring her serene features, mouth watering at the sensual tilt of her full lips, cock twitching in his boxer briefs at the memory of how sweet they had tasted, how soft they had felt against his.

Jason cursed under his breath, so glad at least one of them was able to get back to sleep.

Once they had gotten to his tent earlier and Jason had thoroughly swept it for unsuspecting or lost critters and deemed the area 'slimeball free,' Evelyn deigned to enter and make herself comfortable. After snuggling down into his bedroll, she had fallen asleep almost immediately, so fast in fact, he couldn't have seduced her if he tried, hadn't had the chance.

He had wanted to though, oh boy had he. He had wanted to explore every soft curve of her, every warm nook and cranny of her supple woman's body. He'd wanted to bury his face between her shapely thighs and not come up for air until fall's first chill.

God, she had scared him so bad with that scream! He hadn't been able to relax or fall back to sleep since hearing it, hopped up on so much fear and lust he probably could have started and flown a 747 jet on the adrenaline and endorphins that ran through his veins alone. Either that or he could have smashed the surrounding rocks and mountains of the campsite with his painfully hard cock.

Jason was tempted to wake her—why should he suffer all alone—to join him and watch the sunrise, but she looked so dang peaceful with her folded hands resting beneath a high cheek, lithe smooth body curled into a fetal position, he couldn't find it in his heart to disturb her.

She turned from her side onto her back then, yawned, stretched, and slowly opened her eyes.

Jason watched her as she blinked those gorgeous hazel peepers a couple of times before she turned her head to stare at him and grin.

He sucked in his breath as if he had been sucker-punched in the abdomen, automatically reached out a hand to cup her cheek.

“Is it morning already?”

“Sun’s about ready to grace us with an appearance, yep.”

“Grrrr.” She closed her eyes, covered her head with the blanket and burrowed deep into the bedroll. “I don’t want to get up.”

“We’ve got a little while before chow bell rings.”

She poked her head out of a corner of the blanket and opened one eye to glare at him. “What are you doing up so wide awake and bushy tailed?”

“Not a morning person, are you?”

“After three days with my grumpy ass out on this cattle drive, you should know at least that much about me.”

He grinned. “Oh, I know a little more than that.”

She opened her other eye and looked at him askance. “Really? Like what?”

“For instance...” He deliberately pulled the blanket off of her face and down her body until it reached her bare thighs, but even this wasn’t enough to please him. He needed to get rid of that big T-shirt blocking his view of the rest of her hot body. “I know you like your throat kissed like this.” He bent his head and nuzzled her neck, circling the pulse point with languorous moist strokes of his tongue before gently nipping her with his teeth.

Evelyn groaned and arched her neck, hands coming up to sink into his hair as Jason slid his arms around her and pulled her into his arms to feel her breasts pressed against his chest.

She moved back and forth against him, the hard points of her nipples jabbing his chest through the soft cotton of her shirt and driving him mad. Her squirming made him forget what he’d told her when he’d invited her to his tent, that nothing would happen

she didn't want to happen. Surely, that no longer applied since it was obvious from the erotic whimpers and moans emitting from her throat that she wanted this as much as he did?

"Evie..." He slid his tongue from her throat, to her chin until he finally reached and buried her lips beneath his. He thrust in his tongue and swallowed her gasp as she pressed her slit against his erection and rubbed herself up and down, setting his already scalding cock on fire.

"Mmm..."

"Evie, look at me," he said between pants and kisses, purposefully cupping her face between his palms, big hands almost swallowing her head as she dragged her eyes open to pin him with a blatant invitation. He went on anyway. "I don't want to stop. I want to find out what this is between us, find out what it could b—"

She'd put a finger against his lips with one hand and slid the other down between his legs to cup his testicles and stop him in mid-sentence.

Jason hissed out a breath as she gently squeezed him and he imagined what it would be like to have her milk him dry with her mouth and her cunt.

"I don't want to fight anymore, Jace. I don't want to fight this and I don't want you to stop."

He didn't need to hear anymore before he pushed her down onto her back and ground his lips against hers in a plain portrayal of the sex act, plunging his tongue inside her mouth like he wanted to bury his penis in her moist hot depths.

Evelyn reached her hands down between them and pulled at the waistband of his blue boxer briefs, sliding them down his thighs as far as she could get them without ending the kiss before Jason hastily pulled them down the rest of the way and kicked them off.

"Now you," he said as he grasped the hem of her T-shirt. Evelyn raised her arms so that he could slide it up and over her

head, and once she was divested, he just sat back on his heels and stared at her breasts. They were so perfect in shape and size, enough to fill his hands and his mouth for days, until he was completely sated with the feel and taste of her, and even then he wouldn't have had enough of her, never would have enough of her. "You are so beautiful."

"No. You are." She reached for his hard shaft, thumbed the pearl of liquid gathered at the slit and his cock jerked in her hand with his eagerness. "God, I want to taste you."

He watched as she stuck her thumb in her mouth, closed her eyes, and sucked his pre-come off, running her tongue around and around the digit until rockets blasted up through his spine and exploded in his head, causing him to see stars.

She'd barely touched him! If he didn't take control of the situation now, this little rendezvous would be over much sooner than either of them wanted it to be.

Jason leaned in to kiss her mouth, sampled his own earthy taste on her lips and slowly, deliberately moved his way down her body, kissing a fiery moist trail from her breasts to her bellybutton. He dipped his tongue in and Evelyn pitched her hips into him, driving her pelvis against his chin with an unspoken demand.

He smiled as he slid his mouth lower, lips just brushing the hot pink triangle of material hiding her treasures from him. He took the waistband of her thong in his teeth and slid the flimsy underwear down her legs until he reached her ankles. He sat back on his heels to remove and toss her thong over a shoulder, then took one foot and lifted it to his mouth.

She glanced up at him with an impish twinkle in her eyes that made a shudder run down his back as he closed his mouth around her big toe and sucked.

Evelyn giggled and wiggled the other toes of her foot at him. "That tickles, Mr. Foot Fetish."

“What you call a fetish, I call enjoying every...part...of...your...body...” He kissed his way from her foot, to her ankle, to her calf, to her kneecap with every word and pause in between, until his mouth was poised over her cunt once again.

She spread her thighs wide for him, every bit the accommodating wanton, trembling as he lowered his mouth and tongued her swollen clit.

“Oh, God, Jace...I need you...” She gasped as he eased a finger into her. “Yes. That’s it. I need you inside me. I need—God, that feels good!”

He added another finger and scissored them as he plunged deep and twisted his fingers inside her, brushing the sensitive bundle of nerves inside as he licked, sucked, and nibbled her clit until her body strung tight beneath him.

“Jason!” She grabbed his hair in both hands and held him in place as an orgasm crashed down on her. Her vaginal muscles clenched around his fingers and her cream gushed out and filled his hand.

He raised his head and sat back on his heels again to watch the tremors rack her slick naked body while he licked each finger and savored the musky sweet taste of her. He stared at the downy black hair between her legs, mouth watering at the sight of her creamy glistening pink lips peeking through her curls. “Mmm, now that tasted better than a T-bone steak.”

Evelyn leaned up on her elbows to look at him with bedroom eyes. “Speak for yourself. I think I’d prefer a little taste of this steak right here.” She reached for him, grasped his long jutting shaft, fingertips just barely making it completely around to meet her thumb once she closed her hand around his erect flesh.

He watched her eyes widen in comprehension and his heart fluttered with pride.

Lordy, he knew vanity was a sin, but the things this woman did to his libido and his ego with just a look and a touch made the sinning all the more worthwhile!

“Had enough already?” he asked at the astonished look on her face and she shot right back, “Not nearly enough.”

“I am truly glad to hear that, darlin’,” he murmured, braced his weight on his palms on either side of her head as he lowered his face to hers again. He licked her parted lips before she opened her mouth to suck in his tongue and nibbled his bottom lip.

She cupped his ass, pulled him towards her and bucked her hips, her pubis colliding with his cock as she growled into his mouth. She reached down to caress his balls, taking the springy weight of him in her hand and making him melt inside as surely as that wicked smile of hers did. “Don’t hold out on me, cowboy. Give it to me now.” She drew him forward, but Jason refused to be prodded or rushed. Not until he was ready. He’d waited a little while already. He could wait a little while more, and so could she.

He reached for his jeans behind Evelyn’s head, dug around in one of the front pockets before he emerged with a foil pack that he brought to his mouth.

Jason stared down at Evelyn’s face as he ripped into the package with his teeth and one hand and waited for her reaction.

“Why you cocky cowboy!”

He shook his head, gave her his most earnest look and murmured, “Not cocky, just hopeful. Would you rather I *wasn’t* prepared?”

“I suppose it’s a good thing one of us is,” she admitted, then squinted up at him. “You sure you didn’t put that snake in my tent?”

His eyes widened at the idea. “If I had thought it would get you where you are now, in my tent and beneath me, I might have.” Jason finished sheathing his cock and positioned himself between her thighs as Evelyn brought her legs up to circle his hips. “If I

hadn't come prepared, you would have been deprived of this." He gently poked her slit with the tip of his cock.

Evelyn nodded. "I like a man who thinks ahead."

"Have to keep up with you."

He watched her grin like a satisfied lioness and his heart flipped over.

Time to get this show on the road and good!

He cupped her breasts, leaned in to suckle and bite her erect nipples until they both shone like washed plums in the dim light of the tent.

Evelyn writhed and gasped beneath him. "C'mon, cowboy. Mount up."

"You are so bossy."

"So I've been told." She reached between his legs to grasp his balls, firmly massaging them in her hand until Jason groaned.

He leaned in to plunder her mouth, coming up for air a minute later to say, "You're lucky we want the same thing."

"If that means you're going to fuck me now, and fuck me good then yes, we do."

Her raunchy talk turned him on like nothing else, had him taking his throbbing shaft in hand, guiding it to the creamy opening of her pussy to tease the outer folds of her sex with the head of his cock, just brushing her labia and vulva, but not entering.

"You're trying to get back at me for before, aren't you?" she stated and squeezed his ass with both hands, tried to pull him forward, but Jason resisted.

"You think I'm vengeful, darlin'?"

"Oh, I know it."

"You may be right." He grinned, dipped the tip of his penis into her cunt, stroking the nerve endings right at her entrance until Evelyn whimpered and lightly rasped her nails down his back.

"Jason, please..."

He sunk into her slowly, inch by glorious inch, stroking her insides with quick shallow thrusts and circling his hips before he plunged deep and forced a surprised gasp from her lips, still not in to the hilt.

“Oh...oh, yes, Jace. More...please more. I can take it.”

“I know you can, sweetie.” He drove into her balls-deep and paused as she panted and squirmed beneath him while her slick tight canal stretched to accommodate the length and width of his full erection.

She brought her arms around his back, gripped his shoulders and pitched her hips, simultaneously pulling him flush against her and squeezing her legs tight around him.

“You don’t have to lock me in, Evie. I’m not going anywhere. I’m right where I want to be.”

“Then show me, baby. Show me how much you like being inside this sweet, hot pussy.”

He growled and purposely angled his hips before he gyrated them, withdrew until only the tip of his penis was inside her, then plunged back into her before he started to pump his hips in a hard, almost violent rhythm.

Evelyn bucked her hips, meeting him stroke for stroke, moaning low in her throat.

Jason took her right leg and elevated it to rest her ankle on his left shoulder to give him deeper access, thrusting into her harder and faster until the internal massage became too much for either of them to bear without coming.

He pulled back one final time, and felt her vaginal muscles desperately clutching at his pulsing flesh when he drove back into her.

She held him tight with her arms and legs, and released a keening cry that Jason swallowed with a fierce kiss as his balls tightened against his groin with his impending orgasm. A second later, he released a low deep groan, and stiffened above Evelyn as

he joined her and leaped headlong off the cliff of desire and into his full-blown climax.

Evelyn lay gasping beneath him for several long moments, a fine veneer of perspiration making her skin glow in the waxing morning light. It was an enticing gentle radiance that Jason couldn't help but admire. He licked and sucked her skin from shoulders to pelvis and back again.

"God, that was incredible!" she said and draped the back of a wrist over her forehead, still trying to catch her breath.

"You weren't too bad yourself." He leaned in to kiss her nose. "And I'm not nearly finished with you yet."

"I think I heard the chow bell ring."

"Yeah, it did, about two minutes after I slid into you."

"Oh, well, then that explains it. Who would have heard it then?"

"Not me."

She peered up at him, cupped his cheek with a hand, the scrape of her soft palm against his light whiskers filling the tent. "We'd better get dressed and head out."

"Eve—"

"You go out first and I'll go to my tent, get dressed, and meet you at the wagon."

There she was, giving orders.

Jason knew this morning-after was going to be rougher than any other he'd ever faced.

He decided as long as she didn't order him out of her life yet, he could take anything she had to dish out. He could take any order she wanted to give, because he wasn't letting her get away from him that easily.

Chapter 10

Evelyn stood in the middle of her tent for a full minute just glancing around with her hands at her sides and feeling lost.

She'd had sex with that cocky, sexy-ass cowboy and now she wondered what she was going to do in the aftermath.

Damn, when she had been talking about this trip in Angela's kitchen a couple of weeks ago and had fleetingly thought about getting her groove back, she hadn't literally meant to go out and do it like in the book and the movie and kick up her heels with a younger man!

Shame didn't enter into the equation. Evelyn would never be embarrassed about doing something as enjoyable as what she and Jason had shared. No, she wasn't embarrassed and didn't regret one moment of what they'd done because she had done exactly what she'd wanted.

There were, however, consequences and she acknowledged that she would have to face them eventually, would have to face them sooner than later.

Evelyn got out of her T-shirt and washed up with the water in the basin she'd retrieved from the stream earlier. Luckily, the T-shirt had been big and long enough to cover her essential anatomy. She hadn't been able to find her thong in her haste to get back to her tent, so had left Jason's tent without it. She had chalked up the loss to a wonderful cause—that of discovering she still had it and that she could come, and come quite fiercely without dear old Jack.

Running back to her tent without being seen had been no mean feat, but add her walking around in the wilderness *sans* panties,

and it took the voyeuristic, forbidden thrill quotient to new levels for Evelyn-the-city-slicker. Every step across the dewy fresh meadow from Jason's tent to her own had been a sensuous reminder of the wanton acts they'd performed minutes earlier. The moistness between her legs had rivaled that of the meadow. The rasp of her pussy hair against her cotton T-shirt neared combustible levels.

Thinking about him now made her vaginal muscles convulse with nostalgia as she washed herself with a damp soapy cloth. Touching herself forced the situation to the fore of her brain.

She'd known all along getting with Jason would lead to complications, that sleeping with him was not the wisest decision for her to make. She'd done it anyway, gladly, and despite her knowing bone-deep that long distance relationships did not work. Not to mention the whole age gap that was between them.

Who said anything about a relationship? You're just screwing him, Evelyn. Not marrying him and having kids!

She'd like to believe she was only being conceited, and that Jason wouldn't want to get to know her better—That he wouldn't want to continue seeing her after her two-week stint at the ranch was up, or that he wouldn't want to foster something serious and beyond the physical with her. She knew, however, that she'd only be fooling herself to think any of the above. Jason was not the love-'em-and-leave-'em type. She'd known this before she had taken his hand and followed him to his tent. She'd known it the minute he'd slid that big western cock into her pussy as if he had come home to roost and for good, as if he owned it.

Whose pussy is this, indeed!

Yep, the man had picket fence, wife, and kids written all over him, and if men had a biological clock like women, then his was ticking double-time.

What was she going to do about this? She had no intentions of getting serious and tied down. She had no intentions of opening up a chapter like that in her life just yet.

Besides, he was younger (thus he fucked spectacularly, lest she forgot) and he might want kids some day soon (hey, if she was going to fantasize and speculate, she might as well go all the way). Evelyn didn't have anything against the little tykes, in fact loved children. She just figured her childbearing days were pretty much over. Sure, women in their forties had children every day, but after her miscarriage when she was married to Todd, Evelyn just didn't have the heart to risk that kind of trauma again.

Old or young, and unlike her maternal and nurturing oldest sister Angela, Evelyn had never imagined herself as a mother anyway. She sometimes wondered if she even had that essential maternal gene in her DNA, and told herself that the miscarriage had probably been for the best, that maybe her body wasn't meant to carry a baby to term.

She could, however, see Jason with a house load of kids, little boys and girls in jeans and western shirts and cowboy hats and boots as they accompanied their daddy out on a cattle drive and learned the ropes of ranching.

Evelyn knew there was no place for her in that vision. And, Jesus, she was jumping the gun here, but could she really deprive Jason of fatherhood?

She wasn't the rural, critter-loving type. Her first week here at Freeborn had almost broken her and she had the bumps and bruises from riding with cattle six hours a day to prove it, with still another week on the ranch to go. She couldn't wait to get back to the concrete jungle in New York and all the comforts of home that trip afforded.

She couldn't see Jason in *that* vision, surrounded by the towering glass and steel of Manhattan, covering his broad strong

shoulders in a suit and stifling that sexy smooth neck in a tie would just be a travesty, like caging a wild animal in the zoo.

She couldn't see herself in his world, his future, and she couldn't see him in hers.

Where did that leave them?

* * * *

Jason sat on an outcropping of rocks with the twins trading stories about the snake incident last night. The boys wanted to go out in the woods to look for some more critters, and Jason was busy trying to talk them out of the expedition before their mother brained him.

All the while, his eyes remained trained on the front of Evelyn's tent as he waited for some movement of that flap to indicate she was on her way out.

How long did it take her to throw on some jeans and a shirt for breakfast? It wasn't as if this was the awards dinner they would be having later on tonight near the main house with Montana and Seth in the small banquet hall. It was just chuck wagon food on the range.

Briefly, he wondered if she had escaped out the back and run away. He had to hold in a laugh at his flight of fancy. He couldn't imagine that tough-as-nails New Yorker running away from anything...except maybe him. The thought wasn't something he was particularly proud of, but he knew it was true, especially if her initial reactions to his overtures were any indication.

She couldn't avoid him forever. He planned to talk to her first chance he got and before she let that vivid imagination run away with her.

He could just picture what scenarios she had come up with to 'break things off' with him just because it would be 'for the best.'

More like she reckoned to dump him before she allowed him to dump her.

If he had learned anything about her in the last few days, Evelyn had a bit of a drama queen in her. Not to mention she was defensive, flashy, materialistic, snobby...and so dang gorgeous, generous, funny, sweet, and tender. He found it hard to resist her despite her contrary, tough act.

He was in trouble!

Jason wondered how it had happened, how he had let himself fall so hard so fast when the subject of his quandary emerged from her tent.

Wearing regular old Wrangler jeans, a western shirt as hot pink as the thong he'd taken off of her earlier, cowboy boots, and his black hat on her head, she looked more like a luscious runway model disguised in western garb than any cowhand.

He raised a hand and waved to catch her attention as she headed straight for the chow wagon, but she didn't acknowledge him.

With the sun up and glaring over the wagon it was possible she hadn't noticed him, but Jason didn't think so. He knew whom he was dealing with.

She ignored him, and probably had it in that pretty stubborn head of hers to try and avoid him for the rest of the day until they got back to the main house.

And he wasn't having it.

"Scuse me, boys. I've got some business to tend to."

"Are you still going to take us to the shooting range when we get back to the ranch?" Keith asked for himself and his brother.

"Sure as shooting I am." Jason marched over to the wagon and sidled behind Evelyn as she picked up her tray. He leaned in to nuzzle her neck and she liked to hit the clouds when she jumped. "Tarnation, woman, it's just me."

She glanced over both shoulders as if she thought someone was following her. Then she turned on him, slapped him in the shoulder and said under her breath, "We're out in public."

"I don't have anything to hide. What about you?"

"I'm not hiding anything. I'd just rather not get into...things with you right now."

"Things?" He frowned. He was almost ready to leave her to her breakfast in peace, but wouldn't give her the satisfaction. "We need to talk, Evelyn."

"Can't it wait until after breakfast?"

He knew she wasn't going to like his answer, but the sooner he said his piece the better.

Jason waited a minute while she got her food, then he grabbed the tray from her and stomped to the edge of the forest where he found another outcropping of rocks. They were far enough away from prying eyes but not too far that he couldn't keep an eye on the campsite.

Evelyn stumbled into his back as he abruptly stopped. She recovered and had her fists on her hips when he turned to look at her. "What the hell is your problem?"

"You are."

"What did I do, besides go to the wagon to get breakfast?"

"You were ignoring me."

"It may surprise you to know that you are not the end all and be all of my world, Jason. Nature does call, and so does my stomach. Speaking of which..." She put out her hands. "May I have my breakfast?"

"Sure you can, but you're going to eat right here and we're going to talk."

"What difference does it make where I eat?"

"I have a feeling you're not going to like what I have to say, and I'm sure you don't want any prying eyes and ears in on it."

She looked at him warily as she took her tray and sat down on the rocks without further argument. She balanced her tray on her lap and expertly put syrup on and cut into a corner of her flapjack stack. "Talk away."

"I thought we had an understanding, Evelyn."

She stared up him. "What, that because we screwed each other's brains out, we're exclusive? I never understood anything of the sort."

"You think being deliberately cruel is going to scare me away. Better think again."

"No one's being cruel. I'm just being realistic."

"And I'm not?"

"Look, Jason, just because we fucked doesn't mean anything except I enjoy your body and you enjoy mine. Other than that—"

"You're in denial if you think that's all there is between us."

"You want to go steady? Pin me?"

"Now you're being plain silly."

"Not at all, I'm just plain curious about your intentions and what you think we should call this thing between us. Are you saying you're in love with me or something?"

That caught him off-guard. Up until then, he'd had a comeback for all of her quips but that last one got him right where he lived and breathed. In fact, the three little words made his breath hitch in his chest.

"Cat got your tongue?"

"No, I just—"

"See, even you can't put a name to what's between us."

"Just because I can't put a name to it, doesn't mean I'm going to run away from it."

"Oh, like me, I guess?"

"You said it. I didn't."

Evelyn rolled her eyes and dug into another corner of butter- and syrup-covered flapjacks. She brought the forkful to her mouth and devoured the cakes.

Jason watched her chewing for one long moment. He didn't realize he was gaping until Evelyn stuck out her tongue to lick syrup from the corner of her mouth and he caught himself mimicking her action.

"Stop it," she said.

"Stop what?"

"Looking at me like you want to take a bite out of me."

He grinned at her bull's eye description. "Bite, lick, suck..."

"You're hopeless."

"Which is why I need you in my life." Jason sat down beside her, put an arm around her, and pulled her close to his side. He expected her to resist, at the very least come back at him with some smart remark, but she didn't. She simply speared another corner of flapjacks and brought it to her mouth.

He liked her appetite, for life as well as other things. He liked being on the receiving end of those other things. "So what are you doing next week once the cattle drive's over? How are you going to spend your last week at the ranch?"

She shrugged. "I hadn't actually decided. I've been looking through the brochures to try and come up with some ideas."

"Need a tour guide?"

She turned to him and in that first unguarded instant, he saw the hungry, grateful look in the depths of her eyes, and it made his heart inflate with optimism.

Just as quickly, however, her expression changed, the desire replaced with caution as she asked, "Won't you be busy with work on the ranch?"

"Do you want a tour guide or not, Evie?"

She shrugged again as if it really didn't matter to her. "Whatever screws your bulb in," she mumbled.

Despite her nonchalant answer, Jason knew dang well his question, his invitation, did matter to her. “You have a way with words, woman.”

She arched a brow. “You should talk?”

He snickered, shook his head as he tightened his arm around her. He took heart when he felt her shudder in his embrace. “You’re a tough customer.”

“Make sure you don’t forget it.”

“I don’t think you’d ever let me.” He leaned in to lick syrup from the corner of her mouth, drawn by the earthy taste just below the sugary surface, drawn by the essence of the soft woman beneath all the prickly barbs. “Mmm, that’s sweet.”

“Didn’t you have breakfast already? Now you’re trying to pilfer mine?”

“I’m trying to pilfer a lot more than breakfast.” He teased the seam of her mouth and murmured, “Open for me, Evie.”

She did without question, pushing her tongue out to tangle with his in a sensual, taunting, power struggle that ended with Jason grabbing the tray from her hands and setting it aside before he picked her up to straddle his lap.

Evelyn immediately commenced to rock her pelvis against him in that provocative way that had him wanting to throw her down on the nearest flat surface and plunge his cock into her fully.

She wrapped her arms around him, nuzzled his neck and inhaled deep. “Shit, I want you again, cowboy.” She ground the words out through her teeth like it hurt or made her mad to have to admit it to him.

“Jason,” he said.

She pulled back to peer at him, her hazel eyes searching and intense.

He would have given up his favorite hat to know what was on her mind in the several seconds she let go by before she spoke, then he realized he already had given it up, to her.

"I haven't forgotten who you are."

"I just want to make sure you don't mistake me for some nameless, faceless roll in the hay you're going to brag about to your girlfriends and forget once you get back to the city."

"Oh, I'll brag about you, but you're certainly not a nameless, faceless anything to me, Jason Makepeace." She leaned in to nibble his earlobe and then circled the outer shell of his ear with the tip of her tongue.

I wish I could forget you.

Jason jerked back to stare at her. "Did you say something?"

"Jason Makepeace?"

"No, after that."

"No." She shook her head and leaned back in.

Jason trembled beneath her oral onslaught and pulled her flush against him so hard he felt the points of her hard nipples poking his chest through their clothes. The erotic sensation was more than enough to make him forget the stray thought he'd caught.

He pulled back slightly to stare at her. "You have on a bra?"

She frowned at him. "Yes. Why do you ask?"

In answer, he dipped his hand into the front of her shirt and cupped a breast. He closed his eyes and echoed her moan. "One of those fancy, flimsy Victoria's Secret doodads, huh?"

"What's the matter? You don't like Victoria's Secret?"

"I like your secrets a whole lot better." And he wanted to uncover each and every one.

"Show me, cowboy."

He gaped. "Out here? *Now*?"

She arched a brow. "Chicken?"

Everything this woman did and said surprised him, but he strangely wasn't surprised by the challenge in her eyes. He expected and was turned on by it.

Evelyn reached for his belt at his silence and quickly unbuckled it.

Jason stood and she wrapped her legs around his hips as he purposefully trudged towards the forest and stopped several yards inside the line of pines.

He put her on her feet and pressed her against the bark of a towering aspen, but Evelyn put her hands on his hips and reversed their positions.

“Not so fast, Marlboro Man.”

“What—”

Before he could get another word out, she sank to her knees in front of him, dragging his jeans and boxer briefs down his thighs.

“Evie...”

“You started this.”

He had, and he couldn't say he was sorry, not when she wrapped her hot, moist little mouth around the head of his cock and sucked like *that*.

Jason arched his neck, the back of his head pressed against the tree as he bit his bottom lip and closed his eyes tight.

He automatically slid his hands into her hair and gasped when she ran her teeth along the hard ridges of his penis on her way down to the base of his shaft. He knew she was continuing the power trip she had started on the rocks. He didn't care. He had already surrendered to her will, and was prepared to follow her anywhere at that point as long...as...she...didn't stop...sucking him like that!

“Christ!” He fisted her hair, reveling in the silky softness of the strands against his palms. He firmly held her in place despite her showing no inclination to let him go until she was darn good and ready.

His balls pulled up tight against his groin right before white heat radiated up his shaft and he spurted into her mouth on a long, low groan of ecstasy.

Jason reached down and grabbed her around the biceps. He lifted her to her feet and pulled her against him before he thought

better of it and sank to his knees with her on the forest floor to avoid completely collapsing on his weak, rubbery legs. He attacked her mouth with his, stroking inside the hot cavern with pure curiosity and lust when her tongue darted out to spar with his.

She pulled back to stare at him for a moment, breathless as she cupped his face between her hands. "Tell me you have a condom, please."

"Are you going to get riled and cuss if I tell you I do?"

"I'm going to kiss you silly and ride you hard is what I'm going to do."

"Then for you, I have one."

"My kind of cowboy."

"First, I have to get something out of my system..." Jason pushed her back against the fallen twigs and moist grass of the forest floor and undid her belt, button, and zipper in short order. He tugged her jeans down over her hips and further to her calves until he revealed another one of them flimsy thong-thingies she liked to wear that drove him crazy, this one in purple. "I suppose it matches your bra?" He teased a lacy leg with his forefinger and glanced up at her.

"Of course it does!" she said as if he was crazy to ask such a thing.

Frankly, he didn't care if the panties were chartreuse and the bra was yellow with pink polka dots as long as Evelyn Vega was in 'em.

Jason pulled down the delicate scrap of underwear. If he'd had time to completely divest her, he would have taken it off and claimed it to add to his collection with the other one she'd left in his tent in her haste to leave earlier.

He did take a second to stare at her pussy, admired the glistening black hair, her pink lips, and clit peeking from the fine tuft and glistening with the juices of her arousal as she impatiently writhed and reached up for him.

Jason bent his head, buried his face between her legs, felt her thighs flexing beneath him as he sucked her clit then dipped his tongue into her cunt and licked slow and easy.

She held still with the greatest of willpower, as long as she could. He felt her tension, and sympathized. It had taken everything in him not to just strip her on the rocks out in the open and take her. Not that they weren't still out in the open, so to speak, so he needed to hurry before one of those darn twins came searching...

"Oh, God, Jason, yes! Right there!"

She had that death grip on his hair again, pressing his face close as she pumped her hips against his face. If he'd wanted to move, he couldn't have without losing a patch of hair to her enthusiasm. Thank the Lord he didn't want to move. He was too happy in heaven.

Jason stroked just inside the entrance of her vagina, licked the sweet-tangy juices moistening her inner and outer folds, pulling her labia into his mouth before nibbling each like a snack before the main course.

"Jace...I want your cock...please," she whimpered.

He took the condom out of his pocket, quickly opened, and donned it before rising up to balance his weight on his palms and settle between her legs.

She glanced up at him with wide, trusting hazel eyes, looking every bit the innocent young ingénue that he knew she wasn't, and that he didn't want. She looked like the strong experienced woman he craved more than any other.

Evelyn grasped his butt with both hands and pulled him forward until the tip of his cock just brushed her slit.

Jason slid in just the head of his shaft, circled his hips before slowly sinking inside her until he was balls-deep. He closed his eyes, wrapped his arms around her and gathered her close before he started to move inside her.

Evelyn returned his hug, compressing her vaginal muscles around his cock, furiously bucking her hips and speeding their rhythm until she lead them towards a rushed climax that Jason couldn't have staved off had he tried.

"Evie!" He held her tight as they came against each other, spasms shaking them from the inside out. Jason rocked his lower body against her for several moments as the tremors subsided, then pulled her to lie across his chest as he rested on his back to catch his breath.

"That was something." She trailed a finger from his temple to his chin, caressing his light whiskers before cupping his cheek.

"It surely was." He grinned. "I've never done anything like that before."

"What? Made love outdoors in semi-public?"

"Yep." He gave her a playful squeeze. "You're a bad influence," he teased but Evelyn took it entirely different than he meant because the next thing he knew she pulled out of his arms and glaring down at him.

"So what you're saying is you think I have done it?"

What in tarnation? "I'm not saying anything of the sort. I ju—"

She shoved him in the chest and jerked to her feet to tower over him.

Jason sat up, eye-level with her still moist pussy. It was in licking distance, the spicy sweet scent of her floating around him and scrambling his brains too much for him to register why exactly she was mad at him. But she surely was.

"You think I'm some fast-ass floozy who'll lay down with just any man, don't you?"

"I never said anything of the sort and I think you're taking what I did say totally out of context, Evie."

"Don't you Evie me. I know how men think. I work around them all day long and I hear how they talk and see how they act."

"Whatever men you're talking about, I'm not them."

“Yes, but you’ve got one of those,” she waved at his semi-erect penis and Jason’s entire body heated with a flush as the critter twitched as if it knew it was being talked about, “things between your legs.”

He pulled up his shorts and jeans and popped to his feet to confront her. “I didn’t hear you complaining about it a little while ago.” *Why are you playing into her hands? She’s more than the most contrary woman you know. The woman is plain loco! Shut your pie hole and leave it and her alone.*

But Evelyn wasn’t finished. He could see it in her gleaming eyes, lit as if from a fire within. She was just starting to build up a head of steam.

“That’s why you dragged me away from Jim. You weren’t trying to save me from myself. You think I’m a bad influence. You think I meant to tempt your innocent married friend into adultery.”

“What in Sam Hill are you talking about?” The woman’s logic was all over the place. Sure, he thought she was tempting and seductive, but he never said she was corruptive or depraved. God Almighty!

Evelyn pulled up her thong and jeans, quickly zipped and buttoned her Wrangler’s before turning to jab him in the chest with a finger. “For your information, Mr. Prehistoric Cowboy, I hadn’t had sex for the last two years before I came out here and met you. So who’s the bad influence now, huh?” She froze and stared at him with that wide-eyed innocent look that belied her age. She held his gaze for two charged, confused seconds before she pivoted on her heels and stalked toward the clearing.

Jason felt his face breaking out into a goofy grin as he watched her march away from him.

Chapter 11

You're a bad influence

Evelyn knew he'd been joking. Why did she let it get to her and why did she take it so personally?

Maybe because being with him already made her feel like a fallen, dirty old woman out to corrupt the morals of a minor. When he said things like that remark in the forest, it just reinforced everything she already felt reinforced all of Todd's erroneous perceptions of her 'nymphomania.'

Where was her modern-woman ideal now, when she needed it most?

Shit, if she were a man, she wouldn't have thought twice about his age. He'd be just another feather in her headdress, a notch on her bedpost.

Evelyn guessed when she got right down to it, she was as old fashioned as Jason and her mom, and as romantic as her sister Angela.

Seemed the apple really didn't fall too far from the Vega tree.

She loved men, sure. She loved screwing even better, but she wanted the intimacy that preceded and followed the physical act more than anything. She wanted that spiritual and mental connection to her partner. She wanted a bond. This was probably why she hadn't had sex in so long. She couldn't find anyone with whom to make this connection, and without it the sex was just a superficial endeavor—fun, arousing, but ultimately empty.

Why was she fighting so hard when she had that connection with Jason? She did have one, didn't she?

Evelyn knew he hadn't deserved her attack, and the only thing she could think of to defend herself was really no defense at all. She thought to dump the younger man before he found a young chippy and dumped the old lady he had boned on a dare. She knew she was exaggerating and being totally immature about the situation, but something about being with Jason made her revert to her high school days when the highlight of a school year involved gossiping about what cheerleader the captain of the football team boned.

God, he was only ten years younger than she. He wasn't a teenager. Why did it feel intrinsically wrong being with him? Why did she feel like she was robbing the cradle? She knew she needed to get over the ridiculous concept. She'd thought that she had. Why else would she just screw the man in his tent and then again out in the forest...out in the open!

What was wrong with her? She'd never been shy about her sexuality, which, according to Todd, was her problem—why she had been such a poor choice for a wife—her overactive sex drive. But something about Jason just brought out this side of her even more, brought out the *really* wild and impulsive side of her. He knocked down all her barriers. The sleek cosmopolitan working girl who daily rubbed elbows with captains of the industry in the wood and polished offices of Wall Street just didn't exist around him. She became like the land around her—natural, raw and undomesticated.

How in the hell would she detox from him once she got back home to New York?

"And the award for most improved rider goes to...Evelyn Vega!"

"Huh?"

"He called your name, Evelyn." Tammy gave her a gentle poke in the ribs. "Go on. Go get 'em, woman."

Evelyn's face heated at the girl's teasing tone.

That Tammy—and probably everyone else in the small banquet room for that matter—was aware of her attraction to Jason Makepeace, made her face heat and her legs feel like cooked noodles when she stood to walk to the stage.

Evelyn made it to the stage to the loud applause of the hundred or so guests and employees of Freeborn Ranch, feeling like Miss America being crooned to by Bert Parks. Except the former pageant emcee for damn sure couldn't touch Mr. Makepeace with a fifty-foot-pole.

She tilted up her chin, gaze locked onto his Caribbean-blue eyes as she sashayed across the stage to the podium in a sleeveless emerald-green sheath dress that she had packed specifically for this event listed in the brochure, but still hadn't really expected to wear.

Tammy's loud cheers and applause followed her, drowning out everyone else.

God to be young again, and with so much nonchalant resilience and enthusiasm!

Why did Jason have to be the presenter for this particular award when Montana or Seth had presented all of the others? Was it some kind of group conspiracy? Or had Jason been dragged into the middle of his employers' matchmaking schemes as much as Evelyn had been dragged into Angela's?

She didn't know where the sudden thought came from, but she had a feeling she wasn't too far off the mark. She knew that Angela, somehow somehow, had set up her meeting Jason.

Evelyn stared at him as she reached the podium. He looked as uncomfortable as she felt, not like a co-conspirator in anyone's matchmaking schemes at all, more like a victim.

Should she be relieved?

Jason turned to face her full, holding up the trophy with one hand. He leaned in to kiss her cheek then settled a hand on her waist as she stood at the podium to address the crowd, and Evelyn

couldn't help thinking that he was taking advantage of the situation. She couldn't help thinking too that she wanted to lean back into his embrace—not much, just a millimeter, just an inch—and let him totally engulf her. She could already feel his body heat through his formal clothes and hers, a waft of his clean and rustic scent making her nostrils flare with nostalgia.

God, she could have just eaten him *up* right that minute if there weren't so many people watching them.

"Speech! Speech!" Tammy stood in the middle of the auditorium, screaming through her cupped hands before her mother shushed her with a look. The rest of the audience broke out into gales of laughter.

Evelyn swallowed hard, mouth suddenly dry. Hell, she had never been so nervous in front of a crowd before. She made presentations like this for a living, thrived on pressure.

Finally she stared at her trophy, stalling for time. The reality of the bronze horse-and-rider statue grounded her and then she read the inscription engraved in the marble base—*Freeborn Ranch Cattle Drive's Most Improved Rider, Evelyn Vega*—and choked up.

Where was this sentimentality coming from? It couldn't possibly have been the work of that rascally cow boss whose hand was now curved so deliciously around her waist she didn't have the heart to pull away, especially not at the risk of making a scene.

"I'm overwhelmed," Evelyn said. "And, uh...I don't know what to say except thanks so very much for this honor, and—"

"You earned it!" Jim Bowman shouted from the center of the crowd.

Everyone broke out into loud applause again.

Had Angela arranged all this too, along with the perfect man?

Well, he would be perfect, if it weren't for one teensy tiny little detail.

Jason offered her the trophy, and whispered, “You can take it, Evie. It’s not a snake.” He must have forgotten about the mike, or maybe not. Either way, the audience caught every word and again burst out into laughter.

“That’s all right. My big, bad hero showed that mean old snake.” Evelyn elbowed him in the ribs and took great satisfaction in the *whoosh* of air that left his lungs and the round of applause that greeted her tease.

What she really wanted to do was hit him for reminding her of her night of terror...and their morning of passion. The less she thought about the latter, especially since it couldn’t happen again—she couldn’t let it happen again—the better.

Jason handed over the trophy with a big grin and Evelyn took it, matching him mega-watt for mega-watt before she left the stage to raucous applause that followed her all the way back to her table and seat next to Tammy.

Not several seconds passed after she settled her derriere in the high-back chair before the teenager leaned close and whispered, “You two make such a cute couple.”

Evelyn’s face heated again as she tried to come up with an appropriate denial but couldn’t. She didn’t know about Jason and her being a cute couple as much as Jason was just plain cute...and cuddly, and rough and rugged and huggable and... Damn, she couldn’t come up with enough adjectives to describe how attractive he was to her. Shouldn’t that and the fact that he was just a plain nice guy be enough for her?

Seth and Montana joined Jason on stage to close out the rest of the ceremony before the crowd began to file out of the banquet hall.

“Are you coming down to the lake for cocktails and storytelling?” Tammy asked and hooked an arm through Evelyn’s as she leaned her head on Evelyn’s shoulder. “You have to come.

It's our last night here and I might not get a chance to see you again before we leave in the morning."

"Of course she is. No self-respecting ranch denizen would miss that Freeborn tradition."

Evelyn glanced up at Jason as he sidled next to them. She watched a fierce blush color Tammy's cheeks and could definitely relate. Her own face had been on fire and her legs felt like Jell-O most of the evening. Good thing she was sitting down. "I'll be there," Evelyn muttered.

"Great. See you then." Tammy's gaze drifted from Evelyn to Jason and back again before she shrugged, stood, and finally left.

Jason took the back of Tammy's recently vacated chair, turned it to face Evelyn, straddled the seat and leaned his folded arms across the high back. "Congratulations."

"Thanks."

"You earned it."

"So it would seem."

"You are coming down to the lake, right?"

"I thought it was already established. I mean, that's what *you* told Tammy."

He leaned close, took a tendril of hair that had escaped her chignon and fondled it between thumb and forefinger.

Evelyn automatically closed her eyes and basked in the scent of him wafting out to her.

He didn't smell all fancy and artificial like the men she worked around everyday with their expensive colognes and aftershaves. Sure, they smelled nice, but Jason was naturally clean and fresh, smelled of earth and pine, woodsy like the forest after a soaking rain.

"I said that because I *want* you to come," he murmured.

"Manifesting your destiny?"

"Yep." He nodded then leaned closer and sucked her left earlobe into his mouth.

Evelyn shivered. "You could have just asked."

"Would you have said yes?"

"Maybe."

"Why are you so contrary?"

"Why are you so bossy?"

He sat up at this and frowned at her. "Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

"So what if it is?"

Jason chuckled and leaned back in to take her mouth with his.

She gasped at the contact of his firm full lips against hers and unconsciously pushed out her tongue to meet his. She dueled with him for several long moments, hands drifting up to his chestnut hair and burrowing in the rich waves before she fisted his locks and held him in place as if her life depended on keeping him close.

She liked making the first move, but she had to admit, with Jason she didn't mind him taking the lead. Of course, he did it so well.

When he finally pulled away, Evelyn panted, pussy muscles clenching and unclenching with nostalgia and want.

Jason cupped her face with one hand and leaned his forehead against hers, making her heart ache with the familiarity of the maneuver. "We keep this up, we won't make it to the lake."

"Who says we have to?"

"Don't want to disappoint your fans."

"You mean your fans, don't you?"

"I think you've got me beat in that department." He grinned, ran his hand from her face down her shoulder until he twined his fingers with hers and a liquid fire sizzled in Evelyn's core.

She had never been so turned on by a man's touch and voice before. She could have just sat there and listened to him talk all night and probably come. But she wanted more.

"We could go back to your cottage or you could come to mine," he said.

“If we don’t go somewhere fast, I’ll be fucking you on one of these banquet hall tables any minute.” Evelyn almost slapped a hand over her mouth. She really needed to curve her raunchy tongue and not be so agreeable when it came to sex with him. She hated sending out mixed signals, saying no when she meant yes, and vice versa.

But Jason didn’t seem offended by her crass tongue, or her contradictory ways, in fact, just laughed as he stood without releasing her hand. “You know you don’t offend me in any way, shape or form, Evie,” he murmured.

She gaped as she stood to follow him to the exit. She had to practically run to keep up with his long determined strides, his eagerness all but making her forget what he’d just said, that he’d taken the words, not from her mouth, but plucked them right from her brain. “Got a train to catch or something?”

He paused to smile down at her. “No. Got a hot and ready woman to tame.”

She would have objected—especially to that taming part—but he swooped down on her mouth and planted a hard and urgent kiss against it, teasing her lips open with his tongue for the second it took her nipples to swell and harden. She squeezed his hand and rubbed herself against him, moaning low in her throat before pulling back to murmur, “Let’s go then.”

He dragged her down the paved walkway and onto the grass as he led them across the meadow towards his bungalow.

Evelyn briefly paused and looked longingly at the stables. His wheels spun with sexual, back-to-nature fantasies she had never fully entertained until now. She wondered what were the mechanics of making love on a horse, wanted to ask Jason, but he pulled her along with such single-minded resolve, she figured she’d leave it for another day.

Besides, it didn't matter where they made love, not to her because with Jason, it would be exciting anywhere they did it, even in a conventional bed.

But when he opened the door to his bungalow and led her inside, they didn't make it to the bed before they were pawing at each other.

Jason pushed her against the door as soon as it was closed, shoving the hem of her dress up to her waist as he leaned in to kiss and thoroughly suck her throat.

Evelyn moaned as she curved a leg around his hip and drew him nearer, the head of his hard cock nestled against her slit when he bent his knees. She instantly got wetter, arched her neck to give his mouth better access and buried her hands in his glorious silken waves.

He caught her other leg and lifted her in his arms as Evelyn eagerly wrapped her legs around him. "I don't know what it is about you that just makes me forget who and where I am."

"Ditto."

He chuckled, but didn't make another move to kiss or otherwise engage her, except for his erection that seemed to have a mind of its own, pulsing and twitching against her until she was ready to cry for mercy. He searched her face so long, Evelyn fidgeted in his arms, hot with longing and self-consciousness. "Do you mind if we slow down, just a little?"

How could she say no without seeming like the ungracious sex-maniac Todd always accused her of being? Would Jason think she was just as demanding and unreasonable as Todd had whenever she made the first move and wanted to make love more than once a day, never mind more than twice a week? "Um, I guess not."

"It's not that I don't want you, Evie. Lord knows I do..." Jason walked towards the rocking chair in his living room as he talked, showing no signs of wanting to part from her when he held her close and squeezed her ass in his big hands.

Now who was sending mixed messages?

He sat down in the chair and settled her across his lap as if holding a baby in his arms.

Evelyn kept her arms wrapped around his neck and stared at him, wondering what was going through that old fashioned mind of his when he blinked at her as if coming out of a trance.

"I know this seems like a complete three-sixty."

"You might say that."

"I never meant to maul you when I sat down at that table. But God, that kiss..." He shook his head as if to clear it. "I don't want you to think that this is all I want from you, Evie."

"This, meaning sex?"

He nodded. "It's not, you know."

"Did you see me complaining?"

"Not out loud, but—"

"What other way would I complain, Mr. Mind Reader?"

He shrugged, cheeks suddenly flushing as he averted his gaze.

"Isn't it the woman that's suppose to want to take things slow?" she asked, couldn't believe she was falling into Todd's chauvinistic mindset. Instead of knocking Jason, she should be applauding his fortitude and self-control, because Lord knew she was having a hard time keeping her hands off of *him*, especially with his hot firm erection teasing the seam of her butt.

"I think we've already established that there is nothing typical or normal about our relationship."

"Is that a criticism or a—"

"Why are you so all-fired sore? It's a statement. That's all. And I wish you'd stop reading a reproach or sinister motivations into everything I say and do."

"Not everything." She pouted, feeling like a chastised child..

He grinned and when he reached up a hand to cup her chin Evelyn shivered at his tenderness. "Who's Todd?" he asked then

pulled back and stared at her as if he had blabbed a secret she wasn't supposed to know.

Evelyn gawked. "How do you know about Todd?"

"Oh, I'm sure you mentioned him a time or two."

She shook her head, sure she hadn't.

What occasion would she have mentioned her ex-husband to her new lover? When she and Jason were together, they were too busy trying to get into each other's pants to worry about each other's pasts. And she certainly wouldn't voluntarily bring up a subject that made her feel uncharacteristically indecisive and uncertain.

Maybe it was a good thing Jason had slowed things down. She needed time to think about where this was going and what he was doing to her with his hot body and his uncanny insight.

"He hurt you," Jason whispered and cradled his mouth against her throat to nip and lick her.

His voice was hypnotic, his touch distracting enough to make her forget about grilling him.

"He's a man. That's what they do."

He pulled back to look at her. "Don't give up on all of us because of one fool."

Though she agreed with the fool part, it was hard not to look at the male species with anything other than a jaundiced eye. Not that she'd ever turn into her sister Donna, mind you.

"He's my ex-husband. It's been over a long time now."

Jason nodded as if this news met with his approval.

"And you?" she asked.

"Me?"

"Ever been married?"

"Yep, a long time ago. But that's over, just like you and Todd."

"Was it painful?" she asked and when he frowned at her, Evelyn said, "The divorce?"

Jason shrugged. "As painful as those things usually are."

She didn't want to push it, didn't want to push him, because then it would give him license to dig into her and Todd. He already seemed to know too much about the situation than she wanted to share just yet.

"Mind if we just sit here and cuddle?"

She almost burst out laughing at the cliché, but with Jason, nothing was uninspired, the opportunity to sit with him, touch him, stimulation enough for her starved romantic soul.

Todd never wanted to cuddle, and he rarely made love when she wanted to.

Evelyn wondered what in the world she had seen in him. What had gotten them together and kept them together for five years? But snuggling in Jason's arms made it easy enough to forget that there ever had been a prudish and disapproving husband in her past.

Chapter 12

Either he was going crazy, or...the alternative was just as unpalatable if not totally unbelievable.

That was twice now that he had caught stray thoughts from Evelyn: once in the forest when they had made love and the second time after the banquet when he ‘heard’ her thoughts about her ex-husband, Todd.

Creep.

If what Jason had caught was any indication at all of what the man was like, then he knew he didn’t want to know anything more of Todd Cole than he already knew. He was sorry, too, that Evelyn had ever had to suffer in a cold and unsympathetic marriage with the man.

He had thought his break-up with Bette had scarred him. Especially when, nine months into their marriage, he had come home to find a fellow bronco buster doing his dangedest to bust Jason’s filly from behind, balls deep in Bette’s rear and Bette keening with her blonde head flung back in ecstasy.

Jason shook his head now, didn’t want to immerse himself in those bad memories, not when he was on his way to create new and better ones with Evelyn.

He had read her mind. He knew he had because there was no other explanation for it except the going-crazy part, which he really didn’t want to consider, especially when it looked like his personal life might finally be moving in the right direction.

He’d contacted a mortgage broker and gotten himself pre-qualified for a loan. Monty had already put him in contact with a

real estate agent in the area that had several ‘promising prospects’ in mind for Jason’s house hunt. He had enough money socked away for a decent spread with enough left over to invest in several head of cattle to get him started. He was confident that he knew enough about animal husbandry to make a go of a ranch on his own...until he found a woman to share the toils and joys with him.

Except the woman he had in mind was a city slicker to her core that he couldn’t see agreeing to live out her life on a ranch too far away from the creature comforts afforded by living in a metropolitan area. He couldn’t imagine himself settling down in New York, either, not with the things he had planned for his life, not with how much he enjoyed country living.

So where did that leave him and Evie?

Heck, no better or worse off than before he’d met her, that was sure as shooting, but danged if he wasn’t going to try to make a go of it with her.

Jason had always loved a challenge—his life had been a challenge from the first—and he wasn’t about to be scared off or back down from no little ol’ Ms. Vega.

He whistled now as he strutted up the walkway leading to the front door of Evelyn’s cottage.

He couldn’t blame the woman if she was catching up on all the sleep she had been missing the last week—she was on vacation, after all. He fully expected that he would be disturbing his Yankee’s beauty rest, and was more than willing to deal with the consequences of her grumpy attitude, in fact, looked forward to it.

Jason smiled as he imagined Evelyn’s long, glossy black hair sleep-tousled around her face and her sultry color-changing eyes when she would open the door. His pardner twitched in his jeans at his vision of her.

Of course, knowing Evie as he did, she might be up and about already. He wouldn’t put it past the contrary woman to try and beat

him at his own game even when she wasn't sure what his game was.

Jason smiled and knocked on the door, three quick firm raps, heart thrumming and body strung tight with anticipation as he waited. He hadn't realized how much he had been looking forward to seeing her until after he had knocked. He had been missing her since their last encounter in the banquet hall yesterday evening.

A couple of minutes went by before he heard rustling behind the door and his fist froze midair just as he was about to knock again. "Open up, Evie. It's me."

"Who the hell is me?"

"You know darn well who me is. Your tour guide for this week."

"Oh, crap."

Jason chuckled and instinctively stepped back as she unlocked and opened the door. He half-expected her to brain him with a frying pan or the closest item to her hand that she could use as a weapon and was relieved when he saw her just standing on the threshold of the door. She was unarmed unless he considered hot and sexy dangerous weapons and he definitely did, especially with the way Ms. Evelyn Vega wielded her feminine wiles. She especially looked hazardous to his libido now, better than his earlier fantasies clad in an over-sized, mid-thigh, lavender T-shirt.

His mouth watered at the thought of one of her lacey thongs underneath, probably some hot pink and impractical barely-there strip of material that didn't work very hard at hiding her assets. Not that she could hide from him. He wouldn't let her.

Jason held his pick-up keys in the air and jangled them. "I've got a picnic lunch packed in my truck and a full itinerary for a day at Garden of the Gods."

She licked her lips and looked at him through dazed, heavy-lidded eyes.

Jason stared at the path her tongue had taken, focused on her moist full mouth and just barely bit back a groan. *Focus, pardner. Focus!* “We need to get there early. The park opens at five a.m. and the picnic area is used on a first come-first serve basis. I’ve also got a propane grill to do some grilling.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“I kid you not, Yankee. I’ve got breakfast packed too so you can have something nice and healthy to eat on the way.”

“How can you talk about eating breakfast when it’s still dark outside?”

Jason ignored her pique and waved a thermos of hot coffee under her nose before she sniffed the air and followed it back and forth. He pulled back the thermos when she reached for it. “Ah, ah, ah. After you get dressed.”

“You’re an evil, evil man.”

“An evil man wouldn’t prepare a king’s feast for you, plus delectable coffee for your sleepy taste buds.”

“A nice man would let me have one sip.” She reached for the thermos again and chased after it, both hands outstretched as Jason held it overhead and out of reach before finally letting her catch it and relinquished his grip.

Evelyn unscrewed the top, took a deep breath, and closed her eyes while inhaling the fragrant aroma.

Jason put a hand on her shoulder, turned her around and guided her back into the house. “Let’s get a move on now. Time’s a wasting.” He slapped her butt and Evelyn jumped and gasped before rubbing the spot with her free hand.

“Slave driver.” She took a whiff of the coffee and moaned before handing him back the thermos. “Keep it warm while I go take a quick shower.”

Jason held in a moan of his own at his vision of her naked and under the steamy drizzle, droplets of water glistening on her tanned olive skin.

Before he could entertain his fantasies any further, Evelyn disappeared down the short hallway and into the bathroom.

Jason roamed the living area for several minutes, breathing in her unique scent of sandalwood and vanilla musk now blazed on every piece of furniture in the cottage.

He stopped abruptly on the threshold of the bedroom, listening to the shower running in the bathroom nearby and weighing his options. Hot sexy woman in the shower in one hand, picnic in the park in the other. Have his cake, and eat it, too.

Jason glanced over his shoulder longingly, staring at the closed bathroom door as if he had x-ray vision and hoped to penetrate the wood.

“If you’re going to come in, don’t forget to look in the top drawer of the nightstand,” Evelyn said over the rush of water.

He froze and gawked at the door, wondered if Evelyn had spoken or he had gleaned her thoughts again before she asked, “Did you hear me, Jace?”

“Loud and clear, ma’am.” He grinned, his pardner already hard as he followed her instructions, opened the top drawer, and saw what was inside.

Did Evelyn want him to see it? Did she even remember it was in there?

He reached in and grabbed what he needed, decided he’d worry about it later as he kicked off his boots and got undressed as fast as he could.

* * * *

Evelyn held her breath as the water pounded her shoulders and back.

She’d been too forward. She just knew it.

Jason had probably made an about-face to leave as soon as she’d made her suggestion.

More like made your order. When will you learn not to be so bossy, that men don't like a forward and pushy woman?

He'd probably left already, deciding she was too much of a slut for his traditional country boy ideals. He'd probably—

Evelyn gasped when Jason pulled the curtain back, stepped into the big tub with her, and closed the curtain behind him.

"I did hear right, did I not? You did invite me in?" he asked at her shocked expression.

"Uh, yes. You heard right, but..." She dragged her glance from his ocean-blue eyes to take in the breathtaking rest of him, and he stood tall and proud in all his completely naked glory, like she'd never had the pleasure of seeing him before.

Evelyn licked her lips again as she took in his moist, broad-shouldered, lean-waist physique, fingers moving to run over his firm sculpted chest and abdomen of their own accord. "What are you hiding behind your back, cowboy?"

"What you told me to get."

Evelyn frowned, wondering why he'd be hiding a condom behind his back.

Every bit the modern woman, she'd picked up a box her last time in town 'just in case' she found herself in exactly this situation—with Jason in her abode and naked. So he probably had taken out a couple from the box—certainly not the whole box—and was just trying to tease her.

She gaped suddenly and slapped a hand over her mouth just as Jason pulled Jack from behind his back and wiggled it around in front of her face. "Oh...Dear God."

"I don't think God has a little rabbit's ear attachment like this."

"I don't think he looks like a pink smiley-faced phallus, either." Though she'd swear she had seen God a couple of times after using Jack.

Evelyn grabbed for the vibrator and Jason held it aloft and out of reach. "Are we going to go through this again?"

“What are you going to do with it once you get it?”

“Put it back in the nightstand.”

“Why? It’s already here. You’re here. I’m here...”

“I don’t want to get it wet,” she said lamely. It certainly couldn’t get any wetter than she was right then. If she ran on batteries, she would have shorted out long ago.

“We won’t get it wet.” He caught her hand and pulled her forward, out of the range of the spray, and guided her back against the far wall. “I’ll block you.”

“Jace...”

He flipped the on switch to the clitoral stimulator and the dam—already seeping from the moment she’d heard Jason’s voice on the other side of her cottage door this morning—broke, feminine juices leaving a trail on the inside of her thighs.

Evelyn squirmed beneath his heated look, legs trembling as he pressed her against the wall and teased her clit with the rabbit’s ears.

He had the power on low, just enough to torment her as he turned on the dildo part and slowly slid the head of it inside her.

She curved a leg around his hip and tried to impale herself further, but Jason turned both parts off and pulled back.

“Not so fast. We’ll take this slow and easy. My way.”

“I thought you said we needed to get a move on.” She caught his biceps and held tight, trying to pull him forward, but he was immovable, like granite. Finally, she whimpered and looked at him in defeat. “Okay. Please...”

He got down on his knees in front of her, turned on the vibrator again and slid the ears just inside her, arousing her vulva before he pulled it out to press against her clit.

Evelyn jerked forward and Jason caught her hip with one hand and held her in place.

“Be still, honey,” he murmured.

She bit her bottom lip and closed her eyes. She thought he sounded like the cowboy he was, trying to calm a skittish colt.

Evelyn opened her eyes in time to see Jason lower his head to intently stare at her sex, spreading her pussy lips with one hand and turning off Jack with the other. He abandoned the vibrator altogether to place it on the rim of the tub. "I think I can do this without the help of your little critter. What do you think?"

She glanced down at him. He was submissive and master, idol and worshiper all rolled into one masculine sexy package when he looked up at her with those penetrating and soulful blue eyes. "I think I'd prefer it that way," she whispered.

"Good, because I was getting a mite jealous. Although..." he pulled her pussy lips into his mouth and sucked before saying, "I kind of like the reaction I got with your critter. I especially liked the rosy glow of your skin, like a peach, ripe for eating." He spread her with his thumbs and dipped his tongue inside her before covering her center with his mouth and licking inside her slit in earnest.

Evelyn fisted a bunch of his hair, knuckles braced tight against his scalp. The only thing keeping her from falling over face-first onto the porcelain were Jason's strong hands as he pressed her against the wall and devoured her inside and out.

He retreated only for as long as it took him to pay the same homage to her clit that he had to her lips, licking and nibbling her swollen nub until Evelyn cried out and shuddered beneath him.

"Oh, God...Jason!"

"Yeah, I think I like flying without a co-pilot, too," he murmured against her.

"Condom, smartass. Did you bring a condom?"

"I left a couple on the sink bef—"

"Get one. Please get one now. I need you inside me."

Wordlessly, Jason stood and reached through an opening in the shower curtain to retrieve a condom, expertly ripping the foil open

before sheathing his erection with its content. He came back to her, erection bobbing in front of him, huge and inviting.

Evelyn stared at it—the flushed, mushroom head, the tempting pearl of pre-come at the slit and just barely visible beneath the rubber—and licked her lips as she reached for him.

He had absolutely no reason to be jealous of Jack, or anything and anyone else.

Jason evaded her grasp and quickly picked her up by the ass. “Wrap your legs around me. Yep, like that. Tight. Hold on...”

She was so lost in his rich smooth baritone, and so wet with wanting him, Evelyn barely noticed when he slid into her. This was before he pushed to the hilt and circled his hips. Then she noticed, noticed him deep and to her core as he throbbed against her sultry walls. She moaned, closed her eyes, and wrapped her arms around his neck as she thrust her pelvis against his.

“That’s it, honey. Take it. Take what’s yours.”

“I never knew you were such a talker, cowboy.”

“You’d be surprised what you bring out in me.” He pulled almost out of her, leaving just the tip of his penis inside her entrance before driving back into Evelyn and making her groan.

She buried her face against his throat. “I like surprises.” She liked him, way more than she wanted to admit and it scared the crap out of her because she knew well what came after ‘like,’ especially when it was coupled with a strong sexual attraction like theirs. “Oh...oh, Jace!” She shuddered as he drove his dick in and rocked against her, stars bursting bright before her eyes when an orgasm crashed down on her so suddenly, it took her breath away.

She clutched him to her, panting and tears streaming down her face. She was glad they were in the shower where she could play her waterworks off as something other than her suddenly becoming overwhelmed with emotion.

Evelyn squeezed her vaginal muscles around Jason’s pulsing cock and milked him.

Jason let out a hoarse cry, thrusting inside her with several long finishing strokes before he stiffened and found his own release.

He held her so close and tight while he caught his breath that Evelyn thought he would smother her. She'd gladly die a happy woman, too.

She slid her hands down to squeeze his delectably round and tight ass. "Don't want to keep those Gods waiting."

He pulled back to look at her and smiled. "If they knew what was holding me up, I think they'd forgive me."

"Maybe."

Both of them started and looked at each other when a loud knock sounded on the front door.

"Who in tarnation...?"

"I know. And at this unGodly hour too." Evelyn stood on her toes to kiss his lips, then slapped his butt as she pulled back the curtain to step out of the tub. She grabbed a fluffy white terry towel, wrapped and tucked it around herself, and tossed another one at Jason. "It wouldn't be one of your night wranglers or anyone from your buckaroo crew looking for you, would it?"

"Shouldn't be. But who knows?"

Evelyn shrugged and left the bathroom. At least whoever it was had had the decency to wait until she and Jason had finished what they were doing. Not that she could ever be finished with anything involving Jason. She was just beginning to know him, just beginning to get addicted to his body and soul. She couldn't imagine a day when she had been without him and the thought of eventually being without him saddened her deeply despite knowing this had to end.

Like she'd first thought, this was scary.

Evelyn made it to the door and didn't think twice about opening it without glancing through the curtains or at least asking whom it was. She had settled into the rural simple life a lot easier than she had thought she would.

“Evelyn!” Tammy’s entire face burst into a smile, and she flung her arms around Evelyn as if she hadn’t seen her in months instead of just the night before.

“What are you doing up so early, kid?” Evelyn returned her hug, couldn’t help herself. The girl’s happiness and excitement were contagious.

“We’re catching an early flight and I didn’t want to miss you before we left for the airport.”

“Oh, Tammy, you are so sweet.”

“So, how are things going?”

Evelyn frowned. Did the girl know that Jason was in her cottage, or worse that they had been in the shower together? “Going?”

“With you and Jason?”

“Tsk, ts, are you spying on me, Tammy?” Evelyn teased and Tammy’s face flushed so red she felt sorry for the teen.

“No, not at all!” Tammy shook her head vigorously. “I was just curi—”

“So, who was at the door, Ev...oh.” Jason stopped in the middle of the living room in a pair of jeans and nothing else. “Hi, Tammy.”

Evelyn glanced at him over a shoulder, counted her blessings that the man had had the foresight not to come strutting out in a towel, though shirtless, barefoot and with wet hair was bad enough. Sure Tammy was sixteen, but there was no use in unnecessarily traumatizing her teen illusions..

“Hey, Jason.” Tammy waved then turned her glance back to Evelyn. “Busted,” she teased.

“Like it was actually a secret.”

“No, not from me.” Tammy leaned in to hug her, then pulled back and caught Evelyn around the shoulders. “Promise to invite me to the wedding.”

“Obviously, you know something I don’t. But if things do get that crazy, you’ll be one of the first to know.”

“Cool.” Tammy gave her one more hug, then waved at Jason. “See you, guys.”

“Be good. And have a safe flight.” Evelyn watched the girl practically skip down the walkway and head back toward her cottage.

Wedding? Hell, if things got that serious between her and Jason, she would invite everyone from the ranch to her nuptials, maybe even try to get that mean old snake to come. Next to Angela, he was the best matchmaker Evelyn had ever come across.

Jason sidled behind her, leaned in to nuzzle her neck, and slid his arms around her waist. “You about ready to make that move?”

If she didn’t know better, she would have thought he was asking her about that wedding Tammy had alluded, too. She knew it was insanity to think like that, and only self-destructive to be so maudlin and romantic.

What would she actually say to him if for some insane and totally unfathomable reason Jason did pop the question?

Evelyn turned in his arms and returned his hug. “Ready as I’ll ever be.”

Chapter 13

Watching Evelyn in the simple act of indulging her palate with all the food and beverages he'd brought had Jason's heart crowding with a bunch of soft emotions he didn't even want to put names to.

Jason led the way now to the Visitor and Nature Center to grab a couple of free full-color trail maps for Evelyn. He knew his way around the park like he knew Freeborn Ranch, but wanted to make sure Evelyn had something to take home to remember her trip, besides her memories of him, that was.

Evelyn strolled behind him taking shots of the scenery before they even got into the park proper, ooh'ing and ah'ing at the few visible rock formations.

"Save your film, Evie. It gets even better."

"I've got plenty. I came prepared."

"I noticed." If there was anything he knew about the woman was her penchant for preparedness.

Jason smiled as he remembered the look on her face when he brought that vibrator from behind his back. Her expression alone had been priceless, but her enthusiasm to be with him after was more than one man could bear.

He got hard now with nostalgia, couldn't wait to be alone with her again, somewhere he could get his fill kissing her hot mouth if nothing else. He knew a few trails that afforded lots of privacy, formations they could go behind to sneak a few kisses, maybe a little more.

He'd never been so horny for a woman before! Not even Bette, and with him barely twenty-one and her just turned twenty when they'd married, they'd been pretty randy and insatiable for each other.

Evelyn caught up with him to hook an arm through his as they made it to the doors of the Center. "Breakfast was delicious, by the way. Thank you."

"You're not still sore at me for getting you up so early?"

"You fed me, and well. That's an instant 'Get Outta the Doghouse Free Card' in my book." She grinned and rubbed her trim belly with her free hand. "I know we just finished eating, but I can't wait to see what you've cooked up for lunch."

"Something good. But in the meantime," Jason patted the knapsack on his back, "I've got snacks to tide us over when we take the trails."

"You're going to make me work for my food?"

"It's fun work. Trust me."

"I do," she murmured and drew closer to him as Jason opened the door and they went into the Center.

He swallowed hard, had never felt so protective of anyone before.

He had been on his own most of his life, even when his father was alive. He had never had the pleasure of being responsible for someone's welfare other than a grief-stricken widower bent on killing himself the slowest and hardest way possible with boozing and drugging on the rodeo circuit.

But this woman brought out feelings in him that didn't involve losing sleep wondering whether his father would burn down the house in the middle of the night with a lit cigarette during one of the man's loaded stupors. She brought out feelings that didn't involve wondering whether or not his father would stumble home from one of his famous drinking and catting around binges. She

made him look forward to a future far away and free from all his childhood traumas and past marital woes.

He was in it to his elbows and sinking like a solid gold bar.

“Wow, you weren’t kidding when you said this place opens early. People are all lined up already and the place just opened.”

“It’s a popular tourist spot, sure as shooting.”

“You’re not a tourist and it seems to be pretty popular with you.”

“That’s because I’m anticipating your excitement and pleasure at the sights.” He leaned in and gave her a peck on the nose.

“You’re taking a chance on that, considering I’m such a city slicker who all this beautiful countryside could be lost on.”

“Not a chance it’ll be lost, not even on a diehard Yankee like you.”

“He’s right, you know.”

Jason and Evelyn both turned to the petite silver-haired lady standing in back of them on the line with a gray-haired man who wasn’t much taller than she.

Either they were brother and sister, or a husband and wife who had been together so long, they looked like each other.

Jason idly wondered what he and Evelyn would look like forty or fifty years down the line; then mentally kicked himself for overestimating his worth in her life.

First get passed today, Makepeace. Take it one day at a time.

This had been his motto coming up with his dad on the rodeo circuit for nine years, one he still lived by today. “Are you two taking one of the bus tours?” Jason asked the wizened woman.

“Why, yes. How did you know?”

“Just call it a hunch.” He smiled, couldn’t imagine the frail octogenarian or her companion hiking any of the trails of the Garden, not even any of the shorter more celebrated ones like Ridge Trail.

“You two look like you’re ready to hike the trails,” she said eyeing Jason’s backpack.

Jason pulled Evelyn close, squeezed her shoulder and said, “Going to show her the sights,” at the same time Evelyn said, “He’s making me go.”

The old lady laughed and shook her head. “Youngins.”

“You are so sweet to say that,” Evelyn said, blushing.

“Well, you are young.”

“Not as young as him.” She elbowed Jason in the ribs and he chuckled.

“Tell me, ma’am, does she look a day over thirty?”

The old lady peered at Evelyn for a long moment then shook her head. “Nope. Can’t say that she does.”

“See!” He squeezed her shoulder again, then leaned in to say to his new best friend, “She has a problem with my being ten years younger than her.”

“Stop that!” Evelyn slapped his arm. “I may not look it, but I am. And besides, she’s not interested in our relationship woes.”

“You consider his being younger than you a woe?” The old woman hooked an arm through her companion’s who until that moment had been silently listening to Jason and Evelyn’s exchange with a small smile on his lips. “My Wilbur and me have been married since he was thirty and I was forty-five, going on forty years now.”

Jason’s eyes widened. “Why that’s amazing. Congratulations.”

“Thanks, but it’s not so amazing,” Wilbur said. “The gap becomes less of an issue the older you get. I caught up with Sally somewhere around nineteen eighty-six.”

“Oh, you.” Sally mimicked Evelyn’s earlier move and slapped her husband’s arm.

Jason smiled at their antics, slid his hand from Evelyn’s shoulder to her hand and intertwined his fingers with hers, gently pressing her flesh. He liked the feel of her soft small palm against

his bigger rough one, liked it even better when she squeezed his hand back and glanced up at him with a knowing, conspiratorial look.

He thought he might have been reading more into her expression than was there until he heard, *You think we'll be that close and that adorable when we're their age?*

"If you want us to be. It's up to you."

"What?"

He glanced at Evelyn's grimace and realized he'd slipped and done it again, had responded to something she hadn't said out loud. "Didn't you ask me something?"

"No."

"Hey you two, move it along!" someone called from near the back of the line.

The older and younger couple exchanged glances and chorused, "New York," before bursting into laughter.

"We'd better mosey along before we start a riot." Jason put out his hand to Wilbur and they shook hands. "Jason Makepeace, and it was surely nice to meet the both of you." He reached for Sally's hand as Evelyn reached across him for Wilbur's and introduced herself.

"You're not from around these parts are you?" Wilbur said.

Evelyn smiled and jerked her head towards the back of the line. "I'm from New York."

"Still nice to make your acquaintance." Wilbur and Sally both chuckled as Jason grabbed Evelyn's hand and led her to the Information Desk. "You kids have a good time!"

"We will," Jason said, then elbowed Evelyn. "You heard that, right? He called us kids. Both of us."

"Just get the maps and stop being such a smart aleck."

* * * *

Balanced Rock, Kissing Camels, Steamboat Rock, Siamese Twins, Cathedral Spires...Evelyn's head spun with all the towering sandstone spires she had so far seen and taken numerous pictures of. Not to mention Jason trying to walk her tongue out hiking from all the various trails leading to all the different rock formations.

He was right. The sights were enough to take her breath away, but so was the walking at impossible altitudes. She had worked up as much of a sweat walking today as she had working on the ranch the previous week and if she hadn't accepted Jason's challenge to stop smoking a day after her arrival, she didn't think she would have ever made it without having a coronary.

Jason stopped a few feet ahead of her now, and took off his backpack to retrieve a water bottle inside. He'd brought four twenty-four ounce bottles of iced water with them that had long ago begun to melt in the hot Colorado sun, and that Evelyn had tried her damndest to go through in short order.

He tossed her a fresh bottle that she grabbed from the air and greedily began to gulp from. She felt like a woman who had found an oasis in the desert.

Jason wiped the back of a hand across his mouth and tipped his hat back on his head to press the water bottle against his forehead.

Evelyn didn't realize she was staring at him so ravenously—mouth gaping, tongue lolling, practically drooling as she followed a single trail of water as it made its way down his throat to disappear beneath the collar of his T-shirt—until she felt him staring back.

What she wouldn't do to be that drop of water clinging to his skin.

"You're going to draw flies, Evie."

She snapped her mouth shut when he pointed out what she was doing and took another gulp of water before parroting Jason's actions and pressing the bottle to her forehead. She did him one

better and placed it just above her cleavage, rolling the bottle back and forth and moaning low in her throat.

Wordlessly, Jason closed the distance between them and was swooping down on her mouth in seconds, thrusting his tongue in and pulling back to nibble her lips before he planted a firm kiss on them. "Tease."

She shrugged, not daring to dispute the truth.

"Ready to go back to one of the picnic areas to have some lunch?" he asked.

"In a minute."

"You were just complaining about starving a couple of minutes ago."

"I know. But I'm hungry for something other than food right now..." She closed the small space between them, feeling desperate, like a woman trying to square away all of her affairs before she died, trying to squeeze in everything she needed to do with Jason before she left.

It suddenly occurred to her that her stay would be over in less than a week. In less than a week she would be leaving and saying good bye to all these people who had, in a matter of seven days, become like family to her.

In Jason's case, family I want to bone.

Evelyn took him by a hand and dragged him to the rock formation several yards ahead of them. "What's this one called?" She pulled him behind the rock and pushed him against it.

Jason shrugged off his backpack and let it drop at his feet to the sandy ground. "This is the Tower of Babel."

"Hmm, I guess I'll just have to risk that it won't live up to its name." She stood on her toes, reaching for his lips as she flipped off his hat to burrow her hands through his hair.

Jason bent his head to meet her halfway.

Their lips collided in an explosion of insatiable lust, tongues thrusting and parrying, teeth nipping, mouths hungry for so much more than what a mere kiss could fulfill.

Evelyn pulled his T-shirt out of his jeans and caressed his ribcage with her thumbs, reveling in the feel of his warm skin and hard ridges beneath her fingertips, the feel of him trembling against her. She responded by trembling when his hardness pressed against her slit.

“God, I want to take this off of you so bad and feel you flush against me—skin to skin,” she said.

“No more than I want to feel you.” To punctuate his point, he rocked his lower body against her, teasing her cunt with the treasures and wonders she could have inside her once they were in private and naked. “This is a little more out in the open than the forest.” Jason panted as he ran his tongue from her ear to her throat and sucked the soft skin where her shoulder and neck met. He flicked his tongue against the hollow several times as if he couldn’t get enough of the musky-sweet taste of her. Then his hands drifted to her breasts, thumbs grazing the nipples into painful taut peaks beneath her shirt.

Did he really expect her to resist him when he moved against and touched her like that?

“I know it’s a public park. I wasn’t suggest—”

“I know you weren’t. But the thought crossed *my* dirty ol’ mind more than once.”

“There’s nothing dirty about you.”

“As long as you know I feel the same way about you.” He pulled back to grasp her face with both hands and stare at her. “I told you before, I don’t want you just for sex.”

“I’m not an innocent virgin who needs reassurances and platitudes, Jason.”

“Even if I want to give them to you?”

“Jason...” She tried for adamant, but the intent look he gave her took the wind right out of her reproachful sails. He couldn’t know how much she liked hearing his reassurances and platitudes, couldn’t know how much she didn’t want to get used to them. She didn’t want to get used to him, either, but she already knew it was too late.

Evelyn slid her arms around his back and hugged him close as she leaned her head against his chest and listened to his heart beating bird-fast in time with hers.

Jason held her and they rocked together for several long silent moments.

God, what am I going to do with you? What am I going to do without you?

She felt his body tense at the thought, as if he’d heard her silent questions and was fighting not to give himself away and answer her.

But that was a crazy thought. Wasn’t it? He couldn’t possibly be gifted like her brother and sister after all. Could he?

The fact that Joe and Viviana Vega had indeed produced two ‘special’ children was never discussed out loud amongst the family; it was just accepted, a simple reality like Nick’s dyslexia or Donna’s cynicism or Emilia’s sunny disposition and shyness, or Evelyn’s bossy tomboy tendencies. That Angela and EJ’s talents weren’t discussed did not make them any less real to their siblings and parents, however, or any less of a burden to EJ and Angela.

Evelyn pulled back to look at Jason, wondered what secret pains he hid behind those vivid blue eyes, and not for the first time in her life, she wished for the gifts her brother and sister so naturally wielded, wished to carry their burden.

“What are you thinking, Evie?”

“I was just about to ask you the same question.”

He averted his gaze.

“Tell me about your wife,” Evelyn blurted, unsure why she brought her up, except she’d been curious about the woman ever since Jason had brought up her husband and broached the subject of ex’s with his uncanny knowledge the other night.

“My wife?”

He was stalling, and though his reaction wasn’t unexpected, Evelyn wasn’t ready to let him push the issue to a back burner. If she was ever going to learn more about him, she had to ask because Mr. Closemouthed Cowboy certainly wouldn’t volunteer it. And who knew when she’d have another opportunity? “Yes, your wife, Jason.”

“Ex-wife.”

“Yes, her. Tell me.”

“There’s nothing to tell, Evelyn, except that we’re over.”

“I’m banking that it didn’t get that way over night. Something had to happen between you.”

Jason sighed and glanced around for his hat. Spotting it on the ground nearby, he retrieved it and beat it against his thigh to knock off the dust before putting it back on his head.

Silently, he picked up his backpack, replaced the water bottles, then shrugged into the backpack and made all the adjustments to ensure it was comfortable on his back.

He wasn’t actually going to ignore her question was he?

“I’m not ignoring you, Evie.” Jason put out his hand for her.

She went to him, tentatively put her hand in his, as if afraid it was a live wire. She actually flinched when he twined his fingers with hers and squeezed. She was momentarily afraid of him, afraid of the unknown.

“I’ll tell you everything you need to know once we get back to the picnic area.”

She gawked at him—hat low over his eyes, T-shirt half-in, half-out of his jeans, square dimpled jaw shadowed with light whiskers—and her pussy quivered inside her jeans with

anticipation and need. Her hunger was almost enough to obliterate her anxiety. Almost.

He couldn't possibly tell her everything she needed to know, because what she needed to know wasn't what she wanted to know and that was how in the hell did he keep pulling thoughts from her mind like he just had if he *wasn't* like EJ and Angela?

And with all they already had to deal with in their relationship—the long distance issue, the age issue, the commitment issue—did they really need to add the fantastic and weird dilemma of mind reading on top of everything else?

Chapter 14

By the time they made it back to Spring Canyon, Jason felt like he had already faced the Spanish Inquisition.

All the way from the Tower of Babel—and how appropriate was *that*—where Evelyn had thrown down the gauntlet, to the picnic area where she impatiently waited for him to start the grill and set out their food, his head had been bombarded with her thoughts. It was as if this ‘gift’ of his had kicked things up a notch to catch everything she thought and not just stray thoughts anymore.

If what he experienced was a gift, then he’d rather not have it, in fact wanted to return it.

But something told him he didn’t have a choice in the matter, that whatever this was that had a hold of him was a long time coming and here to stay.

How was he supposed to deal with this and convincing Evelyn not to discount him as just some summer fling? How was he supposed to keep this from her?

Like he could.

Evelyn was as sharp as she was beautiful, and Jason figured she already half-suspected that something was off about him.

Her boyfriend—and he knew he was pushing the envelope with the designation—being younger was one thing. Her boyfriend living thousands of miles away was something else. But her boyfriend being a loon who thought he could read minds, well now that was just a whole other can of beans.

Would she believe him if he came right out and told her? Heck, he didn't believe it himself, didn't want to deal with this, but denial and avoidance were unlike him. He wasn't one to run from a challenge, never had been. Jason embraced change, at least he used to before Freeborn. He wouldn't have survived those first several years after his father's death if he hadn't been adaptable.

Jason put a plate of grilled chicken and vegetable shish kebobs, and a cheeseburger with the works in front of Evelyn before taking the seat next to her with his own plate of the same.

She stared at him before finally reaching out to put a hand on his arm. "Treat it like a bandage, Jace. The pain's exquisite but brief if you just pull it off quick."

Jason grinned at her analogy. He had never thought of Bette quite like that before, but he supposed he had used her to cover the open sore that his life was back then.

Is that how things had been between Evelyn and Todd? Had she used him to fill a void? Had they drifted apart or had it been like him and Bette where someone had come between them to highlight all the weaknesses already existing in their relationship?

He cleared his throat, losing himself in her hazel gaze, the variegated appearance oddly hypnotic and soothing. "I met Bette on the rodeo circ—"

"Bette? What kind of name is that for a grown woman?"

Jealousy emitted from her in waves, so strong it was palpable enough to engulf him and had Jason wondering if his newfound gifts had made him more susceptible to her emotions as well as her thoughts.

Did he have to deal with empathy as well as telepathy now?

He almost smiled at Evelyn's obvious possessiveness, but noticed her grimace and decided not to rile her anymore than necessary. "Her name was Elizabeth Farmer, but everyone called her Bette," Jason said. "Now can I finish?"

"Sure," she muttered.

"I met her on the circuit. I'd just placed in bull riding and calf-roping in a Wyoming event when she approached me backstage, impressed by my exhibition."

"I'll bet." She grinned.

"She'd just turned twenty and I was twenty-one—"

"Babies."

"You asked for the story, now are you going to stop interrupting me or not, Missy?"

"Sorry."

Okay, so he agreed with her, and half suspected had his mother or father been alive they would have said the same thing as Evelyn: he was too young to get married. But by the time he met Bette, he considered himself a man twice over. He had been broken in by Mrs. Harper then on his own drifting from job to job and girl to girl for five years after he'd left her group home. No one or their daddy could have told him he didn't know what he was doing when he asked Bette to marry him.

"Our age was only half the problem."

"And the other half?"

"Bette was a cheating and deceitful spoiled brat."

"Please, don't hold back on my account."

Jason looked at her and chuckled when he saw her arched brows and the way she put her hand over her heart as if what he'd said was too much for her New York sensibilities. "You wanted to hear this."

"I still do."

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not making excuses for myself. We were both hot-in-the-patooty kids trying our wings."

"What my dad would call young, dumb, and full of cum."

"I reckon that's about the size of it." Jason nodded. "Bette wasn't all at fault. I have my faults, too. And I'm sure I had a full load back then."

She gasped. "No."

He saw her smirk and playfully shoved her shoulder with his. Times like these, he forgot she was ten years his senior. He forgot about a lot of their issues when she gave him that lopsided grin, or looked at him with those dazzling color-changing eyes. He forgot everything except how much he wanted her, cock only in a holding pattern of semi-erection until the next time he got her alone or she looked at him with even a hint of encouragement.

Jason reached up to catch a few locks of hair that had escaped her ponytail, losing himself in the silky soft strands and the way the sun reflected off of its black surface giving it a blue glint. He had never seen hair so naturally black before, wondered for a moment if she dyed it.

“It’s my natural color.”

“What are you? A mind reader now?” The thought excited rather than repulsed him, made him feel a lot less isolated, a lot less...freaky.

“Doesn’t take a mind reader to know what you’re thinking.”

“Is that a fact?”

“That’s a fact. I read your face. You were frowning and examining my hair so hard, I figured that was your next question.”

“I think it’s more that you’re extra sensitive about your age around me.” He leaned in to circle the shell of her ear with his tongue and took great satisfaction in the shiver that rode her body. “You don’t have to be, you know.”

“Only because I have good genes.”

“You have exquisite jeans. And you fill them out so well, too.” He reached back to smack her butt and laughed when she jumped then rubbed the spot.

“I like how you just conveniently changed the subject.”

“Subject?” He ducked his head to nuzzle her throat and slid a hand between her legs beneath the picnic table, rubbing her slit until she gasped.

"You and...you and Bette." She closed her eyes and arched her throat, then jerked her head up, sat straight and glanced at their surroundings. "There are kiddies present, Mr. Makepeace."

He looked at a group of six and seven-year-olds surrounding and begging their camp counselors to hurry up and take them hiking on the trails, then turned back to Evelyn. "Don't worry. They can't see what I'm doing." But just to make her comfortable, he removed his hand. "Yeah, so me and Bette..."

She pulled away from him slightly and turned to stare at him when he didn't say anything else for a long moment. "Well?"

"I'd rather talk about you and me."

"I'd rather hear about you and her." She scowled. "What drove you guys apart?"

"A better question would be what drove us together. Plain and simple: hormones run amok."

"And what counteracted that little spell?"

"Disillusionment. Bette had it in her head that the rodeo circuit was glamorous and all the cowboys on it were hunky celebrities, or at least had the potential to be celebrities. She figured to snag her one while the getting was good and early in the game. I guess she had ideas of molding me."

"That, and I'm sure the hunky part was no small attraction."

"She thought I could keep her in the extravagant life style she was used to at home with her well-off parents."

"Ah, a cheating and deceitful, spoiled *rich* brat."

"Basically. And when she found out the truth, she, uh..."

"*Cheated* on you?"

"Not at first. At least I don't reckon so." He shook his head. "She did her darnedest to get me to go to work for her daddy though and I refused, couldn't see myself in a suit and tie every day for the rest of my life."

"No, that wouldn't do."

He shifted on the picnic bench, straddled it as he faced her and took both her hands in his. He waited a moment, expecting at least one of her thoughts to pop into his head, but nothing came. Of course, when he wanted to know what ideas lurked behind that serious and sincere puss, he couldn't read her.

He reckoned it would take time to make the proper adjustments and figure out how this new-fangled telepathy of his worked and whether it was something he could control.

Tarnation, he was accepting his insanity without too much of a struggle!

"Was it just the suit and tie thing or something else?"

"Her father didn't like or respect me. He thought I wasn't good enough for his daughter."

"Of course. A spoiled rich brat and a *Daddy's* girl." Evelyn clucked and shook her head. "So, you wouldn't work for Daddy, and she decided to get her swerve on with someone who would?"

Jason nodded. "Actually, it was another rodeo cowboy. Apparently, he was a little more pliable than I was, though."

"That's a nice way of saying he was a sucker."

God, she was tough. "You think a man trying to keep his wife happy makes him a sucker?"

"If it compromises his principles, you're damn right I do." She reached up to palm his face. "Don't tell me you're thinking you made a mistake in not going to work for her daddy?"

Jason shrugged. "Love, honor, cherish in sickness and in health 'til death do us part, right?"

"I don't hear anything in there about being a doormat for your in-laws." *And thank God he didn't say love, honor, and obey.*

Jason stared at her to make sure she hadn't moved her lips, forced himself not to respond to her thought with a teasing "Would that make a difference to you?"

He'd been getting away with his slips so far, but he'd been lucky, and he was sure Evelyn had so far been too preoccupied to notice. That wouldn't last forever though and he knew it.

"You were too good for her, Jace." She caressed his cheek, the rasp of her palm against his whiskers lulling him. "She didn't deserve you."

"I'm not sure about all that." He shrugged. "As painful as it was, what happened was for the best. And I don't wish her ill."

"You're better then me."

"Is that a woman and ex-wife scorned speaking?"

She averted her gaze, was silent, and when Jason realized she had no intention of responding—at least not verbally—he stood up and started clearing off the table.

"We'd better start heading back," Jason said.

She stood up beside him to help, dumping their Styrofoam plates and cups in a nearby trashcan as Jason packed up the insulated bag, backpack and disassembled his grill.

They headed for the parking lot and packed the back seat of Jason's truck with the remnants of their long day out.

When Jason opened the passenger side door for Evelyn to get in, she stepped closer and wrapped her arms around him instead.

"Thank you, Jace."

He wasn't sure if she thanked him for the day out at the Gardens, or for his discretion in not pressing the issue of her divorce.

He finally decided it didn't matter and just hugged her back.

* * * *

They got home with enough time to still enjoy a little daylight at Freeborn, though Evelyn was too preoccupied after her outing with Jason to enjoy much of anything, especially company.

She left Jason by his truck with a fleeting and chaste peck on the cheek, then turned and headed to her cottage for a shower and change before he could respond.

Twenty minutes after returning to the ranch, she went down to the lake to get acquainted with the new group of guests that had arrived earlier in the afternoon, and had dinner with the three families and Seth, Montana, and Jason.

After dinner and cocktails, Evelyn excused herself, headed back to her cottage, changed out of her peasant skirt and matching blouse and into a pair of cut-off denims over a red one-piece swimsuit.

She grabbed a towel on her way out of the cottage and made her way down toward the lake fully intending to get her feet wet, maybe even take a dip in the cool spring and enjoy laid-back, alone time.

She told herself it's what she wanted, but ten minutes into lounging on the dock with her feet hanging over the water, she decided solitude wasn't all it was cracked up to be and started to miss Jason.

So used to being alone and enjoying her own company, the feelings were alien to Evelyn. She had never felt this way about anyone before, craving his voice and company and hugs like chocolate and whip cream, wanting to be near him just for the hell of it, just for the comfortable easy way he made her feel. The idea of sex didn't even come into play, though she was sure had he shown his sexy masculine face she would have been more than willing to accommodate him.

Evelyn sighed as she leaned back on her palms and swung her legs back and forth, face aimed at the indigo sky and enjoying the moonlit, star dappled night.

God, it was so beautiful out here—the air fresh, the sky clear, the trees abundant—it made her really appreciate the nature that she daily took for granted. She wasn't all that sure about moving

out here, though. Her townhouse in a tree-lined section of Brooklyn was about as close as she wanted to get to country living. She wasn't like Angela or Emilia.

What if he asked you to stay, asked you to be with him? What would you tell him?

She was jumping the gun of course, entertaining fantasies she hadn't thought about since she'd been a teen and longed for the Cinderella fairy tale, back when she still wanted to marry a TV star, who was sixteen years her senior. Back before she'd found out that the fairy tales weren't real life and that Prince Charming didn't exist, especially if her experiences with Todd were any indication.

Boy did she make a complete three-sixty with Jason, not only in age but also in temperament.

Where Todd had been intolerant and a prude, Jason was patient and willing to try anything, at least as long as it was with her. Where Todd had been callous and detached, Jason was affectionate and gentle. And though both men were arrogant and old fashioned, Evelyn couldn't see Jason calling her any of the hateful sexist names that Todd had slung with puritanical glee. She definitely couldn't imagine Jason blaming a woman for her miscarriage. Her Marlboro Man was too sympathetic to do anything so low.

Evelyn stood suddenly and dusted off the seat of her shorts before sliding them off and neatly folding and placing them on her towel.

Thinking about her past mistakes and worrying over her uncertain future wasn't what she had come out here for. It certainly wasn't why Angela had sent her to Colorado, at least Evelyn hoped it wasn't. Angela was good intentioned in her matchmaking schemes, sometimes misguided—though *she* would beg to differ, Evelyn was sure—but never mean.

She needed to cool off and ditch the maudlin trip pronto and a dip in the lake should do the trick of washing some of her anxieties away.

Evelyn stretched her arms in front of her, bent at the waist and did a perfect jackknife into the water. She swam for a stretch under water before breaking the surface several yards from the dock and shaking water out of her eyes and hair.

“I like your form.”

Evelyn jerked her gaze back towards the shore and watched Jason emerge from the clump of trees lining the dock, heart catching in her chest as she easily treaded water. “What are you doing sneaking up on me?”

“I didn’t sneak. I was out for a walk, noticed you sitting on the dock all by your lonesome and decided to come over and see if you needed some company.”

“More like see if you could stir up some trouble.”

He leered. “That too.”

That he admitted it easily sent a hot ball of lust shooting through her core so strong, Evelyn gasped at its intensity. Already she felt warm moisture between her legs, and it wasn’t from the lake water. “We’ve been together all day. Aren’t you tired of my grumpy mug yet?”

He shook his head, came to the edge of the dock and crouched low enough to run his hand along the surface of the water. “Why’d you run off so quick after dinner?”

“I didn’t. I stayed for cocktails.”

“You know what I mean.”

She knew exactly what he meant and couldn’t find it in her to tell him she couldn’t stand being around him, that it was too painful a reminder of having to be without him sooner than later. The only other option was lying and she couldn’t bring herself to do that mainly because she knew he’d see right through her.

“So how ’bout it? You want some company?” he asked.

She shrugged, didn't want to dare give him the idea that she *needed* anything from him, the least of all his company. What kind of wimpy, anti-feminist, unassertive statement would that be making about her after all?

At her iffy response, Jason quietly sat down, took off his hiking boots, slid off his socks, jeans, and T-shirt in short order and dove into the lake, smooth as a dolphin cutting the water. He swam underwater as she had before him, and popped up a couple of feet in front of her.

He smiled, and when Evelyn didn't return it, he splashed her.

Spluttering, she went after him as he quickly turned and swam away from her, heading farther from shore.

Evelyn caught up with him after several lengths, but she knew it was only because he let her.

He effortlessly treaded water and jerked his head in a come-here gesture that Evelyn found herself helplessly obeying.

"What cowboy?" If she could have, she would have put her fists on her hips to show him just how annoyed she was with him. Why this was, she had no idea, just that she didn't like how instantly and fiercely her body reacted to his nearness—nipples hard and taut, clit throbbing, pussy clenching and unclenching as if with a mind of its own.

Jason reached for her, pulling her close as he bent and angled his head for a kiss.

Despite her mind telling her to be cool and just take the imminent contact in stride, Evelyn's heartbeat sped with excitement and was close to bursting by the time Jason's lips touched hers. Her logical intellect warred with her unreasonable emotions as she curved her arms around his neck and hungrily pulled his tongue into her mouth. Their lingual union ignited fires low in her belly, releasing a flood of juices from her cunt so forceful and copious that it shocked her.

Jason hugged and pressed her close, his cock throbbing against her as he lifted her and Evelyn wrapped her legs around his waist and clung to him.

He foraged inside her mouth as if for sustenance, dipping and swirling his tongue around for a long moment before he pulled back panting as he rested his forehead against hers. "God, I want you now," he growled.

"We keep getting into these situations, huh?"

He chuckled, squeezing her close. "You mean starting something I can't finish?"

"Who says you can't finish?"

"At least not any time soon."

His eyes were closed and she studied his face at her leisure, admiring the way his impossibly long thick lashes just brushed his high sculpted cheekbones, making him look younger and more vulnerable to her than he ever had before. Nonetheless, she admired the way the moonlight reflected off of his face and gave it an ethereal glow.

She uncurled one arm from around his neck and brought her palm to his face, liked the silken soft feel of his damp light whiskers against her hand, liked the quiet intimacy of being in the water alone with him and just holding him close. "Jason?"

"Hmm?"

"If we go back to your bungalow, I don't want to just cuddle." Hell, a minute ago she'd wanted only privacy and solitude. Now she couldn't wait to get her hands on his big hard body, couldn't wait to have his hands on her.

"I don't think I'd be able to stop at cuddling. Not tonight."

"Good." She released him and pushed away to tread water. "Last one back to the dock is a hornswoggled cowboy!" Evelyn broke for shore, stroking as fast as she could when she heard Jason yell behind her.

"Last one back to shore is a hog-tied cowgirl!"

Evelyn faltered at the sudden image, just for a moment, but it was more than enough time for Jason to close the distance between them. Panting, she hurried her strokes, flutter kicking harder than she ever had before.

Jason swam up on her left side, quickly closing the gap and overtaking her several yards from the dock.

She watched him pass her, reach the landing, and pull himself up, wet boxer briefs erotically clinging to his strong lean thighs and lovingly hugging his bulge as he stood on the landing.

Evelyn reached the dock a couple of seconds later and just held onto the wood landing as she glanced up at Jason's towering wet figure—feet planted, legs spread, fist on hips and arms akimbo. Talk about nice form!

“Want some help up?” He crouched and reached down to her.

“You make it too easy,” she murmured as she put her hand in his and was just about to jerk him forward and back into the water before his hand closed around hers and he pulled her out.

Evelyn gasped as he swung her up onto the dock, drew her against him and held her fast.

His strength, the heat emanating from his body despite his drenched skin, and the penetrating look lighting his eyes were all a potent aphrodisiac to make her pussy spasm and her legs noodle with uncontrollable desire. Evelyn wrapped her arms around his neck in a hopeless effort to steady herself when she knew she had been forever lost and knocked off-kilter the minute she'd laid eyes on him at the airport. “Did you mean it?” she whispered.

“Mean what?”

“About the hog-tying.”

He didn't say anything for several long seconds and Evelyn was glad he wasn't rubbing her face in her kinky allusion. Instead, he ran his hands slowly up and down her arms, gently caressing her skin, look intent and serious despite the grin he gave her. “Did you lose on purpose?”

She wrapped her arms around his waist, stood on her tiptoes to nuzzle his throat. “What makes you think I lost?”

Chapter 15

“Spying is beneath you, Montana.”

Montana started and turned from the window where she watched Jason carry Evelyn from the dock like a man with demons chasing him. She saw her husband propped up on one elbow, a devilish grin lighting his beautiful eyes as she made her way back to the bed and tweaked his nose. “I wasn’t spying. I just wanted to make sure everything was okay.”

“And is everything okay?”

“For now, they’re getting along like a thumb and a finger.”

Seth frowned and reached for her as she climbed into bed beside him. “Is that a good thing?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty good and I’m actually beginning to think there’s something magical about that lake...” There was something magical, but dangerous and tragic, too. The lake was where Montana had almost drowned as a child before Seth had, before his transformation from centaur to human, rescued her. It was also where two hunters had gunned down and killed Seth’s close centaur friend, Nyssa, twenty-three years later.

Montana didn’t want to dwell on the bad parts of her past, chose to relive how she had met Seth and how they had wound up together. “Have you spoken to Alyosha recently?” she blurted, heart suddenly pounding with dread before her husband even opened his mouth to answer.

Seth barely nodded. “We have communicated.”

“Meaning he did his old voice in the head trick, huh?”

“Something like that.”

“So, what did he have to say?” Montana asked, anxious for positive reinforcement. She didn’t want to believe that she was responsible for setting Jason up for another major fall. She didn’t want him to get his heart broken again.

“Alyosha says that there are some hard times ahead for Jason and Evelyn Vega.”

“What kind of hard times?”

“He would not say.”

“Typical enigmatic elf,” she mumbled.

Seth chuckled, put his arms around her and pulled her close. “He says that they will work things out, but that it will not be easy.”

“What relationship is?” Montana returned his hug, cuddling close. She was trying to be nonchalant, but those terms ‘hard times’ and ‘not be easy’ stuck out in her mind, made her worry for her friend and Angela Calminetti’s youngest sister. She knew Jason was made of tough stock, and that he was good at facing adversity. However, she wasn’t so sure his heart could take another blow, especially one from someone he cared about. Especially from someone he was beginning to care deeply about as he cared for Evelyn.

Montana could see it in the way Jason acted around the older woman, always on edge when she was around, like a shy smitten schoolboy. She could hear it in his voice, normally rich and gentle, but now more so and colored with affection when he spoke about her, miles and miles away from the angry way he’d spouted when he’d first met Evelyn. They still exchanged heated words and had their confrontations—actually much as she and Seth use to, sometimes still did—all the better to fire the passion between them.

But was passion enough to get them through this?

“Do not worry so, Montana. What is meant to be, is meant to be.”

“And Alyosha said Jason and Evelyn are meant to be?”

“Alyosha said that they will reach their fated conclusion.”

What was that supposed to mean? It sounded a little too forbidding and vague for Montana’s tastes. But then forbidding and vague was Alyosha’s style. Actually, Montana hadn’t met a centaur or an elf yet that wasn’t both of the above in equal measure. Maybe it was the mystique of Seth’s home, Sapphira and the mountain elves’ dwelling in Oreias.

Montana couldn’t leave it at that, though, her curiosity making her push for more information. “Are they fated to be together as we were?” It was as close as she would let herself get to asking him if Alyosha would intervene to ensure that Jason and Evelyn wound up together and didn’t just ‘reach their fated conclusion.’

Seth grinned and shook his head as if reading her mind but didn’t say anything. Instead, he flipped her beneath him, insinuating a hard powerful thigh between her legs to gently rub her slit with his knee as he leaned in to hungrily feed from her mouth.

Montana almost forgot what they were talking about, gasped when Seth momentarily raised his head and let her up for air. “You’re trying to distract me.”

“Was it not working?”

It was working a little too well. If Jason and Evelyn’s sex life was anything like hers and Seth’s, then Montana guessed she had nothing to worry about.

But is desire enough?

The question haunted her into the wee hours even after she and Seth made sweet passionate love to each other.

* * * *

Once inside his bungalow, Jason didn’t put Evelyn down, the very idea of letting her go—of separating himself from any part of

her body—enough to fill him with a sense of panic he hadn't experienced since losing his father.

The woman had burrowed deep into his system in a week, so deep he couldn't remember what life had been like without her. He couldn't imagine what he was going to do when she left.

Jason finally put Evelyn down to stand on her own two feet, 'listening' intently without realizing it, mind open to any stray thoughts as she slowly slid down his front and set off wild fires wherever her body touched his. He didn't pick up anything, however, and wasn't sure whether or not he was disappointed or relieved, just knew that some insight might have been nice, especially after that little exchange they'd shared out at the lake.

Jason walked away from her to grab a lariat he had hanging from a peg on the wall in his living room. He came back to Evelyn who hadn't moved an inch and stood in the middle of the floor gawking at him as he slowly uncoiled the rope. "You did mention something about hog-tying, didn't you?"

"Uh-huh."

"You still interested?" He couldn't believe he was doing this, ready to engage in some kink with this woman. But when he saw Evelyn's hazel eyes glinting like the stars in the sky, he knew he wasn't alone in his lust. He knew Evelyn's excitement matched his own and that she wanted him to tie her up as much as he wanted to do it.

Was she bringing out the kinkiness in him or was he bringing out the kinkiness in her?

Heck, it didn't matter none as long as she was being kinky *with* him. Only him.

"I'm...I'm interested," she murmured.

He felt her nervousness, didn't need to read her mind to know how self-conscious her urges made her. Jason was determined to do whatever he could to make her comfortable with this, to make her comfortable with him. No way would he turn her disclosure

against her. He didn't ever want her to compare him to that horse's patooty, her ex-husband Todd.

He cupped her face with his free hand. "Are you sure, honey? I don't want you to do anything you're not comfortable with."

"I'm sure, Jace." She put her hand on his, intertwined her fingers with his, brought their hands down between them, and held tight. "I've never been surer about anything."

He heard the enthusiasm as her already husky voice dropped another octave and she looked at him with smoldering lust. His cock ruthlessly pressed against his shorts, clamoring for release.

Jason didn't know what Evelyn had in mind for their foreplay, but he hoped he could hold out long enough to give her what she needed, bring her pleasure before he blew everything and exploded. He was barely holding it together now, and knew as soon as he got her out of that slinky red suit that was sexier on her than most two-piece thong suits were on other women, his control would be balancing on a razor's edge.

Evelyn stepped away from him, slowly releasing his hand as she reached for the top of her suit. She proceeded to peel it off, slowly dragging the snug red material down her body, the sinuous bump and grind of her round shapely hips sending his libido into overdrive and his partner a throbbing.

Evelyn got the suit down to the floor, never once taking her gaze from his face as she bent to step out of it. She swung the suit around a few times from her forefinger, looking all the world like a seductive stripper before she tossed it into the seat of his rocker where he had earlier dropped his jeans and shirt. Finally, she stood before him in all her curvaceous, olive-skinned splendor, grinning.

She stepped to him and put a hand under his chin to push his mouth closed. "Before you let in the flies."

How had she so easily turned the tables? One minute she was demure and uncertain about her request, the next she was titillating him with her sexy siren routine and making him feel like

something he hadn't been in a long time: an inexperienced, tongue-tied virgin.

And just as quickly, she switched gears again, stepping back and offering her hands to him in so achingly humble a gesture, Jason swallowed hard as he caught her wrists. "Once I tie you up, I get to do with you exactly what I want." He felt her body tense as she hesitated.

He took her silence for acquiescence, wordlessly looped the rope around her wrists and cinched it enough to restrain her, but not enough to hurt her. "How's that," he asked, just to be sure.

"Okay," she whispered.

He picked her up in his arms again and she looped her bound hands around his neck as he carried her to his bedroom and gently laid her in the middle of his large four-poster bed. Never had he considered how useful Montana's old fashioned decorating tastes would be before this moment when he considered all the kinky and sensual possibilities those posts would afford.

Evelyn evidently had the same idea as she placed her hands over her head and spread her legs in a wanton pose that had Jason ready to come in his shorts from just looking at her.

Quickly, he pulled off and discarded his boxer briefs before crawling up the bed between Evelyn's thighs and leaning in to ravish her mouth with a kiss. Long moments later, he raised his head to cup her face. "I've got other plans for you, Yankee."

"Other pla—?" Evelyn yelped as Jason flipped her onto her stomach and poised over her, trapping her round hips between his knees and cradling his stiff shaft between her ass cheeks. "Oh, God, Jace..."

"Is this what you want, Evie?" He slid the head of his penis up and down, spreading his pre-cum on her ass and around her anus before smacking one cheek.

She jumped beneath the blow, her shiny buttocks invitingly bouncing and making Jason want inside her in the worst way. "Is

it?” He firmly kneaded her cheeks before swatting her again and Evelyn moaned and writhed beneath him, her reaction more telling than words.

God, she turned him on, her capitulation turning him inside out!

Jason curved an arm around her waist, pulled her up to her knees, nestling his cock against her ass one more time before he leaped from the bed. “Don’t move.” He looked at her over a shoulder, dick painfully throbbing at the carnal image she made, fidgeting on her knees, generous firm ass pointed at the ceiling.

Jason quickly retrieved a condom from the top drawer of his bedside lowboy, ripped open the pack with shaky hands, then slid its content down over his shaft. He had never before been so excited and nervous in his life, not even with Mrs. Harper, the much older woman who had broken him in righteously.

“Hurry, Jace. I can’t wait to have you inside me.”

Look who was talking? If he waited a second more, he *would* explode and there’d be nothing *left* of him to put inside her.

He knelt on the bed in front of her, looped the end of the rope binding her wrists around one of the bedposts, and tightened it to make sure she was secure. He moved behind her then, wrapped an arm around her waist and pulled her back against him. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath, silently rocking against her as he tried to gather himself.

“Jason?” She wiggled her ass.

He pressed his lips together and gritted his teeth. “Don’t move, honey.” He slowly covered her body with his, caressing her wrists first, then sliding his hands down her body, slow and easy, torturing them both before he finally palmed her ass with both hands and squeezed, enjoying its springy fullness. “You’ve got a beautiful ass.”

She laughed, wiggled it at him again. “I think that’s the first time I’ve ever heard you use anything close to a curse. You must really mean it.”

“A rose by any other name, sweetheart.” He caressed both round cheeks, couldn’t get enough of her, determined to drag this out as long as possible. He didn’t want to rush their first time together at this sort of play. He wanted to enjoy this moment for all it was worth, and remember every detail of her full round body beneath his hands, and her spicy feminine scent in his nostrils.

Evelyn whimpered and pulled against her bonds as he slid a hand between her legs from behind and teased her clit with his middle finger. “Jason, *please...*”

He slid his finger inside her and she groaned and demandingly pushed back to rub her ass against him.

Jason slipped another finger inside her, plunging deep, scissoring his fingers and brushing her moist inner walls to drive her wild. He moved his free hand over her back, massaging moist soft skin in his wake before sliding his hand under her to tweak her taut nipples, in turn.

Evelyn gasped, then whimpered, and he knew he had to put both of them out of their misery.

He removed his fingers from her dripping cunt, used her cream to lubricate his shaft and her hole before he slowly mounted her. “Hold still, honey.”

“I’ll try.”

He circled her waist with his hands, pulled her back against him and slowly began driving the head of his cock past her rosette before stopping at her body’s resistance. “Relax, Evie, or this isn’t going to work.”

She didn’t answer him, not verbally, but her thoughts and feelings assailed his mind in a collage of explosive energy, converging to give him a clear picture of her past sexual experiences, her current wants.

She'd only been with three men before finally settling down with her husband, and had never had anal sex with any of them, and most assuredly hadn't been bound, keeping that little secret desire to herself until a little earlier at the lake. The idea of having him thrust inside her back hole, the rawness of it electrified her as much as being bound. She wanted it rough, wanted to surrender to Jason as he subjugated her.

Both fear and excitement colored her mindset—excitement for the unknown, fear that she would enjoy Jason and what he did to her too much to let him go, fear that she would become a slave to her sexual urges, a slave to him.

"You've never done this before," he murmured, the realization hitting him like a tsunami once he verbalized her thoughts.

"No, but I want to. I want you."

"I want you, too, honey. So much it hurts." Lord knew he wanted her, was willing to do whatever it took to please her but the vividness of her thoughts, her physical demands, had him doubting his ability to fulfill her needs.

She moaned and rubbed herself against him, making his cock vibrate with longing. "I don't know what's happening to me, Jason, what you do to me, but I know how you make me feel, how much I need to feel you..."

He waited for the rest, disappointed at not 'hearing' how and what else she felt for him. Then he felt her confusion and internal pain and the disappointment quickly evaporated beneath a powerful wave of tenderness. He gently pulled her back, circling his hips before he drove past her virgin opening and stopped, panting as he reined in his desire to go deep right away.

Evelyn wriggled beneath him, panting, too. A fine sheen of perspiration coated her back and shoulders and Jason ran his hands from her hips to her shoulders, following them with his tongue as he nipped and kissed his way to her nape before finally plunging inside her.

She gasped, ass muscles clenching tight around him when he slowly ground against her.

Jason reached beneath Evelyn, rubbing her moist folds and plunged two fingers of one hand inside her while using the fingers of his other to tease and torment her clit.

Evelyn uselessly pulled against her bonds, and whimpered as she lunged back against him.

He didn't stop his manipulations though, simply sped the thrusts of his fingers to match those of his cock, until he had built up such a furious rhythm Evelyn couldn't deny him.

Jason pitched his hips and bit his bottom lip as the friction he built inside her made him almost painfully raw. His balls tightened as Evelyn cried out beneath him, violently shuddering. He came with a hoarse shout seconds behind her, nuzzled a cheek against her moist skin, turned his face to kiss her shoulder. He was still catching his breath when he reluctantly pulled out of her a moment later.

He rolled off the condom and discarded it in the bedside pail before slowly reaching up to untie Evelyn's wrists. When he was done, he used the last of his energy to curve an arm around her waist and pull her down across his body as he tumbled onto his back.

Evelyn sat up to straddle him, balancing herself with her palms against his chest. "We're not done yet, cowboy," she murmured.

More than her words, it was the look in her bright, color-changing eyes that made Jason's heart stop. That look told him how much trouble he was in and what no mind reading or telepathy ever could.

He was in love with her.

Chapter 16

Evelyn woke with the sun in her eyes, tried to turn on her side away from the glare but was impeded by one of Jason's big legs thrown over her hip and his right arm haphazardly thrown across her waist as he spooned against her. His right hand palmed her left breast in a proprietary manner that had shivers going down her spine while his semi-erect cock nudged the crack of her ass and had hot lust instantly pooling in her center.

This just felt too good to be good for her. And what they had done last night and this morning? *That* had been sinful with a capital 'S' and enjoyable with a capital 'E.'

She couldn't stay in this house, in this room for another second without ravaging him and letting him ravage her. This time, she didn't think they would stop at two go-rounds or him just tying her wrists and spanking her ass.

Evelyn closed her eyes against the tingle in her ass and clenched her thighs against the rush of desire that crashed through her at the memory of his big hand delivering those stinging blows, blows that had her ready to come with no additional provocation. She had been ready to come without him even being inside her.

This was dangerous. He was dangerous—to her sanity, to her independence—and she couldn't let him insinuate himself any further into her life, or he'd ruin her for anyone else, someone more suitable maybe—someone older, someone in New York.

Evelyn choked back a sudden sob at that thought.

Her heart and body didn't want anyone else, older or younger. Her heart and body craved Jason Makepeace in a way that defied

all logic and went against what she'd always thought herself capable of before.

She opened one eye to peek at Jason's bedside digital clock, then slowly eased out of his grasp. Inch by inch, she slid across the bed and managed to unravel Jason's long limbs from hers. When she was finally free, she got up and stood at his bedside, only to spend the next few minutes staring down at him and taking in his wide shoulders, narrow waist, and athletic legs tangled in the sheet and comforter.

Evelyn's pussy spasmed at the thought of climbing right back in the bed and into his arms, to spend the rest of the day, if not the rest of her crazy life with him. But she was sure she had things she needed to do today, things that didn't involve letting Jason screw her into blissful oblivion as attractive as that sounded. Surely he had plans, too? It wasn't his vacation, after all.

Reluctantly, she backed out of the room, never taking her eyes off of Jason's slumbering form as she made it to the threshold, then turned and headed for the rocking chair where she'd thrown her bathing suit the night before.

Evelyn quickly stepped into it, rolling the soggy material up her body until she reached her shoulders and had it on. She grabbed her towel and wrapped it around her waist. If she bumped into anyone en route to her cottage, it would look like she had gone for an early morning dip in the lake. Not that she cared what anyone thought. She was just thinking about Jason's reputation. As private a person as he was, she knew he wouldn't want anyone knowing more than necessary about their relationship, that is if he indeed considered what was between them a 'relationship.'

You know he considers it a relationship. It's you who's too chicken to call a spade a spade. You know damn well what this is, and you know how he's going to feel when he wakes up and finds you gone.

Regardless of his feelings, she couldn't risk it. She'd already risked too much staying overnight and letting him...Oh, God, her knees grew weak as another swell of lust knocked into her chest and stole her breath away.

Evelyn staggered over to the front door and leaned a hand on the jamb, taking several deep breaths as she closed her eyes against the vision of him thrusting inside her, her hands squeezing his delectable, tight round ass with abandon.

No, if she stayed another minute, she ran the risk of letting him have her any way he wanted.

All he had to do was look at her with those big, long-lashed blue eyes, and she would be a goner.

Ah, but what a sweet little death it would be.

Evelyn opened the door and with one more backward glance, she left Jason's bungalow, and closed the door behind her.

She didn't bump into anyone on her way across the meadow to her cottage, hadn't really expected to, except for maybe one of the night wranglers who were just about the only ones besides Jason usually up at this early hour.

Maybe she could catch a few hours sleep and have a late breakfast before going out to the lake again for another swim later. She hadn't gotten much sleep at Jason's, not that she was complaining. In fact, her body begged for him again, and against all her better judgment.

Evelyn let out a big yawn and stretched as she entered her cottage. She staggered to her bedroom, stripped out of her bathing suit, dawned a long T-shirt, not even bothering with panties and promising herself to grab a shower as soon as she got up. For now, she just wanted to catch some much-needed sleep.

* * * *

Jason noticed the difference in the room before he even opened his eyes, felt the emptiness, and stillness, felt her absence.

He didn't hear Evelyn's thoughts, something he had been doing steadily since last night and become accustomed to. He'd gone to sleep to the comforting lilt of her reflections sometime near dawn, fully expecting to hear her upon waking. He'd looked forward to the intimate buzz.

It was odd how he had come to accept his new talent, indeed appreciated the insight it afforded him, especially where Evelyn was concerned.

He hadn't realized it before, but her thoughts were the *only* ones he could read. Which begged the question: Was his sudden 'talent' only a figment of his imagination, just some manifestation of what he wanted most from Evelyn, or was he just going plain loco?

Why else wouldn't he be able to read anyone else's mind? Why so subjective a gift? Was it subjective or was this just the beginning, and somewhere down the line he'd be picking up others' thoughts as well? Did he really want all that responsibility and headache?

Jason groaned as he sat up, plopped his feet on the floor, and held his head in his hands.

He didn't have time to worry about this fantastic world he'd built with Evelyn. His most pressing need was finding her and giving her a piece of his mind about leaving him before he had a chance to wake and talk to her. He knew what was going on in that pretty little contrary head of hers. He knew her mind—even without his enhanced abilities—and he knew she was still dismissing what they had as a short-lived, temporary affair.

It hurt him to think that she still only saw him as some sort of summer fling, boy toy, only a step above a one-night stand. This all couldn't have been further from the truth, at least from where he stood. *Now to make Evelyn see and believe it, dadgummit!*

Jason jerked up his head when someone knocked at his front door. Heart pounding, he leaped from the bed, threw on his boxer briefs and rushed through the house to the living room. He realized that he was only in his Skivvies and that it more than likely wasn't Evelyn on the other side of the door (as much as he wanted it to be) about a second before he opened the door and saw Montana on his front step.

He couldn't even gather the wherewithal to address why she was on his doorstep so early in the morning before she grabbed his arm and pulled him back into the living room.

"We need to talk."

"If you're here to talk to me about Evelyn, I already kn—"

"It's about her and...some other issues."

Jason frowned, wondering what had put the creases in Montana's brow. He hadn't seen her looking so agitated and troubled since Seth had dropped into their lives.

Now why would he think about Seth's arrival in quite that way?

"Sit." She pointed to the sofa and Jason flopped into a corner without question, Montana's tone too demanding and serious to ignore.

She sat down beside him. "I need to ask you something."

"Maybe I should tell you I know you and Evelyn's sister played matchmakers to get us together."

Montana's mouth dropped open. "How?"

"You're not a good liar, Monty. You never have been."

"But, when did you—"

"Figure it out?"

She nodded and Jason went on. "That first day I went to pick her up and came back all flustered and fired up. You just seemed a little too interested in how we got along."

"You figured it out just from that?"

“That and some other things you said.” He wasn’t about to give away all his secrets, especially when his friend needed to stew just a little for trying to fix him up in the first place. Never mind that Evelyn seemed like the perfect woman for him and he loved her to distraction. Montana had no right to go behind his back the way she’d done.

“Okay so now that you know, what do you think?”

Jason folded his arms across his chest and gave her a stern look. “I’m not sure I should be sharing that with you just yet, if ever.”

“Jason, I need to know how things are going with you two.”

“Aside from the obvious reasons, why?”

Montana shrugged. “It’s just important for me to know how things are going.”

“How things are going?”

She sighed and stood up to pace in front of him.

Jason felt her tension, but couldn’t help playing dumb and wanting to see her sweat. Maybe this would teach her a lesson.

Montana came back to the sofa and sat down again, facing him. She took a deep breath, then slowly released it. “There’s some things you need to know about me...about yourself.”

“About myself?” He grimaced, didn’t like where this was going, especially with what he already knew about Montana.

“And Seth.”

“What does he have to do with all this?”

“Everything and nothing. It’ll just be easier to get everything out in the open all at once, I guess. At least easier for me.”

“What is it you’re trying to tell me, Monty?”

“I know you’ve heard some stories about me, about the things I can do.”

Jason nodded, trying to be noncommittal as his heart sped. He knew what she was going to say, what she would confirm, and blurted, “You really are psychic?”

“Yes.”

Even though he was expecting her response—had heard the rumors ever since coming to Freeborn—hearing her admit it out loud, still shocked him.

He knew she claimed to have foreseen the plane crash that had killed Dusty and Michael, and years later there’d been the incident with Seth and... “Is Seth...is he special, too?”

She slowly nodded. “Seth is from a race of mythological beings that aren’t really mythological at all.”

“Okay, I’ll go along. Which race of beings would that be?”

“He’s a centaur. Or at least he used to be before his punishment and sentencing and—” Montana abruptly cut herself off and waved her hands in front of her face “This isn’t what I came here to talk to you about, Jace.”

“But I’m interested now. I’d like to hear the rest of this tale.”

Montana stopped just short of pouting. “You don’t believe me.”

He couldn’t honestly say. Was believing Seth was a centaur any crazier than him believing Montana to be psychic or that *he* could read Evelyn’s mind? “I’m listening.”

For the next fifteen minutes, Jason listened as Montana recounted Seth’s arrival at Freeborn, how he had transformed from a centaur to a man and she had almost run over him out on the road with Sunspot.

The running over part Jason knew about, but the spell that had been cast on Seth to change him from centaur to human was news to him, as was his being cast from his home in Sapphira as a punishment for causing the death of one of his kind.

Then Montana started to go into this convoluted story about the Black and Fair Elves. The former had cast the spell on Seth and the latter had helped Montana and Seth break it so that they could be together.

Suddenly, something clicked into place when Jason remembered the stray horse that had mysteriously appeared at the ranch one day and disappeared just as mysteriously. The horse's appearance and disappearance directly coincided with Seth's.

Jason gaped. "Seth was...Seth was Mercury, wasn't he?"

Montana grinned and slowly nodded. "I know this all seems too fantastic to be true, and you're probably thinking I'm touched in the head by now..."

"Not unless I am, too." And he certainly didn't consider himself unhinged anymore than he considered Monty unhinged.

Her explanation and his acceptance dang near had him ready to tell her what he had been experiencing with Evelyn. Surely, someone who was psychic and believed in elves and spells and centaurs would believe his little old tale of telepathy.

"The reason I brought up Seth and the elves in the first place was to give you a better idea of what you might be dealing with some time soon."

"What I might be dealing with?"

"Have you been experiencing any, you know, any ESP?"

"You mean seeing into the future like you?" Jason tried to slow his heart, feared it might fly right out of his chest if he didn't.

When it had just been him alone with Evelyn thinking he was going crazy and that he couldn't possibly be reading her mind, that had been okay. When he had privately given in to the insanity but decided to keep it to himself, that was okay, too. But being confronted with the very thing he was still in denial of, this was just a little too much for him to handle right now.

"I mean any sort of ESP at all, Jason." She tenderly took both of his hands in hers and squeezed as if trying to emit some secret message.

Jason wasn't at all sure that he wanted to decode it.

"Jace?"

He caught her expression, compassion, and understanding shining out of her dark eyes, the look of someone who'd been doubted and traumatized because of her abilities, or even in spite of them, for most of her life. It was a look of acceptance.

Jason jerked his hands from hers and staggered to his feet. He took several steps away from her, raking a hand through his hair as he stared at her from a safe distance, as if her gifts were catching and his immune system was already susceptible.

Heck, Montana had lived all her life with her gift. She'd had *time* to accept it, to understand it. Jason had no such luxury, had gone thirty-three years without experiencing any special abilities, except his keen insight into human nature and his uncanny ability to communicate with critters.

Montana stood and hesitantly approached as if she were afraid he'd bolt and leave the house, which wasn't too far from what he wanted to do. She reached out a hand to touch his shoulder. "You have, haven't you?"

"What does it mean if I say yes?"

"It just means what it is. There's nothing you can do about it but accept it."

"What if I don't want to?"

"You don't really have a choice in the matter. It's not something you chose to have or not.

It just is."

"So why are you here exactly? To help me with the transition or something?"

"Something like that."

Jason closed his eyes, shaking his head as he remembered all the things she'd told him since arriving, his mind freezing on the part about the elves. "This elf that helped you and Seth break the spell and you two get together—"

"Alyosha."

"Yeah, him. What's his stake in all this?"

Montana averted her eyes. “None really.”

Jason put his forefinger under her chin and lifted her face to meet her eyes. “We’ve already established that you’re not a good liar, Monty.”

“I really shouldn’t be telling you this. Not that there’s much to tell. Elves are notoriously close-mouthed about their...undertakings.”

This was getting more curious by the minute. “Evelyn and I are an undertaking?”

“Well, not officially. Alyosha just shared some things about you guys with Seth and Seth and I thought it would be helpful to let you in on those things.”

“Like my—”

“Gifts. Which you never really divulged or confirmed, by the way.”

“Promise you won’t laugh.”

“Jace, how could I after everything I’ve told you?”

He sighed, couldn’t believe he was getting ready to say this out loud. “I’ve been, uh—this is impossible!”

“Once you say it and get it out in the open, you’ll feel better, trust me.”

Jason smiled at how much she sounded like Evelyn trying to get him to share his experiences with Bette. Divulging his telepathy couldn’t possibly be half as difficult and wrenching as that had been, could it? “I can read minds.”

“You’re telepathic.”

Jason nodded.

“Is that it?”

He gawked. “Isn’t that enough?”

“No, what I mean is, have you manifested any other abilities? Have you experienced any precognition or telekinesis or—”

“Whoa, whoa, let’s handle one mental illness at a time.”

“It’s not an illness, Jace. It’s a gift.”

“It’s a curse.”

“You don’t really believe that.”

No, he didn’t, but sometimes he felt put upon having the responsibility of keeping someone else’s secrets in addition to his own. “I didn’t mean to insult you, Monty.”

“You didn’t.” She gave him an understanding smile. “It’s hard to accept at first, but in time, it’ll be like second nature to you. So much so, you won’t even think twice about using it. But you should, think twice I mean.”

Here was the self-control he had been considering, the onus of not using his ability whenever it suited him, and just because he could. “I hope you’re right.”

“Trust me. I am.” She patted his back, eyes abruptly widening. “You said you can read minds. How long has it been going on?”

“A little after Evelyn’s arrival, I reckon.”

Montana nodded. “And is it just Evelyn’s mind you can read or can you read anyone else’s mind, too?”

“You’re wondering if I can read yours and maybe that’s why I knew what you and Angela Calminetti did to get Evelyn and me together?”

“Maybe.”

“Evelyn’s mind is the only one I can read, at least so far, and I was actually a mite curious about why that is.”

“Oh, um...” She averted her eyes, and Jason leaned close.

“There’s something you’re not telling me.”

She returned his stare. “Alyosha intimated the sudden manifestation of your gifts means that you’ve fallen in love and found your, um...”

“Let me help you along. I’ve found my soul mate.”

“You don’t believe in destiny? Fate? True love?”

In as far as the first two had deemed it so that his mother should die young, or his father should be killed and leave him to grow up an orphan and alone among a sea of people, he guessed he

did believe in them. He just didn't want to rely on only destiny and fate to determine with whom he settled down. That would be as bad as letting Evelyn decide that he wasn't the right man for her without putting up a fight, and he sure as heck wasn't letting her get away without a fight.

"So you're saying it's my destiny to be with Evelyn?"

"Alyosha is saying it."

"And does that make our being together a guarantee?" Not that he'd ever relied on guarantees in his life, didn't believe in them, unless he was the one making them.

"It just means fate has seen fit to put you two together. What you do with the opportunity is up to you and Evelyn."

That's what he was counting on, his own powers of persuasion and fortitude to make Evelyn see things his way. He didn't want to, couldn't leave his future in the hands of some ephemeral and fickle ladies called Destiny and Fate. They had already taken too much from him. It was time for him to decide his own future and who would be in it.

"Jace, is everything okay otherwise?"

"You mean aside from the fact that I have telepathy, the woman I love is older, emotionally scarred, lives half-way across the country, and is determined to maintain her independence even at the cost of true love? Everything is just peachy." He finished to see Montana gaping at him, and realized just how much he had revealed with that little speech.

"You are in love with her then?"

"Forget I said that."

"Too late, it's already out there." She grinned like a goofy kid and punched his shoulder.

"You would just pick up on that one thing when I mentioned so many other issues."

"Love is the most important one you mentioned."

"Yeah, yeah, love conquers all."

“It can.” She turned suddenly serious. “If she’s who and what you want, then go for it.”

“I plan to.” He wouldn’t stop until he got her. There was just one other problem he had to come to grips with, in addition to the myriad list he’d outlined to Montana, and this was how he was supposed to go about telling practical and independent Evelyn Vega that he could, and had been reading her mind.

Chapter 17

Her head pounded had been for what seemed like the last several minutes, but it had probably just taken that long for the noise to drag her up from the dark quiet depths of a peaceful slumber. Maybe it wasn't her head pounding at all and someone was actually banging on her door wanting in.

The door!

Evelyn jerked to a sitting position in her bed, eyes still closed as she breathed deep and tried to get her bearings. She opened one eye to look at her bedside clock, had an eerie sense of déjà vu when she remembered leaving Jason earlier this morning.

Hell, it was still early, only three hours since she'd left him at near six o'clock.

Who the hell was at the door and what kind of vacation was this when she couldn't sleep in at least one day out of the entire freaking two weeks?

She vowed to kill Angela when she got back to New York, first thing.

Evelyn got out of bed, stalked to the living room and straight to the front door. She flung it open with a 'Can't a hard-working woman get some shut-eye on her freaking vacation!' before she noticed Jason standing on her doorstep, grinning.

Her heart fluttered and she automatically followed her nose, leaning forward to get a whiff of his clean woodsy scent, appreciating the familiar sight and smell of him.

You're getting used to the man, girl. That is not a good thing.

“You left without finding out what I had planned for us today.” He caught her shoulders and gently pushed her to the side before entering her living room and standing in the middle of the floor as if to wait for her.

Evelyn closed the door and, dazed, turned around to face him.

He was freshly showered and shaved, his rangy and broad shouldered frame dwarfing her and invading her space while his bow-legged, masculine cowboy sumptuousness made her wet.

She licked her lips to check her drooling. Damn, he looked good enough to eat!

She should have been angry that he had interrupted her sleep but instead she was curious as to what he was going to have her doing today. “Plans?”

“I’m your tour guide, remember? And I’ve got another hot spot to take you to today.”

“Does every spot you pick out have to open so early?”

“This one’s not as early as the last one, but we’ve still got a lot to get in.”

At least it wasn’t dark outside and he had waited until the sun came up. “Give me a hint, and if it involves more hiking, count me out.” Evelyn walked over to the living room sofa and flung herself down into a corner of it to emphasize her low tolerance for strenuous exercise.

“Don’t be such a spoilsport.” Jason chuckled, joined her on the sofa and wrapped an arm around her. “There’s lots of walking involved and some climbing, but you’ll like it. I promise.”

“That’s what you said the last time.”

“And did you enjoy yourself?”

She pouted and folded her arms over her breasts. “That’s not the point.”

Jason reached for her and pulled her into his arms for a kiss.

Evelyn averted her face, frowning. “I’ve got morning breath and I haven’t taken a shower.”

“So?” He bent his head and Evelyn put her hand up between their faces before his lips could make contact with hers. “I don’t care how stinky you are, woman.”

“You say that now because you’re enamored, but I care.”

“I like the way you smell. You smell like me.”

Her face heated at the intimacy of his statement. She not only smelled like him, she smelled like sex—smelled like the hot unadulterated sex they’d had just a couple of hours ago.

“C’m on.” He caught her arms and dragged her to her feet. “Go get your shower. I’ll wait.” He slapped her ass, hand lingering for a squeeze.

Evelyn knew the exact moment when he realized she didn’t have on any underwear as, after the squeeze, he growled, slid his hand down to the hem of her big T-shirt and lifted it up.

He glided his palm across the smooth round surface of her ass, fondling her along the way until he easily drove his middle finger inside her anus.

She uncontrollably shuddered, then bore down on the digit as she turned slightly to grab Jason’s wrist. She cleared her throat. “Um, my shower.”

“Oh yeah, that.” He moved his other hand to her pussy, teasing her clit and brushing her moist folds before inserting his middle finger.

Evelyn gasped and pushed closer to him. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Making getting up so early worth your while.”

“Mmmm...” She moaned as he wiggled his fingers, tracing all sorts of exotic and wonderful shapes inside her ass and cunt, and making her see stars with his talented creative hands. Evelyn squeezed her thighs against the orgasm that sneaked up on her. She clutched Jason’s shoulder and nestled her face against his aromatic shirt as she bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out.

Jason slowly pulled his fingers out of her, took her hand, and led her to the bathroom. "Want any company?"

She shook her head. As tempting as the offer was, she had to say no. She needed a little space to get her head together. They were moving way too fast for her to make any sound decisions, even if only for the short term.

"I promise I won't molest you," Jason murmured.

The way he said that made her want him to molest her, made her want to molest *him*.

He leaned in to kiss her before he picked her up to place her in the tub, then reached down to pull her shirt up and over her head. After he had discarded it over a shoulder, he just stood staring at her like a hungry wolf that's spotted a flock of unattended sheep. "I'm about to do something I've never done before."

"What's that?"

"Break a promise." He leaned in to kiss her again, hand traveling down each side of her body until they met at her ass where he proceeded to caress and spank her until electricity shot straight to her already heated and wet cunt.

Evelyn wrapped her arms around his neck, returning his kiss and pressing herself against him, wanting so much more, more than she was willing to give or receive.

Jason reached down to turn on the shower, the cool water turning pleasantly warm as Evelyn stood under the spray to soak her hair.

"You're going to get wet," she said.

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Jason..."

He was out of his shirt, boots, jeans, and underwear in a blink, stepping into the tub behind her and pulling the curtain closed before she knew it.

"What now?"

“Whatever you want.” He slid his arms around her and pulled her close. “I’ve always said the couple that works and showers together stays together.”

They certainly had been doing a lot of both in the last week and a half. But what did he mean by ‘couple’ and ‘stays together?’

“Don’t look so panic-stricken, woman. I didn’t ask you to marry me...yet.”

Evelyn spluttered and he stopped her objection in its track with a scorching kiss that made her toes curl against the bath mat for purchase.

“We’re just showering together,” he whispered. “You and me, and a whole lot of soap and water.” At this, he retrieved the shampoo from the caddy and squeezed a generous amount into his hand before he buried his hands in her hair and began to lather up her long black mane.

He drew slow, lazy patterns against her scalp, his fingers so relaxing and magical, she felt close to falling back to sleep.

Evelyn closed her eyes and moaned, couldn’t help herself. She leaned back into his chest as he massaged her head. His masculine scent mingled with the fruity smell of her shampoo and washed over her in an irresistible, powerful aroma that made her knees weak with longing.

She turned in his arms, stood on her toes and attacked his mouth with hers, whipping out her tongue and quickly connecting with his in a feral lingual dance.

After several head-spinning moments, Jason pulled back and caught her around the shoulders, panting, as he glanced down at her.

She tasted him and the watery residue of her shampoo as it rinsed out of her hair under the shower and down her face. Jason’s taste won out, beckoning her to stand on her toes again and reach for his mouth with hers.

He held her back. “Let’s save some for after.”

“After what?”

“After our trip.”

“You are such a tease.”

He grinned and the sight sent anticipation and desire spiraling from her chest to her core in a river of molten lust.

“Trust me, I’m teasing myself more than I’m teasing you.”

“If you’re worried whether or not I’ll respect you in the morning—”

“I already know you only see me as some frivolous fling.”

“That’s not true,” she lied, face heating with a furious blush. That he read her so well was more than a little disconcerting.

He nodded. “Don’t worry about denying it. I’ve already got plans to change your mind and make you see things my way.”

She didn’t know whether to be angry or pleased with his assertion. That her heart filled to bursting at the confident grin on his face and her pussy spasmed in response to the challenge in his blue eyes, left her more confused than his statement. She did her best to cover her shock though, flashing her own bold grin and asking, “Is that a fact, cowboy?”

“That’s a fact, ma’am.”

God, when he looked at her with that determined gleam in his eyes and that dimpled smirk, it made Evelyn wish things could be different, that she and Jason could be together just because they wanted to. There were too many variables involved, however, that made their being together very difficult if not downright impossible.

First and foremost, the age gap between them could not be ignored. As much as she wanted to overlook it, she couldn’t, especially not when she knew her childbearing days were numbered and Jason’s entire demeanor shouted “paternal material,” and a man in his prime. The class and distance issue ran a not-too-distant second and third in the they-couldn’t-be-together sweepstakes. Finally, with Jason being a cowboy by trade and a

country boy to the bone, Evelyn couldn't imagine him flourishing, surrounded by the steel and concrete of New York, and there were very little cattle ranches in the vicinity where he could settle down and make his living.

"How many cons are you up to?"

Evelyn blinked. "What?"

"Did you even get to the pros? Or should I ask if you have any pros at all?"

She gaped. How did he keep doing that?

"It's written all over your face, Evie. All the negative responses to any argument I might come up with to convince you that this is right. That we're right."

She pushed away from him and turned to cut the shower off.

Obviously, she had grown too complacent, allowing the fantasy of them as a couple to lull her into a state of dangerous and unrealistic contentment.

He caught her around the shoulders, a gentle but firm touch that drew her back against his hard slick chest. He wrapped his arms around her and just held her, slowly rocking from side to side as he kissed her hair. "I'm not letting you run away from us."

"I'm not running."

"Not physically. But I can hear you making all these contingency plans in your head. I'm not going anywhere."

That's what she was afraid of, that he wouldn't be able to leave this idyllic bucolic haven to come to New York...not even for her.

And are you willing to move here and change your life for him? It cuts both ways, girl. Can't expect him to make all the concessions and sacrifices.

This was exactly why she didn't want to get into a serious relationship. She wasn't ready or willing to give up her independence. She wasn't ready for all the work and responsibilities involved with being a couple or for the inherent

sacrifices. Call her lazy, call her selfish, but she just didn't want to be tied down and committed to anyone except herself.

Jason bent his head to kiss her nape, dragged his lips from her throat to her ear and slowly circled the shell of her ear before sucking the lobe into his mouth and nibbling.

Electricity immediately shot from her ear to her pussy, making Evelyn tremble uncontrollably. She tried to turn in his arms, but he wouldn't let her.

"Just feel, Evie. Feel me. Feel what it would be like between us."

"I already know what it would be like."

"Do you really?" He caught her shoulders again to turn her around now, his gaze so intense Evelyn felt its effect to her core, a shimmering glow of heat uncoiling in her center.

If the quantity and quality of sex between them was a barometer for success, then they had absolutely nothing to worry about. But sex wasn't enough, even if she was having it with a hunky young cowboy. She knew that better than anyone. "We'd better get dressed and go."

"Now, you're willing to let me drag you off hiking when a minute ago you were griping?"

"Hiking is looking immensely attractive to me now."

"As opposed to discussing the future, I'll bet."

Future? "Call it what you want." Evelyn stepped out of the tub, wrapped a white terry towel around her, and tucked it in over her breasts.

Jason followed, licking his lips, gaze lazily traveling from her head to her toes, lingering on her breasts and her center.

Evelyn playfully punched his shoulder. "Stop it. I can't take you seriously when you look at me like that."

"Like what?"

When he gave her that innocent boy expression and tone, she realized how young he was, and totally out of her league. “Like you—”

“Want to eat you all up?”

“Yes, like that, smart ass.”

“I do.”

She arched a questioning brow despite knowing exactly what he meant, and despite his last statement sending a jolt of longing and excitement through her bloodstream.

You can't have him, Evie. He's just Mr. Right Now, a temporary thing. Enjoy it while it lasts and forget about it. “You do what?”

“Want to eat you all up.”

She gasped as he bent his knees, curved his arms around her waist, and lifted her in the air. Her towel was dangerously close to coming loose, not that it made much difference with him pressed against her, naked, hard in all the right places and absolutely edible. It never failed to amaze her how absolutely gorgeous he was. That she had landed someone so close to perfection and fantasy was still beyond her belief.

“Make no mistake about it, Evie. I'm as serious and determined as a bull in heat.”

Good thing he was holding her, because her knees instantly melted at his deep sultry voice.

Jason leaned in to kiss her deep, thrusting his tongue into her mouth as he carried her out of the bathroom and into her bedroom. She tangled her tongue with his right before he tossed her on the bed and stripped the towel from her body in one motion.

“Jace!” Warm juices immediately leaked out of her pussy to trickle onto her inner thighs. God, the man had barely touched her and she was near coming!

“This is twice you've made me change my mind about taking you before we leave.”

She shivered at the way he said ‘take’ her, more than ready for him to do just that. “Don’t blame this on me, you randy cow boss.”

He grinned and waggled his eyebrows as he stalked her across the bed on his hands and knees and she tried to evade him, scampering backwards on her elbows and heels.

He caught her by an ankle and dragged her back towards him.

Evelyn giggled and playfully kicked at him until he caught her ankles and spread her legs to accommodate his frame. She immediately wrapped her legs around his hips, pulling him to her.

“I knew I should have brought my lariat,” he murmured and leaned in to kiss her neck.

Evelyn arched her throat, eyes drifting closed on the erotic fantasy of him binding her again. Just the idea of being at his mercy was enough to flood the dam and unbalance what little equilibrium she had left since he had entered her cottage.

She reached for him, thumbing the pearl of precome from the head of his penis and bringing it to her mouth. She sucked the salty liquid off her thumb, hungry for much more. She reached down again to grasp his cock, firmly guiding him to her vagina.

He teased her with the tip of his penis, thrusting into her shallowly, experimentally as if dipping a toe in an icy cold pool. “God, I want you now!”

“Then take me.”

“Aren’t we forgetting—”

She jerked him forward with her legs, holding him in place as he balanced his weight on his palms and held back.

“Evelyn, are you sure?”

“If you don’t get inside me now, I’m going to scream,” she growled.

Jason needed no more prompting, slowly sank into her pussy to the hilt.

She watched his face as he paused, mentally tracing his chiseled features before reaching out with her hands to trail her

fingers from his forehead to his chin. She cupped his cheek, drew him close for a soul kiss that rocked her harder than his entry.

He opened his long-lashed eyes and the look in them was enough to make her moan and shudder, both of which she did while he gathered her in his arms and pulled her flush against him. She didn't know whether he reacted to the look in her eyes, or the desperation in her tone.

She felt desperate—desperate and reckless, and hungrier for the touch of a male, for the touch of this particular male—more than she'd ever been in her entire life.

Evelyn closed her eyes as Jason slowly pulled back, then plunged deep and circled his hips, movements deliberate, sinuous, and seductive. She tightened her pussy muscles around him in answer, squeezing his hot pulsing flesh, and trying to steer him to a faster pace.

“Honey...don't move.”

She opened her eyes in time to see him grit his teeth, squeezed him again and felt his cock throb inside her. “Why not?”

Jason panted. “Because...I'm going to...I'm going to come.”

She squeezed him again, harder, ignoring his warning. “I want you to. I want you...” She'd worry about the consequences tomorrow. She needed him today. Now.

At his hesitation, she pulled him close.

I trust you, Jason.

He stared at her so long and hard after the thought, that she was certain this time that he'd heard her. The possibility both excited and terrified her.

“Evie...”

She palmed his face. “Just do it, Jace. Do it now.”

He drove into her flush, alternately circling and pistoning his hips several intense moments, before he slowed his thrusts and stroked inside her long and deep.

He bent his head to take a hard nipple into his mouth, licking and sucking it until Evelyn was writhing and whimpering beneath him.

She ran her nails down his back, lightly scoring his skin before crying out her release. She could hold back no longer. Her pussy spasmed around his hard flesh and she bore down with all she had to make Jason join her in orgasmic rapture.

His tremors started slowly, rising up from his legs to his hips where he furiously pumped into her. She clutched him tight in response. Her arms curved around his neck and her thighs imprisoned his waist as she bucked against him and rode out the last vestiges of her orgasm.

Jason finally followed her with a low moan signaling his own climax.

Evelyn lay still beneath him, catching her breath as she pushed stray moist strands of chestnut hair away from his face, and looked at his totally guileless young face knowing she'd made the biggest mistake of her life.

She had taken a risk—taken a million—and gone and fallen in love with the most unsuitable man in the world for her!

Chapter 18

Jason knew Evelyn was tense without knowing her thoughts, felt it in the way she moved beside him, cool and detached, like she was afraid that he would at any minute invade her personal space. In fact, she acted like the few feet she maintained between them as they left his truck wasn't enough space, and hurried her steps like she wanted to get away from him.

She kept her distance as if his nearness presented a danger to her person and sanity, acted like her distance was perfectly natural after what they'd shared this morning back at his bungalow and her cottage.

She was in denial.

Jason knew the trick to pull her out of it, and decided he'd take the chance if only to get her dander up. He hated to admit it, but he did like to see her angry, especially when it meant they'd spend some quality time with him trying to calm her down and make her see things his way.

He picked up his pace to catch up with her and grabbed her hand as soon as he was even with her, didn't give her a chance to pull away or escape. "C'mon, Yankee. I want to get a few sights in before we break for lunch and since we started out so late, we don't have much time."

"Can I ask you something?"

He paused to see the sincere look on her face, knew that he would never be able to deny this woman anything, from the simplest request to the most monumental favor. "Ask away."

“When did you ever find the time to visit Garden of the Gods and Seven Falls?”

“Contrary to popular opinion, I do take time off from work once in a while to take in the sights outside of the ranch.”

“Like now?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Did you take time off from work just to be with me this week?”

“That was part of it.”

She arched a brow, and Jason clearly heard her silent: *And the other part?* as if she’d asked it out loud.

He began to wonder if his abilities had up and deserted him before he’d even had a chance to really get used to having them and almost sighed in relief at hearing her last thought. “The other part was I’ve started some house and ranch hunting and wanted to be free to see prospects in the area when my agent calls.”

“House hunting? How long?”

He squeezed her hand as they neared the stairway to the Eagle’s Nest Observation platform, and knew where her mind was going. “A little while before you arrived. I’ve actually looked at a spread or two, but neither of them was right for me.”

“But if you’re with me, you’re not exactly free to see prospects, are you?”

He let go of her hand to draw her in a one-armed hug. “Of course I am. If I get a call, I’ll just drag you with me and we’ll check it out together.”

“You’ve already made me drag ride, and dragged me hiking. You’re not dragging me anywhere else, especially not house hunting.”

“I know. Some vacation.”

“Damn right.”

“If you don’t mind my asking, what do you have against house hunting, strictly as a bystander, that is?”

“Would I really be just a bystander?”

“Okay, you got me. I might ask for an opinion or two.”

“Or three.”

“Sure, if you can spare ’em.” He chuckled as she slid an arm around his waist.

“I’m not sure I can. It would seem too much like invading your privacy.”

“Not if I invite you.”

“I’m not sure I want to get so...involved.”

She didn’t need to say or think *with you*. He filled those two words in all by himself, the truth rearing its homely head to him. The fearless and outspoken Evelyn Vega was afraid of being part of a domesticated couple, afraid of being ‘his woman.’

Should he let her off the hook, or push the issue, find out exactly what she meant by involved, even though he knew perfectly well? What did she have against getting involved anyway? Sure, she’d been hurt. Heck, he’d been hurt, too, but he wasn’t shying away from the idea, at least not anymore and especially not if Evelyn was part of the equation.

Jason shook off her slight and pulled her towards the stairs. “C’mon, Ms. Commitment-phobe.”

“I’m not a...” She paused and glanced up, mouth falling open before she turned to him. “You’ve got to be kidding me, right?”

“The exercise’ll do you good.”

“Surely there’s an elevator we can take.”

“There is, but this is so much more invigorating.”

“Shove invigorating. I’ll meet you at the top.” She tried to pull away from him, but Jason held fast and pulled her close, leaning in for a quick peck on the lips.

“Where’s your competitor’s spirit?”

She grumbled and punched him in the gut. “Lunch better be worth it, cowboy.” She jerked her hand out of his and headed up the stairs. Somewhere on the fifth step, she turned back with a

grimace and said, "Only because I'm a masochist, I have to ask. How many?"

"Only two-hundred-and-twenty-four." Jason took the stairs two at a time to join Evelyn as she groaned. "Not only do I promise you lunch will be worth it, but the view from up top is worth the price of admission."

"Not that your promises are worth all that much," she teased.

He shrugged. "What can I say? You're too tempting, Evie."

"A likely story." She shook her head. "I don't think I've ever met a man so into the outdoors and nature."

"You've been hanging out with the wrong men."

"Maybe."

That she gave him even that much encouraged Jason, and he circled her shoulders with an arm as they took the steps and caught up to a group of teens a flight ahead.

Passing this group, they settled into a rhythm, taking their time to enjoy the various trails leading to Midnight Falls and Inspiration Point with a breathtaking view of Colorado Springs and the vast plains beyond.

Evelyn ooh'ed and ah'h'ed at all the sights he pointed out, eyes so wide with wonder, Jason knew she was genuinely enjoying herself and not just humoring him.

Wildlife was everywhere and he took special care to point out the hummingbirds, rainbow trout, and the rare, waterfall nesting American Dipper.

Near the last twenty steps, Jason challenged Evelyn to a race to the top. She wasted no time shoving him to the side to take the stairs two at a time.

Jason caught up with her ten steps from the top and held back so that they'd clear the landing together. He caught her around the waist at the top and flung her up into his arms, barely winded. "Don't your lungs feel clearer?"

Panting, Evelyn said, "Give me a minute...and I'll let you know."

"C'mon, admit it, Yankee. You'd have never been able to do that had you still been smoking."

"That goes without saying. If I were still smoking I'd have had a coronary the first week of the cattle drive." Evelyn took a deep breath and kissed him on the cheek. "I still want my saddle though."

"And I still want to make sure you stay around for a long time to come." He waited as his double meaning sunk in, watched the blush creep into her cheeks as she hugged him.

"Of course you do. You're into older, oversexed women."

Jason frowned. "Who said anything about oversexed?"

She averted her eyes and pushed against his chest to be let down.

He loosened his hold to let her slide down his front to the floor but didn't release her.

He caught her chin and tipped up her head. "Hey, you're with me. Not Todd."

"I know that."

"Are you sure?" What had this Todd done to undermine Evelyn's self-confidence? In every other facet of her relationship with him, she was bossy, contrary, and a take-charge person, but when it came to sex, she seemed to have some sort of complex. It wasn't enough to keep her from engaging and enjoying it, thank the Lord, but there was something just under the surface, niggling and annoying like a pebble in her shoe—not enough to hobble her but enough to make her step gingerly.

If her ex-husband was in front of him that moment, Jason couldn't promise he wouldn't hit the man. To make a beautiful vibrant woman even a little self-conscious about her sensuality and sexual nature just wasn't right.

Evelyn looked at him as if shocked by his attitude, shaking her head again.

“What?”

“You just amaze me sometimes. Most times.”

“How so?” he asked.

“In so many ways, you’re old-fashioned—”

“That’s a bad thing?”

“No, I’m not criticizing, so retract those quills a little.”

Jason laughed, waited for the rest.

“What I mean is you’re chivalrous, a gentleman. You’re of the old school. But at the same time...” She slid her hand down to his crotch and cupped his quickly burgeoning cock. “You’re open-minded and thoroughly modern about sex.”

What kind of puritanical, *undersexed* bozo was this Todd? “Sex is a natural act between a man and a woman who desire and care about each other. There’s no shame in wanting plenty of it as long as you’re not hurting anyone.”

She looked at him as if awestruck. “Your father did a good job raising you.”

Jason tried not to let a dark cloud into his day at the mention of his father but knew he hadn’t done such a good job when Evelyn asked, “Did I say something wrong?”

He shook his head, automatically took her hand in his and walked her over to one of the viewers. “I owe my thoroughly modern attitude about sex to an older woman who decided to break in this young cowboy.”

She grinned. “Tell me more about this enlightened lady.”

Jason paused, debating how much to tell her about Mrs. Harper, how much he could get away with not telling her. He didn’t want to mention his foster and group home stints, didn’t want to dwell on his father’s death, but most of all, he didn’t want Evelyn’s pity.

“She must have been a pretty hot number to catch your eye,” she prompted, playfully elbowing him in the ribs.

“She didn’t hold a candle to you.”

“How much older?”

“About your age, but nowhere near as well-preserved.”

“Gee, you make me feel like strawberry jam.”

Jason chuckled, and squeezed her hand. “Strawberry jam doesn’t hold a candle to you, either.”

“You are such a charmer. I bet you were irresistible at...what age are we talking?”

“Sixteen.”

“That’s not too bad, Jail Bait. I know guys who lost it even younger.”

“I reckon so, but I made up for lost time.”

“I’ll bet.” She chuckled. “So tell me.”

Jason shrugged. “Nothing much to tell. She was a widow, a faded Marilyn Monroe look-alike who felt it her civic duty to usher in the manhood of most of the teenage boys who crossed her path. A lot of us lost our virginity to Mrs. Harper back then.”

“Civic duty, huh? Nowadays, they’d lock someone like her up.”

“None of us were pressing any charges.”

“Most boys wouldn’t. But if your father knew...”

Heck, had Dunley Makepeace known Jason made time with a hot-to-trot widow like Mrs. Harper, he would have been patting his son’s back, along with the rest of the hard-living rodeo cowboys who Jason grew up around. It was just Jason’s good fortune that Mrs. Harper had taken the time to teach him not only about sex, but about self-respect and the proper way to treat a woman whether she acted like a lady or not.

When Evelyn noticed he wouldn’t take the bait and discuss his father any further, she leaned forward to take a look through the viewer.

Jason waited as she sucked in her breath at what she saw and squeezed his hand.

“My God, it’s beautiful!”

“I told you.”

She pulled back from the viewer to look at him. “You’re something else, you know that?”

“Don’t mistake me for some lily-livered tenderfoot just because I like flowers, trees, amazing views, and can cook.”

“Though that is quite a résumé, I’d never mistake you for a quiche-eating guy in touch with his feminine side.”

“C’mere...” He circled his arms around her waist and pulled her close. “The only feminine side I’m interested in getting in touch with is your feminine side.”

“You are such a sweet talker.”

He leaned in to kiss her on the lips, slow and easy, enjoying the sweet tangy taste of her, enjoying the way her tongue naturally curled around and danced with his. His cock hardened and throbbed from the soft feel of her in his arms, the heady spicy aroma of her in his nostrils.

Jason moaned low in his throat and reluctantly pulled away. If he didn’t stop, they’d be doing something totally inadvisable, risqué, and illicit in full view of the numerous other nature lovers and watchers.

“Who knew the great outdoors could be such a turn-on?” Evelyn slid her hands from his back to his chest, fisting his T-shirt and pulling him close. “Or maybe it’s you that turns me on.”

“That’s a definite possibility, although I’m sure it’s a little bit of both. I’ve always found the outdoors a great aphrodisiac.”

“So I’ve noticed.”

Jason leaned in, circling the shell of her ear before whispering, “I’ve got some business to attend to once we get back to the ranch and it involves my lariat and your four bedposts.”

Evelyn shivered and fisted his shirt tighter, knuckles digging into his chest so firm, Jason was sure they'd leave black and blue imprints on his skin.

He leaned in to nibble her earlobe. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Evie? You want me to tie you up nice and tight and have my way with you?"

She whimpered, sliding her arms around his back as she pressed herself against him, and slowly rocked her hips. "Oh, God, yesss," she hissed.

The eagerness in her voice made him even hungrier for the scene he'd just outlined.

It shocked him how easily he fell into her bondage and discipline fantasies, how much he liked doing the things she craved, and how much he enjoyed them as much as she did.

Never had he been so turned on by the idea of running his palms along a woman's soft round ass and spanking it. But the idea of spanking Evelyn, of her writhing beneath him in ecstasy at his playful punishment, shot stinging daggers of desire straight to his groin.

He'd be lucky if he could hold off ravishing her before they got back downstairs for lunch, much less back to the ranch.

"Damn, why did you have to bring up all that *here*?" Evelyn asked.

"Something to keep you motivated."

"I don't need any additional motivation to want you."

Yeah, but she might need a lot of motivation to want to keep him.

And Jason intended to give her all the motivation and reasons she needed to keep him around for the long haul.

Chapter 19

The rest of the week went by in a blur of paradoxical idle activity for Evelyn.

Jason continued playing tour guide by day—taking her hiking and picnicking in Pike’s Peak/Pike National Forest one day, then off to get some culture at The World Figure Skating Museum and Hall of Fame—and hunky gorgeous cowboy who fulfilled all Evelyn’s physical needs by night.

Sometimes, they hung with the rest of the guests, Montana, and Seth at the lake after dinner. Most times, however, they sneaked off on their own, back to either Jason’s bungalow or Evelyn’s cottage for a little heated, horizontal dancing before going back down to the lake for some midnight skinny-dipping.

The day before Evelyn was scheduled to leave, Jason did as he had promised and dragged her with him to see a ranch that his real estate agent thought he might be interested in.

She had to admit curiosity more than anything allowed her to be ‘dragged’ and when she saw the real estate agent, Susan Brooks—a stunning blond, blue-eyed supermodel type who reminded Evelyn of a grown-up Tammy—jealousy kept her around for the rest of the tour.

Susan was actually a pretty nice woman, one Jason seemed not to have any interest in at all beyond the professional, so touring the ranch and its abode wasn’t as stressful or bad an experience as Evelyn had first surmised it would be. In addition to this, the house was beautiful and cozy, occupying a generous twenty acres, large enough to support twenty cows and their calves, and included a

barn with electricity/water/phone, tack room, grain room, and fenced pasture—a horse lover’s dream home.

“Monty’s giving me a deal on some longhorns to get me started,” Jason had explained as they’d strolled hand in hand through the stables behind Susan. “It’s what she calls a family deal,” he finished with a grin.

His words and expression heartened her. No longer was she jealous of Montana Freeborn. Evelyn knew enough about Montana’s relationship with Jason to understand that the younger and devoted married woman saw him as a big brother she loved, admired and depended on—nothing more.

The inside of the house was enormous, featuring five-thousand square feet of space that included formal and informal living areas, lots of hardwood floors throughout, remodeled kitchen with granite counters, brick cook nook and breathtaking mountain views from most every room of the house, especially the master suite.

Evelyn’s favorite feature, however, was the old-fashioned porch and wrap around deck. She could tell that it was Jason’s favorite part of the house too by the way he lingered on the deck with hands stuffed in his back pockets as he rocked back on his heels and admired the panoramic vista beneath a salmon and violet-hued sunset.

Watching him and the coziness that pervaded her soul gave Evelyn ideas that she was better off not entertaining. It had her fantasizing about living a life she had long ago given up on.

She couldn’t have Jason, she couldn’t and shouldn’t be with Jason and there was no future for them. End of story.

But damned if the cowboy didn’t do his best to dispel all of Evelyn’s unspoken misgivings about their relationship, his favorite method being, of course, sensual persuasion.

Jason lingered behind Susan not only on the porch, but most of the tour, insisting he needed to stay in each room until it talked to

him and he got a feel for whether the property and he would be a good match.

It was whimsical actually, the way he talked and reminded Evelyn of Angela and EJ, as if Jason was assessing a life partner and not timber, glass, and concrete.

When she mentioned her thoughts, Jason only laughed, said that shopping for a house was like shopping for a mate. He contended the former was just as important as the latter. “Whatever I do settle on, it’s a decision for life, something I want to grow with and raise a family on. It’s going to be a house that sustains our soul as well as our bodies.”

When he said ‘our,’ it just sent uncontrollable shivers down her spine, as if he’d thrown down a gauntlet to challenge her...or asked her to marry him.

Of course, he had other ulterior motives to linger in each of the four bedrooms, living room, kitchen, dining room, and two bathrooms, long after the agent had outlined the house’s conveniences, and that was to fondle and kiss Evelyn every free second he got.

Evelyn got the feeling had Susan not been nearby, Jason would have taken her against the wall in one of the bedrooms. Indeed he had come close to bringing her to orgasm with just his fingers caressing her slit and his tongue making lazy circles against her throat. They were in the kitchen with Susan thankfully walking ahead to the stairs leading down to the three-port garage.

When Susan backtracked, evidently realizing her client and his guest weren’t behind her, Jason stopped his amorous attentions long enough to ask Susan to leave him and Evelyn alone for a few minutes. Susan accommodated them and left with a “Take your time” flung over a shoulder.

As soon as the real estate agent was gone—no doubt believing her client would discuss the purchase of the house with his

significant other—Jason got down to business, surprising Evelyn when he really did want to discuss the house.

“So, Yankee, what do you think?”

“W-why are you asking me?”

“Because I respect your opinion and I need a female’s point of view.”

“Hmm, speaking from a strictly female point of view,” she ran her hand over the smooth counter tops and imagined herself in the kitchen, throwing together a meal for Jason after a long hard day on the trail, even though she couldn’t stand cooking. “I like it,” she murmured.

“Just like?”

“Jason, I’m not the one who has to live here.”

“Doesn’t mean you can’t use your imagination.” He shrugged. “Besides, you never know.”

What was he insinuating? That he wanted something permanent? That he wanted her to give up her life in New York to move in with him here, almost clear across the country?

Before Evelyn could voice any of the questions simmering in her throat, Jason wrapped his arms around her and made her heart jump.

“It’s not like I can afford this place anyway. Not at the asking price. I’d have to do a lot of finagling to get them in the neighborhood of what I’m willing and able to spend.”

Evelyn bit her bottom lip, sizing up her opportunity to steer the conversation to a less personal, more business-like ground. Finances, she could deal with. Numbers and money were inarguable tangibles, something she worked with every day, not like opinions or hints and allusions. “How far apart are you and the owners?”

“Pretty darn far, I reckon.”

“Give me a little hint.” She realized as she asked it she was treading back into those personal waters she had been so anxious

to get away from. But something in Jason's tone drew her in, something simultaneously hopeful and determined.

"I guess if I was willing to go into substantial debt and have the bank own most of the ranch, I could swing it. But I'm trying to do this with as much of my own money as possible and borrowing as little as possible."

"You've looked at this house before, haven't you?"

He nodded, grinning. "I dropped by one day when I got word from the friend of a friend early on in my hunt. When Susan called the other day and mentioned the property, I figured since it was still on the market, I might have a chance of getting the owners to knock down their asking price, but they're pretty firm."

"How much, Jace?"

"Just under a million."

Evelyn didn't blink. Her townhouse in Brooklyn went for near the same thing and was nowhere near as big, without any of the amenities or land to raise livestock. Comparatively, Jason's dream house was a bargain.

"You don't look shocked," he said at her non-response.

"I guess because I'm from New York. I've seen much more exorbitant asking prices, for far less space and comforts."

"I know you're right. And I reckon I should probably take the risk, seeing how much I like it and all. But I'm trying to be practical, too. I don't want to end up like my f—"

She caught his frown as he cut himself off and asked, "Like your who?"

He shrugged again. "Just a friend. No one important."

He'd already let the cat out of the bag, though. Evelyn knew he'd been talking about his father and not some 'friend.' She was more curious than ever now to hear about the elusive. Mr. Makepeace, Sr.

“I think I’m going to keep looking until I find something a little more in my price range. I’m sure there’s something out there to satisfy both my logical and fanciful sides.”

“If you’re not completely comfortable with it, then you shouldn’t bid.”

Jason squeezed her close and smiled. “I knew there was a reason I brought you along.”

As light as his tone was, she could still detect the note of disappointment and it made her heart twist in her chest.

However, neither of them had a chance to address it further before Susan popped her head back in the room and asked, “So, have you guys made a decision yet?”

* * * *

Evelyn dreamed, a wonderful dream, too. In it she lay naked, spread-eagle on Jason’s bed, her wrists and ankles bound to the four bedposts by several of his lariats. The bonds were surprisingly gentle against her skin but tied snug enough to hold her in place.

She smelled him as he stood at the foot of the bed, slowly stripping out of his clothes, his woodsy clean aroma wafting out to her and making her shiver with need.

Totally helpless and panting with anticipation, she lifted her head to watch as he knelt on the mattress and lazily crawled up between her legs. He skimmed his palms over the soft smooth skin of her thighs until he reached the top of her legs, lingering at the creases, his thumbs teasing the black hair dusting her pussy.

She groaned, writhing and pulling against her bonds as Jason bent his head. He paused to blow against her cunt and Evelyn shivered at the barely there contact. “Please, Jace...”

“I love it when you beg and say my name.”

“I’ll do anything you ask if you just...please, I need you inside me. Now.”

“And I need to be inside you. But I’m going to warn you now, Evie; I won’t be gentle.”

“I don’t want gentle, Jace. I want you to fuck me. Fuck me hard.”

No sooner did she say this than he buried his face between her legs, roughly flicking his tongue against her clit before sucking the swollen nub into his mouth. He spread her moist folds with his thumbs, first licking and nibbling her labia and vulva before thrusting two fingers inside, alternately scissoring them and brushing the nerves deep in her core to make her shudder.

While she flung her head from side to side and whimpered in a horny haze, he reached up with his free hand, caressing each breast before laving, then devouring her tight, upright nipples.

“More, Jace. I want more of you...”

“You’ll have it.” He found her G-spot and deliberately put pressure on it with one finger.

“Oh, God, that’s it!” Evelyn almost jumped out of her skin, pitching her hips into his hand and straining her legs against the ropes holding them as an orgasm detonated inside her. She closed her eyes tight and arched her neck, riding out the intense fire that rushed through her.

When she came back to herself a few moments later and opened her eyes, Jason was poised over her. His palms pressed against the mattress on either side of her face as he teased her vulva with the head of his cock before driving into her slick cunt and sinking balls deep.

Evelyn gasped, felt like his penis touched her womb when he ground his pelvis against her and slowly circled his hips.

She wanted to hold him so bad, she could taste it, fisting her hands and pulling against her bonds. But she would be damned if she would ask him to untie her, even if she did want to tunnel her fingers through his glorious chestnut waves and dig her nails into his back and feel his hard muscles flex beneath her fingers.

“I want you to have something to remember me by when you go back to New York, Yankee.”

He didn’t need to remind her she was leaving. She counted the minutes and dreaded every second that ticked by signaling her departure, and she already had enough memories to keep her up at night pining for his masculine touch and taste as it was. She wished he hadn’t brought up what she’d be missing once she said good-bye to Freeborn and him.

Frustrated and ravenous, she growled and bucked her hips against him. “Just fuck me, Jason. Shut up and take me now.”

His smile was lazy when he pulled back, and slowly stroked into her to the hilt. He pulled back again a second later, plunged into her with more force, leaning in to sink his teeth into a breast before running his tongue along her skin to soothe the hurt.

Her pussy quivered with the pleasure pain of his ruthless maneuvers. She bit her bottom lip to keep from crying out or begging him to make her come again. Unfortunately, she couldn’t keep a low groan from escaping her throat.

“I know, honey. I know...” he whispered against her ear, his tender words of understanding in direct contrast to the way he thrust into her, using his cock like the sensual weapon it was, his hard-driving plunges taking her breath away with each entry and retreat. “You’ll remember me, won’t you, Evie.”

“Yes...yes...”

“Say it!” He thrust hard.

“I won’t...” She gasped when he ground into her again, snatching her breath away. “I won’t forget you, Jace.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear.” He drove into her one final time before Evelyn came again on a strangled shout.

When she opened her eyes this time, it was to the real vision of Jason lounging beside her, trailing one finger down her side as she lay naked and on her side, unfettered and facing him.

“Care to share what you were dreaming about?”

She gaped. “Dreaming about?” Damn. Had she been talking in her sleep? Or worse still, had she been moaning in ecstasy? Remembering what Jason had been doing to her in her dream, she wouldn’t be surprised if either were the case. “I, uh...What makes you think I was dreaming?”

“The smile on your face.”

“Oh.”

“Were you dreaming about me?”

“I don’t think I have ever met anyone so arrogant in my li— Oomph.” She landed against Jason’s hard chest with a thud as he pulled her into a one-armed embrace and held her close.

“Nothing arrogant about it. Just deductive reasoning.”

She lifted her eyebrows. “Oh, really?”

“That and the fact that you’re sopping wet.” He reached between their bodies and slid one finger into her slick cunt to emphasize his point, wiggled it around a bit, slowly pulled it out, then popped it into his mouth and groaned with relish. “Now that’s a tasty treat to wake up to.”

How was she supposed to wriggle her way out of this one? Like the man said, she was sopping, and it was obviously for him.

Evelyn pushed against his chest with both hands, trying to distance herself, but Jason wouldn’t release her.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“I’ve got things to do. Packing, showering...”

“It’s early yet, and there’s plenty of time for that. Especially since I’ll help you.”

“Thanks, but no thanks.” She didn’t need him to see all the junk she’d bought and would be carrying back, to her family and friends in New York. He already thought she was a shameless shopaholic and clotheshorse, only interested in appearances. The gear she’d acquired since arriving would only entrench his perceptions.

Jason squeezed her arm and nuzzled her throat. "I reckon I should tell you now: I'm going to miss you, Yankee."

"Please don't start with the long, teary good-byes."

He pulled her closer and rubbed her arm. "You and your tough talk don't scare me none, Evelyn Vega. I know your bark is worse than your bite."

"Don't be so sure..." She deliberately slid her hand down between his legs to fondle his balls, then bent her head to nibble his pecs. "My bite can be pretty lethal." She circled his nipples with her tongue, thoroughly laving each one and making him shudder beneath her touch.

As much as his reaction delighted and had her craving his hard cock stroking inside her, Evelyn pulled back and sat up. She folded her legs yoga-style, trying not to stare directly into those hypnotic blue eyes or she'd lose her nerve. She fiddled with the bed linen for several moments before Jason reached out and grabbed her hand.

"You're far from a retiring southern belle, Evie. Spit it out."

She raised her eyes to his and heat uncoiled in her belly at the intense look in his eyes, just like she knew it would. "Maybe this is a good time to discuss...us," she murmured.

"I'm all ears."

"Don't look at me like that."

"I don't know what you mean. Like what?"

"Like a..." *Man whose about to be told he only has six months to live.*

Or was that her guilty conscience talking? "Jace, I'm trying to make this as easy and simple as possible."

"And what exactly is 'this?'"

"A clean break." She watched the muscles in his jaw work as he gritted his teeth. She'd known he wouldn't take this well. But what did he expect? They weren't a couple. They weren't anything, except...God, she didn't really think of him as a fuck

buddy. There was too much between them to even call him that. So what was he?

“Since when has anything between us been clean? We’ve been down and dirty and messy from the beginning.” He forked his fingers through her hair. “And I like it that way.”

“I’ve enjoyed it, too. But all good things have to come to an end sooner or later.”

“Who says?”

“Jace...don’t make me do this.”

“What, spell things out?”

“You’ve known from the beginning that this can’t work between us.”

“I haven’t known any such thing and neither have you.”

“I wasn’t looking for a commitment when we started this, Jason. You knew that. Nothing’s changed. I’m still not looking for a commitment.” She held her breath as she watched him, wondered if he could tell she lied through her teeth. But just because she wanted something didn’t mean she was supposed to have it, or that it would be good for her once she got it.

“So you’re not ready for a commitment. Neither am I. Who says we can’t still keep in contact and—”

“What? Stay friends?”

He winced as if she had slapped him. “Reckon I couldn’t ever look at you as just a friend. Not after everything we’ve done.”

“So you see, we’re in agreement then.”

“Not exactly, but if that’s the way you want it...” He shrugged and pulled her down beside him. “If I’m just your summer fling and we’re calling it quits after today, then I’m going to make it worth both our while.”

Evelyn melted beneath his heated kiss, heart trembling with lust and a little disappointment at his sudden retreat and acquiescence. She couldn’t decide whether or not she was pleased or upset with his response.

The thing was, he certainly didn't feel like a fling—summer or otherwise. Especially when she was in his strong arms like now, or had her head nestled against his firm, muscled chest. He felt solid and whole and real, a man made for the long haul

But was she a woman made for the long haul?

After Todd, and despite his and her five-year union, Evelyn didn't think she had it in her to open herself up to someone like that again—unconditionally.

"Don't be so hung up on the past or semantics, Evie. Just be with me in the here and now," he whispered against her ear and held her tight as if trying to emit a message.

Evelyn no longer wondered if he was reading her mind. She did wonder, however, when he would confirm it. "I don't want there to be any misunderstandings, Jason."

He pulled back to glare at her. "Trust me. You've made yourself abundantly clear on the status of our relationship."

Was that an attitude she heard from him? Was it possible he wasn't as nonchalant about this as he pretended? And wasn't she just being the dog in the manger for questioning him?

He was giving her what she wanted by not making a fuss, after all. Wasn't he?

Chapter 20

If she thought she was going to get rid of him that easily, she had another thing coming.

He was just supposed to forget everything that had gone on between them, everything they'd shared since they'd met as if it hadn't happened? What in Sam Hill was on the woman's mind? She might as well ask him to cut off a limb, since he was about as likely to do that as he was to let her go without a fight.

He missed her already and she hadn't gone anywhere yet. Come a few hours from now, there'd be no telling what sort of withdrawal symptoms he'd be suffering once the Yankee good and truly left Freeborn.

Jason swallowed hard at the idea of never seeing her grumpy face over a plate of flapjacks, or hearing her grouse about getting up at the crack of dawn and hiking all over the great state of Colorado for no good reason, except to see the pretty sights.

He pulled her close as she slept, wanting to do all sorts of fresh and illicit things to her body, but he knew she needed her rest. Already he had kept her up half the night and into the wee hours having his way with her and ruining himself for any other woman in the bargain.

There was no way he'd be able to look at another woman with lust again, no way another woman could measure up to the sexy combination of playful innocent ingénue and stubborn tough-as-nails cynic the way Evelyn did. She was a charming combination of sex and intelligence with a generous helping of sarcastic wit,

and daring athleticism sprinkled on top and Jason wasn't about to let the perfect woman walk out of his life.

He'd let her have her moment to believe he was giving up on her and resigned to not seeing her again. But he had plans, and they didn't include his staying out of touch. He had Montana, after all to get information from, and if worse came to worse, he wasn't above contacting Evelyn's sister, Angela, in New York to pump her for information before he made his trip to the Big Apple.

Then he remembered the saddle he owed her. Between trips with Evelyn to see the sights and house-hunting, he'd put the finishing touches to her custom-made saddle just yesterday, no mean feat since he spent most of his free time with Evelyn. But he'd done it, and now he had his excuse to get her address, intended to just ask her outright.

Jason decided he'd give Evelyn time to settle in and get back to her normal life away from him, then he would make his move. Three weeks to a month max, no more. He reckoned this was enough time for her to stew in her own juices before she began to miss him, or at least before she started to admit it to herself. He knew how stubborn and contrary she was, how much she liked to deny her feelings and that it wouldn't be beneath her to claim she had no affection for him beyond the superficial.

He, on the other hand, had no problems admitting how he felt about her, at least not to himself. He sure as shooting knew a month was more than enough time for him to be away from her before the notion of her settling for one of them-there high-powered, three-piece-suit metro-sexuals back east started driving him crazy.

"What are you scheming and plotting on? Or should I say who?"

Jason glanced down to see her wide awake and staring at him. "What makes you think I'm plotting anything on anyone?"

“I’ve known you long enough to know that look, that’s why.” She gently pulled from his arms and glanced over her shoulder at the bedside clock.

He couldn’t dispute her because in just two weeks, she already knew him better than any woman he’d ever been with, and he knew her just as well, telepathy notwithstanding.

He’d learned to temper his reception, reading her as much as possible without invading her privacy, yet still trying to give himself a leg up on how to approach her and their relationship. It was a delicate balancing act that he was only just getting the hang of. He applauded Montana every day for being able to endure under the umbrella of ‘special abilities’ and ‘gifts’ for as long as she had without losing all her sense of self and sanity.

As Montana had told him, using his abilities was second nature. He had more trouble cutting them off than on, not to mention Evelyn was such a passionate and volatile woman, she provided him a lot of opportunities to read her—thoughts and emotions.

All this made it easy for Jason to anticipate her move and shoot out his hand to catch Evelyn’s wrist when she threw one leg over the side of the bed intending to get up. “Where are you going?”

“Didn’t we go through this same argument a few hours ago?”

“It wasn’t an argument. Just a little difference of opinion.”

“Yes, I wanted to pack, and you wouldn’t let me.”

“Eventually, we got it all done.”

She averted her gaze. “Yes, we did,” she mumbled as if it hurt her to admit he was right about something.

With her speech, with her body language, with every minute that went by, it was clear Evelyn was getting a head start on distancing herself.

He wanted to tell her to stop wasting her time and stop deluding herself, but decided to just let her see for herself they

were meant to be together, and it didn't take any old elf or telepathy to tell him that.

"Nothing left for you to do now, except get showered and dressed and out to the van for the airport," Jason murmured. Despite his plans, he didn't look forward to saying good-bye to her, and knew it would be one of the hardest things he had ever done next to seeing his father buried.

"Yep."

He got up from the bed and pulled her with him, lifting her up into his arms.

"What do you think you're doing, cowboy?"

"We'll save time if we shower together."

"A likely story."

He caught her grin before she curved her arms around his neck and laid her head on his shoulder. He decided he could hold her like this against him for the rest of his life and not suffer any stress or strain or deprivation.

Jason walked to her bathroom and placed her in the large tub before climbing in with her. He busied himself turning on the water and adjusting the settings to steaming hot just the way Evelyn liked it right before he put her under the spray in front of him.

He caught her thought about his unimaginable and refreshing chivalry, caught how much she was going to miss it when she went back to New York.

Jason wanted to reassure her that she wouldn't have to do without it, but then that would defeat the entire purpose of his surprise.

Instead, he wrapped himself up in the solemnity of her silence, decided not to break it as he lathered up a loufa sponge with the cottage's shower gel and gently washed Evelyn's body from head to toe.

It took everything in him not to get down on his knees to taste her, especially when she shuddered as he caressed her folds and clit with the lathered sponge. Her responsiveness had always been one of her biggest turn-ons for him.

Once Jason was done with Evelyn, he quickly washed himself before she had a chance to put her hands on him. He didn't think he could stand any prolonged contact of Evelyn's hands to his anatomy when she was so close to leaving. He realized he needed a little distance himself, at least as much as sharing a shower would allow. Not that it mattered since Evelyn seemed more than happy to just stand under the spray of the shower and watch him perform his ablutions without lifting a finger.

When he was through, he turned off the water, retrieved a towel, and wrapped it around his waist.

He pulled another towel off the rack and draped it around her before lifting her in his arms and taking her back to the bed where he carefully placed her in the center of the bed.

"I feel like a baby that's about to be powdered down before bed." Evelyn chuckled.

He smiled and silently patted her dry with the towel.

"Jace?"

He raised his eyes to stare at her, felt her hesitation, and was tempted to pry but held back.

"I am going to miss you, you know."

"I know."

"Will you make love to me one more time before I go?"

He put the towel aside, got rid of his own, and pulled her into his arms. "Try and stop me."

* * * *

This was going to be a lot harder than Evelyn had anticipated.

Saying good-bye to Jason in the cottage was hard enough, but facing him out here at the van with all the other guests and having to say it to Montana and Seth was just more than her emotions should have to bear in one day.

Sitting in her sister's kitchen a couple of weeks ago griping about this trip, she never would have seen this moment coming, never could have known that she'd get so attached to these people or that it would be so difficult to leave.

Montana was first, stepping forward to pull Evelyn into a crushing hug that reminded her so much of Angela in its intensity and warmth. She was instantly homesick.

"Hope you enjoyed your stay with us, Evie."

Like Jason, she had taken to calling Evelyn by the intimate moniker, and Evelyn smiled and responded in kind, "I loved it here, Monty. A lot more than I thought I ever could." She had to force herself not to glance Jason's way, had already caught a glimpse of him leaning back against his pick-up, legs crossed at the ankles, arms folded across his chest, and jaw muscles furiously working.

"I hope you'll think about coming out again then?"

Should she tell Montana that there was no chance of that no matter how much she had enjoyed herself? Should she tell her that she was willingly leaving her heart and soul behind and wouldn't be coming back to reclaim them? "I'll think about it," she finally murmured, but was sure that if Angela had anything to say about it, or got an inkling of what had gone on between Evelyn and Jason, Evelyn would be flying back to Freeborn tomorrow.

What was she going to tell that busy-body sister of hers when she asked about the trip? And Evelyn knew there was no way Angela wouldn't ask. The woman had invested too much—her money and romantic, passionate heart—in this venture not to want to know if her plans had blossomed into another love match for one of her younger siblings.

Before Evelyn could think on it anymore, taciturn and stony-faced Seth Phoenix swept her into a bear hug that almost took her breath away. She could do no less than return it, and when she caught Jason's expression in the distance, she immediately regretted it. If looks could kill, she'd be in a coffin six feet under already.

"We will miss you, Evelyn."

"I'll miss you t—" Evelyn felt herself being yanked back by the arm.

"She does have a plane to catch," Jason muttered.

"But is she not riding with the rest of the guests?" Seth asked.

"Not a chance. I've got this."

Montana laughed and waved. "Have a safe trip, Evie!"

"Thanks, and I had a great time!" She turned to glare on Jason's profile, practically had to run to keep up with his long-legged strides. "What the hell is the matter with you?"

"I've got your bags stacked in the truck already. I figured there was no reason for you to linger around wasting time."

"What wasting time? I was saying good-bye to my host and hostess."

"Did you have to enjoy it so much?"

"What?" Evelyn tried to pull her arm out of his grip but couldn't, just avoided being dragged the rest of the five feet to his truck.

"You didn't have to cuddle up so close to him, you know."

"*Seth?*"

"Yeah, Seth."

"It was just a friendly hug."

"Well, I didn't like it, all right?"

"What is wrong with you?"

"Phoenix can find his own friend to hug and leave mine alone."

"Are you jealous?" she asked, heart inexplicably soaring at his caveman act as she watched the flush of color rush to his face beneath the sexy tan.

"That's not the point."

"Oh I think it is." She reached out to cup his cheek. "You know you're being ridiculous, considering Seth and Monty are crazy in love with each other and any fool can see it."

"Yeah, well..." He toed the dirt with the front of his boot as he released her. "Get in."

"You know kidnapping's a federal offense."

"I'm not kidnapping anyone. I'm just claiming what's mine."

"Ooh, I love it when you get all Neanderthal on me." Evelyn dramatically shivered and headed towards the front of the truck, expectedly getting a playful whack on the ass.

"Don't be smart just because you're leaving, Yankee."

By the time she made it around to the passenger side and got in, Jason was all strapped in and raring to go, and Evelyn had an intense sense of déjà vu.

She was on her way back to the airport where she'd first met Jason Makepeace, the place where they'd fallen in instant hate and sparred practically all the way back to Freeborn.

Evelyn tried to concentrate on the sights and not look at his rugged profile, the muscles working along his jaw as he clenched his teeth or the sight of his elegant strong fingers strangling the steering wheel into submission as he drove. It was hard work, however, trying to ignore such a commanding presence. Just the scent of him, his authority, as he sat next to her, made her want to jump his bones. He didn't have to make an overture or look at her to make his presence felt. He just had to do what he was doing, and be there.

There was going to be a big void in her life when she got back to New York, a void no city slicker, older man could fill.

But she had made her bed and was determined not to turn back. She knew she had made the right decision even if Jason couldn't see it.

Fifteen minutes into the ride, she realized that the time to part grew nearer, and the closer they got to the airport, the more urgent the need to talk became for Evelyn.

She wanted to hear his voice, needed to. At the very least, it would let her know she wasn't alone in the world or her determination. "So we're going to end things the same way we started? At odds and gritting our teeth?"

"I'm not the one who wants to end things."

"I don't want to argue with you about this, Jason."

"No, you just want to quit."

"There's nothing to quit!" She threw up her hands, took a deep breath and turned to him. "This is where I came in. Uppity city slicker meets ornery arrogant cowboy."

"We've come a long way since then, Evie." He looked at her from the corner of his eyes and she silently added the *come too far to turn back now* that she knew was on the tip of his tongue.

"At least you're not smoking," he added, turning to her as he pulled into the short-term parking lot and quickly found a spot.

"I admit I have you to thank for that. Which reminds me. You owe me a saddle."

Jason grinned as he turned off the ignition and unlatched his seatbelt. He leaned towards Evelyn and paused with his lips a hairsbreadth from hers. "I haven't forgotten."

"Well, did you finish making it?"

"I've got a few special touches to put to it before I'm done. I was going to ship it to you as soon as it's ready. So I need your address." He closed the space separating them and slipped his tongue between her parted lips.

Evelyn didn't know she held her breath until she gasped at the shock of contact. Unconsciously, she sucked his tongue into her

mouth, stroking it with hers, and savoring his taste and all the rough and smooth edges.

She burrowed her hands in his hair to hold him close, whimpering at the idea of missing this—his hard body, his smell, his voice—once she got on that plane and didn't turn back.

After a long moment, Jason pulled away, cupping her face with both hands and holding her in place. "You don't stop, you'll miss your plane."

She just looked at him, wondered if maybe that wouldn't be the best thing.

Jason reached across her to open the dashboard, pulled out a pen and paper and handed each to Evelyn. "Don't forget your phone number, too."

"Phone number?"

"I have to put it on the FedEx slip. I like to cover all my bases." He grinned.

"Okay." Obediently she wrote out her address and phone number, felt like a woman at the end of a blind date giving out her information for a future meeting.

Her heart stuttered at the idea right before Jason kissed her hard and got out of his truck.

By the time Evelyn joined him outside, he already had all her bags out of the truck and was stacking them in one of the carts in the lot.

They silently walked to the airport check-in, got her bags checked and her electronic tickets printed up. Before Evelyn knew it, she was ready to go through the last security check-point before boarding.

Jason stood on the side of the line to the metal detectors and pulled her into his arms for another scorching kiss and mimicked her dream when he pulled back to murmur, "Something to remember me by."

She didn't tell him she'd never forget him because she was determined to at least try.

Chapter 21

LaGuardia Airport, New York – One month later

One carry-on in tow over his shoulder, Jason retrieved his other bag from baggage claim and made his way to the exit in search of Angela Calminetti.

After only a few seconds of scanning the crowds, he spotted her, a pretty petite brunette in a long, flowered sundress, smiling and wildly waving at him.

Grinning, he lifted his bags, made his way over to where she stood and was immediately swallowed in a hard warm hug.

“It’s so nice to see you again!”

“You’ve got a long memory, Angela.” Her name came out as if he had been saying it all his life, like she was already family. He *felt* like she was family.

Angela smiled. “You made quite an impression on me and my girls a couple of years ago.”

“Oh, right, Danni and Tina.”

“I think it was one of the first times they had a crush on the same man at the same time. Even though they’re both tomboys like their Aunt Evie, they still have different tastes with other things. But with you, they were in whole-hearted agreement.”

“Agreement?”

“You’re a major babe.”

“Oh...” Jason felt his face heating.

“Well, don’t be shy.” She hooked an arm through his and led him towards the exit. “Let’s get this reunion on the road proper.”

“I’m still not sure popping up on her is such a good idea.”

“Well, you’re here now and we’ll just have to see about that.”

Jason chuckled as they made it out to the parking lot.

He still couldn’t believe he had let this woman convince him to come here behind Evelyn’s back. Before she’d called the ranch asking for him two weeks ago, his plans had only been in the embryonic stage. Heck, he had darn near convinced himself not to make the trip at all, that Evelyn really didn’t want to have anything to do with him and he’d only be stirring up trouble if he did come. One call from a confident and impassioned Angela, though, had changed all his doubts and had him booking the earliest flight to New York he could find.

“So, how’s the house-hunting going?” Angela asked as she started her SUV, pulled out of the parking lot and headed towards the throughway.

Jason gaped, and before he could ask her how she knew that, she said, “Monty mentioned something about you moving on.”

“You and Monty talk a lot, don’t you?”

“Let’s not be coy, Jason. I know you know by now I sent Evelyn out there to meet you.”

“I had an idea from what Monty said when Evelyn first arrived.”

She turned to him briefly before merging into the heavy afternoon traffic. “So, how do you feel about that?”

He frowned, finding it hard to keep up with this woman. If he hadn’t already seen the physical resemblance to Evelyn in her facial features and lean build, her straightforward approach would have been a dead give away. “How do I feel?”

“If you’re anything like my brothers and sisters, I’m sure you feel a little violated, manipulated...”

“At first, I was.”

“And now?”

“I reckon I appreciate your...intervention.”

"I really like you, Jason Makepeace." She chuckled. "I knew there was a reason you were right for my sister. You're complete opposites."

"That's not exactly a good thing."

"You're referring to the country boy-city slicker thing?"

"That and the distance and—"

"Your age?"

Jason shrugged. "Evelyn seemed to have a problem with it."

"Trust me, she got over that a long time ago."

"How much have you two been talking since she's been back?"

"Not as much as usual. But I know my sister."

"So she hasn't said anything to you specifically."

Angela took a deep breath, glancing in her rearview mirror before she put her foot on the gas as the traffic began to move again.

Jason tensed beside her, not entirely sure he wanted to hear what she was about to say.

"There's some things you and Evelyn have to hash out before she goes back out to Colorado with you."

His heart tripped then sped at the certainty in her voice. She spoke as if he and Evelyn were a done deal. She sounded like Monty and it made him wonder who had rubbed off on whom. "What things exactly?"

"Oh, it's not for me to tell you. You'll have to find out from Evie when you two get back together. By then she should be ready to tell you what she needs to."

For cryptic Jason didn't think Monty and Seth's Black and Fair elves had anything on Angela Calminetti.

"I'm sure you didn't eat on the plane and a young growing man like you must be starving. How about I take you out for a nice meal before I take you back to Evie's?"

"I could go for something good to eat," he admitted. He didn't really like airline food and the country western breakfast he'd had

earlier that morning was long forgotten. “But, uh, isn’t Evelyn at work?”

Angela nodded. “And will be for several more hours, the workaholic.” She turned to him and smiled. “That’s one thing you both have in common.”

Not that he considered himself a workaholic, but he could see that Evelyn was driven and competitive when she put her mind on something she wanted, which led him to believe that she really didn’t want a relationship with him or she would have been willing to fight for it.

Angela reached over to squeeze and pat his thigh. “Evelyn is a little gun shy since her divorce. I know you know how that feels.”

“I uh...” Was she reading his mind like he’d been reading Evelyn’s back in Colorado?

“You know about Todd?”

“She mentioned him a time or two,” Jason said. Most of what he’d learned about Todd he’d pilfered from Evelyn’s memories..

“I’m sure she didn’t go into a lot of details. But that’s something else you two are going to have to hash out and get past before you can be together.”

What had the man *done* to her? Jason wondered.

From what he’d gleaned of Evelyn’s thoughts and remarks, he got the general impression that she had been hurt by a couple of men in her past but specifically by her husband. However, Jason had a feeling the man’s faults as a spouse went much deeper than his being an overall jerk.

“So, any houses and property catch your fancy yet?” Angela asked.

He smiled, liked her resolve and that she didn’t let anything veer her from her mission. Her personality was a double-edged sword to be sure, especially since he was the one currently in her sights. “It’s coming.” He wouldn’t dare tell her he had already bid on a spread and looked forward to moving out of Freeborn in the

next month or so. He wanted to share that tidbit of information with Evelyn first, even if it wasn't the dream house and property they had looked at together.

"Playing it close to the vest, huh? I can understand that."

"I appreciate it."

During the rest of the ride, Angela did most of the talking, entertaining like a good hostess should. She shared some especially colorful anecdotes about Evelyn and her childhood growing up with five siblings that had Jason practically slapping his knee in amusement.

The pictures she drew were priceless and had him anxious and ready to meet the irrepressible Vega clan.

He got so absorbed by Angela's tales, that before Jason knew it, she was pulling her SUV up to a curb in front of a quaint but elegant townhouse in the Sunset Park section of Brooklyn.

Though nowhere near the country vibe of Colorado Springs, the surrounding sidewalks were tree-lined and pristine, and the large nearby park was lush and beautiful. Not that it could ever rival the wide-open spaces of the Midwest, but for an area in the city, it wasn't bad.

Angela turned to him and said, "I wish I had more time to take you on a tour of the neighborhood. It really is lovely as you can see, but that's something else I'm going to have to leave to Evie. You should have fun exploring with her and I'm sure she'll have a ball rediscovering all that she's missing cooped up in that stuffy office of hers ten to twelve hours a day." She led the way upstairs into the lobby of the building, unlocked the door, and let Jason enter the house proper in front of her.

He stood in the middle of the polished wood floor, pleased by his surroundings and liking Evelyn's surprisingly understated tastes.

The living room was comfortable and homey with plump rust throw pillows on the cream sofa, but still refined, boasting

chandeliers overhead, plush Oriental throw rugs, and black marble countertops in the kitchen.

The dining area to the left of him featured six high back, ornately carved maple chairs, surrounding a matching table.

Jason took several steps to the table and ran his fingers over the finished wood, imagined Evelyn giving grand dinner parties for her rich urban co-workers and friends.

"You'd never think it from the way she acts and dresses, but she's really just a romantic homebody at heart."

Jason turned to see Angela standing right behind him.

The woman moved like a cat, which totally belied her bright exuberant personality.

"Actually, I have seen the romantic homebody side of her," he admitted, remembering the homestyle dinners up at the main house at Freeborn, the quiet times spent around the campfire after a hard day of round-up and riding, the easygoing way Evie had with everyone around her.

Jason smiled at his memory of Evelyn falling off of her horse the first time she'd tried to mount him, and her dogged determination to get things done right once she learned what needed to be done.

"You're missing her, aren't you?"

Did he have that wistful a look on his face or...was she reading his mind?

He hadn't *felt* like his mind had been touched, for want of a better word, but then how was he to know what it felt like to be read? He'd only been the reader so far, not the readee and this made him wonder what it felt like to Evelyn when he heard her thoughts, or if she felt anything from him at all. Did she feel enough to give him away?

Jason stared at Angela a long moment before answering.

He knew there was something special and different about her, but didn't know if he wanted to go as far as believing she could

read his mind as easily as he could read Evelyn's. "I've missed her every day since she left," he confessed.

"Well, we'll have to put a stop to that forthwith and get you two back together as soon as possible." She took his arm and led him through the house, giving him a quick tour of the downstairs and the second floor where she had him drop off his bags in the master bedroom, and insisted it wasn't presumptuous of him. She added that if Evelyn had a problem with it, he could just tell her to speak to Angela. Like Evelyn would actually go for that before kicking his keister.

"Now let's go fortify you with some food so you can go face off with my baby sister." Angela chuckled as they left the house.

* * * *

Two hours and a filling, hardy meal later at a neighborhood steak house, Angela drove Jason up to lower Manhattan where Evelyn worked in the Financial District.

The closer they got to the area, the more claustrophobic Jason felt, and it wasn't just from the idea of being reunited with Evelyn, but from the narrow and devastated streets that stretched as far as the eye could see. Every avenue they drove down seemed to be under some form of construction or repair and the air was absolutely rife with pollutants that made Jason wonder how Evelyn, how anyone, could stand working or living in the area.

"Getting nervous?"

There she was again, plucking his feelings from thin air. If the woman wasn't such a sweetheart, she'd be dangerous. "Is it that obvious?"

"You're crushing the brim of that Stetson pretty good."

"You sure it's not your driving?" he teased.

She grinned. "I get that a lot. I guess it's from driving around so slow in the 'burbs. I get on the highway and in the city and just let a little loose. My husband calls me Angela Andretti."

Jason laughed, silently thanking her for keeping his mind off of his upcoming meeting with her teasing sense of humor and down-to-earth manner. From what he could see so far, both must be a Vega trait.

Angela found a parking space down one of the infamous narrow streets, and left the engine idling as she turned to him with a smile. "Well, this is where I let you out to fly on your own."

Jason unlatched his seatbelt and leaned in to kiss her cheek. "It's been a real pleasure, Angela."

She made a dismissive gesture with her hand. "Oh, pish-tosh. It's all in a day's work."

"Still, I put you out."

"Didn't put me out one bit. I had a ball driving you around and feeding you."

Jason got the feeling it was these moments and days that Angela Calminetti lived for and thought her husband and kids were lucky to have her in their lives.

He reached in the back seat to retrieve the gift box with the saddle in it then opened the door to get out before he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"Don't let her scare you, Jason. Her bark's a lot worse than her bite, and I know for a fact that she has strong feelings for you."

Were they strong enough to make her want to live in Colorado? Jason was going for the entire enchilada here and would settle for nothing less but he didn't ask, instead joked, "I'll try and remember that when she's piercing my eardrums."

Angela chuckled and keyed the ignition. "You'll be fine, honey. Bye now!"

Jason got out of her SUV and watched her drive off as he stood on the sidewalk.

“Jason Makepeace?”

He started before turning around to see a familiar face. “Jennifer!” He went to her, automatically opening his arms for a hug as she did the same. It wasn’t until she squeezed him tight and he felt her breasts pressing just under his chest that he started to feel self-conscious and imagined Evelyn’s possible reaction.

“Well, gosh you are a sight for sore eyes, I’ll tell you,” Jennifer said as she pulled away.

“You, too.”

“So, what brings you here to the big wicked city?”

“Visiting a friend,” Jason said.

“I shouldn’t be so immodest to think you came all the way out here for little ol’ me, should I?” Jennifer teased.

“Not this time, no.”

“Shucks.” She snapped her fingers, then hooked an arm through his. “Walk with me a ways.”

They strolled down the street at an easy pace, weaving around the idle throngs in front of the Trade Center makeshift memorial site where pictures of twisted metal, soot-covered civilians and countless firefighter funerals lined the blocks-long chain link fence.

Jason walked with an open-mouthed gaze and Jennifer remarked, “Yeah, that was my reaction when I first saw it. The pictures on television just don’t do it justice.”

“I never imagined this...” He knew his reaction was totally illogical, but he suddenly felt desperate to get Evelyn out of this city and away from any place where something like the terror attacks could happen. It was illogical because unless he took her off the planet, she’d never be totally safe. But at least she would be with him.

“Unfortunately, you get used to it. Now I just walk by it like the rest of the native New Yorkers in the area, trying to get to

where I'm going the fastest way possible and cursing the tourists in my way."

He turned to her and paused in front of the chainlink fence. "How do you stand the confinement after growing up in Colorado?"

She shrugged. "Actually, I'm just in the area doing some shopping before I'm off to an audition, and then my bread-and-butter job."

"Where would that be?"

"This little honky tonk dive in Brooklyn, Hank's Moonshine. It's a nice slice of home that keeps me sane in an insane world." She giggled.

"So how's the acting coming?"

"I'll let you know tonight when you come by the bar to visit me. Bring your friend."

"Oh, I'm not sure about that." He was sure the minute Evelyn got a look at Jennifer the fur would fly. He shouldn't pigeonhole her, but he knew his woman, and he knew how her possessive mind worked. It wouldn't matter that he had come all the way out here to see *her*.

"C'mon. I insist." Jennifer reached into her big suede patch shoulder bag for a pen and piece of paper to write out her cell number and the address to Hank's Moonshine and handed it over to Jason when she was done. "You can't come to New York for a visit and not pop in to see me. It's been too long since I've seen such a handsome, friendly face."

Jason felt his face heating again as he took the paper. "I'll try and stop by later."

"I'll hold you to it." She grinned. "So, where are you staying while you're here?"

"Actually, in Brooklyn, Sunset Park."

Jennifer whistled. "I know it. Nice area and it's a hop and a skip from the bar by the subway, or driving. I'm sure your friend will know how to get there."

Jason didn't miss the emphasis she put on 'friend' and said, "I'm sure she will."

"Good. I'm looking forward to seeing y'all there."

He must have a thing for forceful, bossy women, Jason thought and wondered when Jennifer Brighthart had become so...citified.

She took him further off-guard when she stood on her toes to kiss him full on the mouth.

"I'll see you later tonight."

He licked his lips and watched her sashay down the street, gradually becoming a small dot down the street before he turned on his boot heels to go back the way he had come.

He was more determined than ever to face his contrary woman and convince her that he was the man for her and that she belonged with him in Colorado.

Chapter 22

“Okay, you’ve been avoiding me for weeks now and it’s time to stop the madness.”

Evelyn glanced up from the figures she was studying on her monitor and grinned at her friend and co-worker standing on the threshold of her office with her arms crossed over her ample breasts as she glared at Evelyn over her stylish-framed glasses.

“You know it’s nothing personal, Gail. I’ve just been really busy.”

“Uh-huh. Sounds like a load of malarkey to me.” Gail crossed the plush carpeting, paused in front of Evelyn’s desk, put her fists on her hips and gave her friend one of her best don’t-screw-with-me looks. “Details. I want details so spill ’em.”

Yes, Angela, all of her brothers and sisters, and Gail wanted details, but Evelyn wasn’t spilling, at least not yet. She was too busy trying to deal with Freeborn-Jason withdrawal and act like it hadn’t ripped her heart out to get on that plane four weeks ago to come home.

“There’s nothing to spill,” Evelyn finally murmured.

Gail, however, was not buying it, plunked her generous butt on Evelyn’s large desk and turned the monitor towards her and away from Evelyn. “Please, honey. I wasn’t born yesterday. And there is no way in the world you spent two weeks on a ranch surrounded by all that rugged cowboy pulchritude and nothing happened.”

“How do you know I wasn’t surrounded by a bunch of no-tooth, gimpy Chesters and Deputy Droopalongs?”

“Because I know your sister, girl. And she ain’t sending you no place like that.”

“Don’t remind me that I still owe her a talking to for setting me up.” Evelyn almost gasped and covered her mouth with her hand when she realized she’d walked right into her friend’s trap.

“Mmm-hmm. I knew it.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“What I think is that you’ve been holding out on me, hun.” Gail leaned close and grinned. “Don’t be so mean. You know this married girl lives vicariously through your single-girl antics.”

Evelyn felt the fierce heat of a blush flood her cheeks when she remembered some of the very ‘antics’ she’d performed with Jason—in the lake, in the woods, in the stables...Damn, she missed that man! “You know me better than that.”

“Unfortunately, I do, but I was hoping you’d correct that little aberrant celibate issue once you got into the fresh air of the country, encompassed by all those cowboy pheromones.”

“Enough with the cowboy allusions already.”

“Sure, once you tell me where you got the glow.”

“Oh, please. I’m no more glowing than when I come back from the Caribbean.”

“This glow is different. It’s an I-got-served-by-a-hot-man-and-served-well glow.”

Evelyn laughed, couldn’t help herself. Gail did that to her, brought out the young, flirty, and carefree person and was always able to make Evelyn see the silver lining in any situation.

“C’mon.” Gail hopped off of the desk and came around it to drag Evelyn to her feet. “Let’s go down for a smoke and you can tell me all about him over a nice cigarette break.”

Evelyn allowed herself to be dragged all the way to the door before she stopped in her tracks. “Um...I quit.”

Gail gaped. "I thought something was going on when I didn't see you outside anymore during your breaks, but I never considered that."

Evelyn shrugged. "It was about time."

"You're telling me." Gail leaned close again. "So tell me, was it all that mountain air and high altitude that got to you, or something else?"

"A little of both."

"Don't hedge. If you've got a kick-the-habit secret weapon, I need to know. I've been trying for years to quit the sticks."

"Actually, I made a bet with the cow boss at Freeborn. He promised me a personalized handmade saddle if I could quit smoking for the two weeks I was at the ranch."

"And we all know how competitive my girlfriend is."

"I couldn't help myself."

"I'm curious to know what else you got for quitting besides a saddle." Gail grabbed her arm again and walked her towards reception. "C'mon then and get some second-hand smoke for old time's sake. It'll be the last time I bother you, I promise. But we have got to talk. Anyone who could get my Evelyn to quit smoking, I've got to hear more about."

Evelyn grinned, still not ready to share Jason with anyone just yet, still at the stage where she barely believed her idyll with him had really occurred.

They had just passed the busy main reception desk for the floor when Trudy, the young temp behind the desk began frantically waving at them.

"I think she wants you," Gail said and was in the act of drawing Evelyn back to the desk when the elevator doors at the far end of the bank opened.

Evelyn froze when she saw a tall man in cowboy boots, blue jeans, denim jacket over a button shirt, and a black Stetson with the brim down low over his eyes get off the elevator.

It couldn't be!

"Evie, did you hear Trudy? She said you had a guest on the way up and..."

Evelyn barely heard Gail, too busy watching Jason make his way over to the glass doors.

She couldn't see his eyes, but she'd recognize those broad shoulders, luscious thighs, and long, bow-legged stride anywhere.

"That must be him," Trudy said as she buzzed him in.

When he opened and stepped through the glass door, took off his hat, and smiled at her across the several feet separating them, Evelyn's heart stopped.

God, she didn't remember his eyes being that blue, or his dimples being that deep, or his cheekbones being that sculpted, or his smile being that bright. He was way more gorgeous than she remembered if that was at all possible.

Gail leaned close and stage-whispered, "Um, hun? You might want to start breathing again."

Evelyn took a deep breath, hadn't realized she'd been holding it until Gail's quip.

"Whoa." Trudy sighed then shook and ducked her head when she realized she'd spoken out loud.

"I'll say." Gail smiled.

On unsteady legs, Evelyn took a couple of steps closer, still not believing he was real. He couldn't have shocked her more had he gotten off the elevator on a large white stallion. "Jason."

"Evie."

"What are you doing here?"

Gail elbowed her in the ribs, almost knocking her over as she stepped forward with her hand outstretched. "The girl has just plain lost her manners since getting back to New York. You must be the cow boss I've been hearing so little about."

Jason took Gail's hand and shook it. "Ma'am."

Tittering, she turned back to Evelyn who remained riveted to the spot, still in shock at Jason's arrival. "Did you hear that? He called me ma'am." She turned back to Jason and said, "I'm Evelyn's good friend here at *Saxon Securities*, and the name's Gail Crawford, but you can just call me Gail."

"Jason Makepeace. It's a pleasure, Gail."

"The pleasure is all mine." She turned back to Evelyn with wide eyes and whispered, "I love the drawl."

"And it's real, too. Just like the rest of him, so you can stop fawning like you've never seen a real live cowboy before."

"Except for the Naked Singing Cowboy on Forty-Second Street, I haven't." Gail leaned close to say, "And let me tell you, Mr. Makepeace, that cowboy has nothing on you."

He chuckled. "Call me Jason."

"If you two are finished with your mutual admiration society..." Evelyn stepped forward and tilted back her head to look him in the eyes. Yep, that Caribbean blue still made her pussy spasm and her cunt wet. "You still haven't told me what you're doing here."

"Don't be rude to your guest, Evie. Haven't I taught you better than that?"

"It's all right, Gail. I reckon I'm used to her...bite."

Gail and Trudy both giggled behind their hands.

Oooh, when she got him alone, Evelyn promised herself she'd show him her bite. She would strip him down and maul him proper. Right after she kissed him silly.

Evelyn pointed to the box he held against one hip. "Is that what I think it is?"

Jason smiled. "I decided to make a special delivery."

"Well, don't keep us in suspense! What is it?" Gail asked.

Evelyn had almost forgotten she was there, and when she glanced around, she realized she had a bit of an audience outside of her girlfriend and Trudy.

Several secretaries from nearby cubicles had popped in to see what the ruckus was about and Evelyn could just smell the cowboy pheromones that Gail had earlier mentioned riding the wind.

It never failed. Wherever Jason went, estrous sighs and overactive hormones seemed to follow.

"I'm assuming it's my saddle," Evelyn answered her friend.

"All gift wrapped and everything. How sweet."

"Yes. He's that kind of guy." Evelyn reached for the box as Jason handed it over. Then she grabbed his arm with her free hand and pulled him back towards her office. "I'll have to catch up with you some other cigarette break, Gail."

Jason frowned as they made it to her office.

Evelyn told her secretary to hold her calls, dragged Jason into her office and closed and locked the door behind herself.

She walked across the floor to place the box in the chair in front of her desk, then turned to face Jason with her hands on her hips.

He didn't move from his spot near the door, just looked at her with his piercing blue eyes and a sexy grimace.

"You're full of surprises, aren't you, cowboy?"

"You weren't about to go out and backslide, were you?"

"Don't try to change the subject. And no, I wasn't going to backslide though I have to admit being back with all my smoker buddies makes it hard to abstain."

"But?"

"But I'm smoke-free for six weeks now."

Jason grinned and came closer. "Then I reckon you really do deserve my special delivery."

"Technically, I deserve it regardless. I stayed smoke-free for my two weeks on the ranch."

"Reckon you got me there." He reached for her, sliding his arms through her arms and around her waist to pull her close.

Evelyn sighed as he pressed his flesh against her, the hard erection behind his jeans calling to her like a decadent treat she'd been too long without. She slid her hand down to firmly cup his cock and took great pleasure in the breath that hissed through his clenched teeth. "I reckon I do."

He bent his head to capture her lips with his in an eating kiss, sliding his tongue into her mouth and coupling it with her eager one.

By the time he pulled away, holding her by the shoulders, both of them were panting and hazy-eyed.

Still, Evelyn saw the lust shining out of Jason's eyes and knew it reflected the look in her own. She took a deep breath and stepped back. "I'm at work," she stated.

"I know."

"I'll have to be here for at least another two hours." For the first time in a long time, Evelyn resented her job and the time it was taking away from her doing something she really wanted to do and being with someone she really wanted to be with.

"So it's not really a nine to five like they call it then."

"Not nearly. I've been here since six-thirty."

"Sun up to sundown. That's almost as bad as ranch work."

Evelyn chuckled and almost agreed, except she'd never cracked up a French manicure guiding a client through the intricacies of investing for the future, or heading up a staff meeting.

Jason closed the spaced between them again and slid his hands back around her waist.

He really wasn't going to make resisting him easy, was he?

"Angela said you were a workaholic like me."

She craned her neck to glare up at him. "When did you speak to my sister?"

"When she drove me in from the airport."

"Angela picked you up from the airport?"

“Uh, yep.”

“How long have you two been scheming this little visit?”

Jason shrugged and averted his eyes. “Not long.”

“Can’t even look me in the eye when you say that.” She chuckled, couldn’t be mad at him or even her busy-body sister. She knew Angela only had her baby sister’s best interests at heart. Evelyn just wished the woman would trust her to know what her own best interests were.

“Don’t blame your sister. I was going to come out anyway. She just solidified my decision to come when she called Monty at the ranch looking for me.”

“Boy, she’s been a busy little beaver behind my back.”

“She means well.”

Evelyn frowned. “How much time have you two spent together since she picked you up?”

“She took me out to eat before she dropped me off.”

Should she be jealous? She knew Angela and Freddie were into each other in a major way even after almost twenty-five years of marriage. But Jason was a major hottie. She wouldn’t blame her sister for looking. “Just to eat? That’s it?”

“I reckon, but then it doesn’t take long to know your sister is big on family and loves everyone in her family heaps.”

He said it with a hint of yearning in his voice, and not for the first time, Evelyn wondered at his, so far, unmentionable father.

“Knowing Angela, you’ll probably meet most of the gang while you’re here...” She paused then asked, “How long are you staying anyway?”

“As long as it takes.”

“As long as it takes what?”

“As long as it takes me to convince you that the two of us belong together.”

Her heart went all a flutter at the determination in his voice. “Whoa, you just get right to the point, don’t you, Mr. Makepeace.”

“And it’s about time you knew that, too.”

“Oh, I’ve always known it.”

“Good.” He pulled her close and leaned in for another kiss.

Evelyn inserted her hand between their mouths before he could connect.

Jason sighed. “What now, woman?”

She peered at him. “Where are you staying while you’re here?”

He averted his eyes again and Evelyn had a feeling she wasn’t going to like his answer.

“Your sister made a stop at your place before we went to eat and we dropped my stuff off.”

“Let me guess. She told you to see her if I had a problem with it?”

Jason gaped. “Wow, you two really know each other darn well.”

“After forty-three years of being bossed around by her, I should.”

“It’s kind of nice to see someone who can boss you around.” He chuckled and pecked her on the nose. “It must have been fun growing up with all those brothers and sisters.”

“It had its bright spots.”

“Be truthful. You loved it.”

She shrugged, didn’t know why she felt uncomfortable talking about her big family ties around Jason. Maybe it was the way he’d mentioned how Angela was big on family and how much she loved every member in the Vega-Calminetti clan.

She couldn’t imagine being without any of her brothers and sisters—from bad boy, rebellious brother Nick, to flirtatious and fun-loving brother EJ, to eternally optimistic, goody-two-shoes sister, Emilia, to man-hating, cynical sister Donna, and finally to her imperious and protective big sister Angela. Next to her parents, her siblings were her main lifeline, had kept her sane and grounded

growing up when other kids around her were running wild and unsupervised in the streets.

What must it have been like for Jason to come up an only child without a mother, much less all the brothers and sisters Evelyn had?

“Actually, I still love it. I don’t know what I’d do without them,” she finally confessed.

“I’m going to work on making you say the same things about me.”

Little did he know she already felt that way about him and had only done without him these last four weeks because she refused to go back on her decision to leave him.

She needed to steer this conversation onto lighter grounds. “So, you’re planning on sitting in this stuffy office for the rest of the evening watching me work?”

He grinned, rocking his pelvis against her. “I wouldn’t mind.”

“I might not mind either if it wasn’t going to kill my concentration,” she said.

“I guess I could always mosey on over to the seaport for a spell and go exploring.”

Her cowboy let loose on the city and the unsuspecting, man-hungry female population of lower Manhattan?

The green juices of jealousy churned in her stomach at the notion, but what could she do to stop him? Tie him down in her off—

Evelyn curved her arms up around his neck, eyeing his untethered shirt collar and loving the teasing expanse of tanned skin the two open buttons afforded but cursing his tie-less state.

She smiled as she remembered a story Tabitha had shared about her and EJ in her office and how she had tied EJ to the chair with his tie and...Evelyn quivered with desire at the idea of doing the same to Jason, having all his male strength primed beneath her

fingertips and giving him something to think about while he was on his little jaunt to the seaport.

When she focused her glance on him, he looked back at her warily, almost as if he knew what she contemplated.

Evelyn licked her lips when she remembered the blue-and-red silk scarf she had around her neck, a gift she had gotten from Emilia one Christmas that went perfectly with the red silk top and navy pencil skirt she had on.

She reached for the knot at the side of her neck and untied it, then took Jason by the hand and led him to the executive chair behind her desk.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s what we’ll be doing and you’ll see.” She planted her palm against his well-defined chest, pushed him back, and watched him plunk down into the seat.

Jason let her take his hands and put them behind his back to bind them to the chair without saying one word.

Apologizing to her sister for using her gift for purposes that it had not originally been intended for, Evelyn finished knotting his wrists, came back around to his front and sat on her desk to admire her handiwork.

He arched a brow. “Now what?”

“I’m just enjoying the view for now.” She folded her arms across her breasts, liked his composure, and wondered how long she could just sit and look at him without losing hers. Her thong was already soaked and her engorged clit pressed against the lacey fabric of her underwear as she crossed one thigh over the other to ease the throbbing ache between her legs.

“I don’t have anything on me, honey,” he murmured.

“I didn’t think you did.”

“So what—” Jason gasped as Evelyn knelt before him and quickly unzipped his jeans.

“I’ve been wanting to do this and taste you since you got off the elevator and sent my hormones all haywire.”

“What if someone—”

“I locked the door.” She reached inside his fly, freed his hard cock and wrapped her lips around the flushed, moist head with a groan of relish.

“Tarnation, you’re going to kill me, woman!”

Evelyn’s chest filled with glee at the low husky sound of his voice. She’d been back in New York a month and hadn’t heard that word once. And before this moment, she hadn’t realized how much she had missed it. “Tarnation is right, cowboy.” She lowered her mouth further, licking and sucking her way down his shaft until she reached the base.

Jason pitched and rolled his hips until she gripped them tight and held him in place.

She moved her mouth up and down his hot erection with deliberate, sensual intent, gradually building to a hard and fast rhythm that had Jason’s thigh muscles tightening beneath her as he braced his feet against the carpeted floor to keep the chair from swiveling.

Evelyn felt his cock pulsating and burgeoning in her mouth right before he unaccustomedly cussed and spurted his hot cream into her mouth, stopping her approaching chuckle in its tracks.

She milked him with her mouth, sucking and lapping until his shudders slowed and she was sure he had no more to give.

Evelyn got to her feet and sat on the edge of her desk, licking her lips as she watched him.

After a long moment, he finally opened his eyes and lowered his head to look at her.

She smiled, then leaned forward to cup his face with one hand and the silky rasp of his whiskers against her palm sent heat spiraling to her core again. She bent her head, mouth poised a

hairsbreadth from his and whispered, “Welcome to New York, cowboy.”

Chapter 23

Jason didn't know what he had been expecting once he and Evelyn got alone, but it hadn't been the mind-numbing blow-job that he had gotten.

He'd expected bushels of indignation at his presumption in just flying out on his and her sister's whims, and he had gotten only a smidgen of that. He'd expected surprise, which Evelyn had turned right around on him to give him one of the biggest, most pleasant shocks of his life.

Jason had sat tied to her chair for the seconds it took Evelyn to untie him, speechless and so satiated he hadn't been able to move for several moments after his legs were so shaky.

Finally, he got up, retrieved his hat, and slowly walked to the door, saying,, "I'll see you at six thirty then," before walking out of her office as coolly as he could considering he'd just had his world turned upside down.

How could he have forgotten the woman's ability to so easily take the reins and steer a situation to her liking? How could he forget how drugging and sensual an affect she had on him?

If he'd thought for a second that four weeks away from her would change the way he felt about her, would mitigate his hunger or diminish his love, he would have been mistaken.

He loved her still and loved her more. The problem was to get Evelyn to believe it.

Jason sat on the dock watching water taxis and small pleasure ships making trips across the Hudson River before he closed his eyes to relive those few moments in Evelyn's office.

When he remembered how he'd caught her thoughts and feelings right before she'd untied that scarf from around her neck, he had to fight not to shudder again.

It had taken everything in him to stay put beneath the intensity of her desire, or the need he'd caught in her eyes when she'd circled around him to tie his hands.

He'd known what she wanted to do to him, how she wanted to do it, and made himself stand as still as possible to accept it because he felt how important it was for her. He knew that she needed to be in control that moment more than she wanted him.

The pleasure that had flowed through her at his completion was indescribable, so powerful and total, he no longer knew where her pleasure had begun and his had ended.

Jason opened his eyes to look at his wristwatch, took a deep breath enjoying the salty night air as he stood and stretched.

What other surprises would she have up her sleeve this evening, and would he survive them?

He grinned at the thoughts and headed back the way he had come earlier, across the wooden dock and out toward the cobblestone streets until he reached the smooth paved roads of Gold Street, meandering through the light pedestrian traffic.

He reached Evelyn's building in ten minutes, his long legs and anticipation spurring his steps as sure as a pair of boot heels to the ribs.

Jason didn't have a problem getting up to the office this time, not that he'd had much of one the last time with the friendly and flirtatious female security guard manning the desk. This time he just flashed the nametag stuck to the front of his jacket and was allowed entry to the elevator banks that would take him up to the twentieth floor where Evelyn worked.

There was no one manning the reception desk, so Jason dialed the private number Evelyn had given him before he left, and not

more than a minute later, she came strolling into the reception area to buzz him through the glass doors.

“I’ve got a few more things to tie up here and then we can go.”

“How do you feel about hitting the town?” Jason asked as he fell into step beside her.

She looked at him askance. “What do you have in mind?”

“You wouldn’t believe this, but I bumped into a friend from Colorado earlier and she invited me to this honky tonk where she works. I thought we could go and hang out for a while before heading back to your place.”

“Hmm...where is this honky tonk?”

“It’s in Brooklyn.” Jason pulled out the address and handed it to her.

“Oh, I know this place. It’s a rough and tumble hillbilly bar. I took a couple of country western-loving clients of mine there once. They loved the ambience.” She glanced up from the paper to grin at him. “Already hankering for a dose of home?”

Jason returned her grin, surprised when he didn’t catch any stray thoughts, especially in response to his revelation that his friend was a she. Maybe he didn’t need to worry after all. “Not as much as I’m a hankering for a dose of you,” he murmured.

“Don’t try and make me forget that I’m supposed to be mad at you.”

“If what you did to me earlier was you being mad, then I need to get on your bad side more often.”

“You already do.” She playfully elbowed him in the ribs and chuckled as she went into her office to retrieve her leather shoulder bag and her saddle.

Jason followed behind her, reached for the box, and she easily handed it over. He glanced at the box as he settled it on his hip like earlier. “You didn’t open it.”

“I wanted to wait until we got home, so we could do it together and I could show you my proper appreciation.”

Like she hadn't done that already?

Dadgummit, the woman never ceased to amaze him! He expected her to be appreciative, but not to make getting the saddle into some grand event. He made plenty of them every year and it really was no big deal. But evidently it was a big deal to Evelyn. He could see it in the way she looked at him, making a funny, warm feeling roll through his chest.

Jason slid an arm around her shoulder as they left her office and she locked the door behind them.

The floor still buzzed with employees scattered here and there, and Evelyn said her good nights to a handful of them before she and Jason made it out to the elevators.

They waited in silence, Evelyn's eyes traveling the length of him and leaving a trail of heat in their wake. Made him regret inviting her out to Hank's Moonshine, because he didn't think he would make it through a night of skylarking before getting his hands on Evelyn right and proper.

* * * *

Hank's Moonshine was everything Evelyn remembered about the place and more.

Sinister painted flames curled up the cement façade, neon beer signs glowed in the windows and barflies of all persuasions staggered out of the place to light up their cigarettes.

Jason escorted her inside, a homey wood-paneled dive where they were immediately engulfed by the sound of the country-rock jukebox blasting a Shania Twain tune.

Evelyn turned to Jason and caught his smile. The song playing was the same one he'd had playing in his truck when Evelyn turned on his CD on the way to Freeborn from the airport.

God, that seemed like ages ago. Ages, and lots of hot steamy times spent in each other's arms nurturing a relationship that had no hopes of going anywhere.

"Come here, Fatalistic Fannie." Jason grabbed her by her closest hand and drew her further into the bar.

"Fatalistic Fannie?"

"I can see the doubt in your expression a mile away."

She'd forgotten how perceptive he was, and how well he read people, but especially how well he read her.

Jason led the way to an empty table where a waitress bent over wiping down the top with a damp cloth.

She must have felt Evelyn and Jason behind her, because without turning, she said, "Y'all just have a seat and your waitress will be with you in a minute."

Jason and Evelyn did as instructed.

The waitress finished what she was doing, then turned to leave.

"Friendly place," Jason said.

"We're not in Colorado Springs, cowboy. This is just a reasonable facsimile thereof." Evelyn chuckled at his frown, then grimaced herself when a pretty young blond came up behind Jason and covered his eyes with her hands.

It took everything in Evelyn to keep her in her seat and not rip the woman's eyes out before she reminded herself that Jason had mentioned a friend from Colorado had invited him here.

Where was this possessiveness coming from? She'd be the first to admit she had a streak of jealousy in her and had been known to show it every now and then, but nothing like what was churning in her insides now. Not even with Todd had she been this watchful, and he had certainly given her more reasons to be jealous than Jason with his inattentiveness and frequent absences—physical as well as emotional.

"Guess who?"

How original, Evelyn thought and folded her arms over her breasts as the Barbie Doll took her hands away from Jason's eyes and stepped in front of him.

"I didn't think you'd come."

Her voice was sweet and breathy and it made Evelyn cringe.

Jason stood and kissed her on the cheek. "To see an old friend? Wild horses couldn't keep me away."

She didn't look that old to Evelyn. In fact, she didn't look much older than Tammy and that was saying something.

Possessiveness. Check. Insecurity. Double check. Jealousy. Triple check. Three sure fire signs that being around this younger man was bad news for her emotional stability.

"...the friend I was telling you about, Evie."

Evelyn shook herself and stared up at Jason standing beside the waitress with his arm around her shoulder and a big, dimple-revealing smile on his face.

"Evie?"

"I'm sorry. You were saying?"

"This is my friend Jennifer Brighthart. Jen, this is Evelyn Vega."

Evelyn put out her hand, which was immediately taken into a warm, firm grip.

"Nice to meet you, Evelyn. Any friend of this old boy is a friend of mine."

God, she wanted to dislike the young woman so bad, but she couldn't. She was too open and...sweet. Too much like Jason.

"Hey, watch who you're calling old."

Speaking of which, Evelyn wondered exactly how old Jennifer was and had to bite her tongue to keep from asking. Instead, she smiled and asked, "So how long have you two known each other?"

"Not that long really. I worked in a restaurant back in Colorado Springs. Jason was in town on some Freeborn business one day and stopped in for a meal. We've been friends ever since."

"Sounds fascinating," Evelyn drawled, but what she really wanted to know was had Ms. Brighthart and Jason slept together. She briefly closed her eyes against a vision of them tangled between the sheets and in each other's arms.

"Yep, Jason was the sweetest thing. He listened to all my sob stories about wanting to come out to New York and become an actress and he never complained once. He was so patient, a good listener, and full of helpful advice. Not to mention he was a great tipper to boot."

Evelyn did *not* need the girl to extol all *her* man's virtues. She knew each and every one of them inside out, and from up-close-and-personal experience, too.

She didn't know how they did things out in Colorado, but Evelyn didn't play that cozy, platonic crap here. She knew better than to believe any such thing could exist between a healthy, red-blooded man and woman, especially when they had the hots for each other the way Jennifer seemed to have for Jason. Even if the said man was someone like Jason, honest and loyal, and seemingly uninterested in someone like Jennifer, eventually that good old tool between his legs would make him crack under the pressure of an earnest pursuit. Evelyn had seen it happen too many times in the past.

God, she was starting to sound like her sister Donna!

Look at EJ and Tabitha. Look at Nick and Slany. And don't forget Angela and Freddie and your own parents. They're all together through the trials and tribulations of marriage and still going strong, all still very much in love with each other.

But Evelyn could sense the desire seeping from every pore of Jennifer's skin, smelled it on the air and she'd be damned if she would let Ms. American Pie get away with trying to rekindle whatever she had had with Jason while Evelyn stood right there!

Evelyn eyed the cozy way Jennifer's hand rested on Jason's waist.

Didn't the woman know that particular body part, along with every other piece of flesh attached to his sexy six-foot-plus frame belonged to *her*?

As if sensing Evelyn's rising ire, Jennifer snatched her hand off of Jason's waist and took a step back, nervously tittering. "I reckon I should get busy and take y'all's orders before the boss starts making a ruckus."

"I reckon," Evelyn mumbled.

Jason took his seat across from Evelyn, and Jennifer busied herself pulling out a pad and pen from a pocket of the apron tied around her waist.

Evelyn let Jason order for the both of them. She didn't have much of an appetite and didn't think she could get much more down than the Buffalo wings anyway.

Once Jennifer was gone, Jason reached across the table and grabbed Evelyn's hands. "Are you okay, honey?"

"I'm fine. Why shouldn't I be?"

"You just seem like something's chapped your hide, but good is all."

"You have a wonderful way of putting things." *I'd like to chap somebody's hide all right!*

Jason winced at her as if he'd heard her thoughts, and she flashed back to her days at Freeborn when no one could have told her that the man wasn't reading her mind on a regular basis.

Eventually, she was just going to have to come right out and ask him about it, wasn't she?

Jennifer came back to their table balancing their drinks on a tray—Jason's a draft of beer and Evelyn a White Russian—and was gone in the blink of an eye. Or was it Evelyn's unblinking evil eye that made the girl skedaddle?

"You keep frowning like that and those wrinkles are going to stay on your forehead permanently."

She knew he was teasing her, but there was just something about seeing him with an acquaintance from Colorado, a beautiful younger woman with his same affectations and accent that brought home to her in a big way how different she and he were and sent her temper skyrocketing. “We wouldn’t want that now, would we?”

“Will you quit squinting at me like you’re Clint Eastwood in a spaghetti western about to draw on me?”

She cracked a grudging smile at his analogy and hated that he had the ability to pull her out of a funky mood when she least wanted to be pulled.

They sat in silence for several moments listening to the music blasting from the jukebox, and absorbing the rowdy shouts of men shooting pool in a nearby back room and the bleeps, pings, and pongs of video games and pinball machines.

Evelyn had only taken a sip of her drink but suddenly had a headache that wouldn’t quit. On top of this, as soon as Jennifer brought the tray of aromatic Buffalo wings to their table with its accompanying blue cheese dressing, she had the instant urge to throw up.

Evelyn gritted her teeth and stood from the table.

Jason frowned at her and stood, too. “What’s the matter, honey?”

“I’m really not that much in the mood to hang out as I thought. We need to go. Right now.”

He didn’t question her, simply pulled a wad of bills from his pocket and dropped some onto the table after counting them out. He then took Evelyn’s arm and led her towards the exit, making hasty apologies to Jennifer on the way.

“I’m really sorry y’all can’t stick around.”

Evelyn sensed the girl really meant it and felt ten times worse than the headache and nausea were already making her.

God she’d made a mess of the night.

Jason leaned in to peck Jennifer's cheek. "I'm sorry, too. But I'll catch up with you another time. Promise." He drew Evelyn close as they reached the door and they had just enough time to make it to the curb outside before she bent at the waist and politely splattered the contents of her stomach onto the concrete and anything else in the vicinity including the bottom of Jason's jeans and his boots.

Chapter 24

On the outside Jason remained silent in the back of the cab the entire ten-minute ride home to Evelyn's, but inside he was screaming upset.

Evelyn looked so pitiful and sick, however, he couldn't bring himself to cause her any more misery by chastising her for the way she'd behaved at the bar and the shoddy way she'd treated Jennifer.

He knew he couldn't let the incident go without addressing it, though. His chivalrous conscience wouldn't let him, dadgummit.

Jason was torn between ripping Evelyn a new one and saying nothing. Normally he would have just gone toe-to-toe with her because he knew she could give as good as she got. Normally. But her delicate condition, something he suspected but was almost certain Evelyn had no inkling of, precluded him telling her about herself, at least for right now.

The cab pulled up in front of Evelyn's townhouse, and Jason paid the driver through the bulletproof partition, then tried to help Evelyn out of the back seat, except she fussed with him the entire way up to her house and refused to hold his hand.

Jason dutiful waited as she unlocked the inside door and quietly followed her into the spacious living area as she turned on the overhead chandeliers.

He braced his feet apart and folded his arms across his chest, mimicking Evelyn's earlier pose at the bar, and waited for her to turn around.

When she did finally turn to see him, she shot up an eyebrow and tossed her handbag on the nearby sofa before stalking up to him. “And what is your problem?”

“That should be my question to you.”

“I don’t have a problem.”

“That’s debatable.” He smirked. “Did you have to be so mean to Jen?”

“Hmph. Poor *Jen*.”

“It’s just a nickname.”

“I’d appreciate it if you’d refrain from nicknaming anyone you’re not fucking.”

“Don’t be nasty.”

“I’ll be as nasty as I want to be and you’ll like it.”

“I probably will, but that’s beside the point.” He smiled to let her know he was teasing her, but he could see she refused to be charmed out of her evil mood.

It was a side of her he hadn’t really been exposed to. He’d seen her bossy, grumpy, raunchy, even a little jealous, but never this scathing. He reckoned he could take anything she had to dish out because he wanted her, but he didn’t like her wasting her energy on circumstances that existed only in her mind.

She glared at him. “Did you have to let her maul you?”

“Maul? That was just a friendly hug.”

“What you call friendly, I call mauling.”

Jason leaned in and gave her a hard kiss on the lips. “You haven’t really seen mauling yet.” He whipped one arm behind her back and bent to slide the other under her legs before he swept her up into his arms and headed for the stairs.

“Where the hell do you think you’re taking me?”

“To your bedroom to show you what a proper mauling is.”

“This ain’t *Gone with the Wind*, and you ain’t Rhett. Not to mention, I’m still mad at you and I’m not sure I want to be mauled by you.”

"Tough." He kissed her again. "I came all the way to New York to see *you*, Evie. I don't want anyone else. Not older, younger, or in between. Just you. So get used to it."

She opened her mouth to argue, but he kissed her again, this time adding a healthy dose of tongue before pulling back slightly to nip her full lower lip.

"I'm not Todd. I would never do what he did to you."

"How do you know what he did to me?"

"Tell me about it then, Evie. Rip the bandage off."

"You need to put me down," she whispered.

He peered at her a long moment before complying, but caught her around the shoulders so that she couldn't go anywhere or do anything except stay with him.

"Let me go, Jace."

He cupped her chin and tipped up her head so that he could look into those haunting color-changing eyes, temporarily losing himself in the sadness he saw there. "Talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about. It didn't work out. We were too different, wanted different things out of a marriage. Eventually we just grew apart."

"You and I are different. Worlds different."

"Yes, and you see how well that's working out."

"It'll work out just fine once you let it." He pulled her close, nuzzled her cheek. "Tell me, honey. Tell me what he did."

"I don't want to talk about this."

"Too bad. I'm not dropping this until we get it out into the open. We can stay here all ni—"

"He called me a dirty murdering whore!" She shoved her hands hard against his chest, pushed out of his arms, turned her back to him, and stalked several paces away.

"Wha—Why?"

She turned back to glare at him, eyes bright with unshed tears.

Jason felt her pain, the weight of her jumbled thoughts pressing against his brain and heart as if someone had reached inside him to squeeze each organ in his or her hands.

There'd been another baby, one she'd lost. And her husband, the man who had vowed to love and cherish her until death did they part, had blamed her.

Jason went to her and pulled her stiff form into his arms.

"So you got what you wanted. Are you happy now?"

"No, honey. I'm not happy at all." In fact, he was spitting and cussing mad. He'd never felt so bloodthirsty in his life, and if Todd Cole had been in front of him right then, he couldn't guarantee that he wouldn't have committed cold-blooded murder.

"I was thirty-six when I found out I was pregnant, and it was a bit of a shock especially since he...touched me so rarely. We were three years into our marriage, but Todd had been nagging me to have a baby since before we got married. I wanted to wait, solidify my career, and make partner. I thought I had plenty of time..." She paused, took a deep breath and raised her head to look at him. "Todd was, of course, ecstatic when I told him, wanted me to quit working and stay home to prepare and 'get used to how things were going to be,' as he put it. I knew then that I didn't want to have a baby with him."

For some reason her wording heartened him. She hadn't said she didn't *want* a baby, just that she didn't want to have one with Todd. "Did you...ever consider not having it?"

She didn't get upset or look shocked that he'd asked, just nodded and said, "I can't say I didn't consider it, especially early on. I've always been Pro-Choice, much to my mother and older sister's dismay. But the idea of...killing a baby because I didn't like and couldn't get along with its father just didn't sit right with me.

"By the time I reached my fourth month it didn't matter anymore what my beliefs were, or how I felt about Todd, because I

had felt the baby moving inside me. He was a part of me. He was alive. He was mine. I couldn't..."

He tightened his arms around her and held her close as her tears fell and she choked back sobs. It took everything in him not to curse the fates that had put Todd into Evelyn's life.

"I lost my baby in my eighth month, Jason, and Todd blamed me for the miscarriage. Said it was my fault for not quitting work earlier, that I didn't take good enough care of myself. He called me a selfish bitch. Imagine that."

"That son-of-a...gun."

Evelyn chuckled and wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Yes, you could call him that, among other much worse things I've called him over the years."

"You have to know that not all men are like that."

"I...I guess not."

Dadgummit, she still didn't trust him. What did he have to do to make her see that she could, to make her see that all men weren't like Todd Cole? What did he have to do to get her to admit that she felt the same way about him as he felt about her?

Evelyn took a deep breath and slowly pulled out of his arms. "This day has taken a lot out of me. I'm exhausted and I really want to go to bed."

"Not alone."

She shook her head. "I can't promise I'll be the best company, though."

"Even your worst company is the best company for me, Evie." He swept her up into his arms for the second time that evening and headed up the stairs, sensing her doubts and fears the entire way, and determined to allay them all as soon as he could.

* * * *

Jason spent most of the next several hours cuddling Evelyn in his arms as she slept and wondering how he was going to tell her about his ability.

He wasn't sure when he'd decided that he couldn't keep it from her any longer, but he reckoned it had been around the time he decided the best way to get her trust was to give her his.

When he wasn't holding Evelyn, he was up and pacing the room at the foot of her king-sized bed, throwing periodic glances at her, and willing her to wake so that he could get the worst over with, tell her his news and let the cow chips fall where they would. He'd almost woken her up a couple of times during the night, but she looked so darn peaceful, and the thought of the emotionally draining night she'd had, gave him pause.

By the time dawn broke over the horizon, spilling salmon and golden-hued morning light into the room through the opened slats of the wooden venetian blinds at Evelyn's bedroom window, Jason was an emotional wreck.

When he'd first set out for New York, he had never in his wildest dreams considered what he would be letting himself in for, except coming after the woman he wanted to make a life with. He had never considered he would be putting so much of himself at risk, or the very real possibility Evelyn might reject him and his outrageous claims.

But here in the light of day with Evelyn's powerful revelations now behind them, he was beginning to wonder just how much of his own past and secrets he could reveal without being branded a mad man or alienating her altogether.

"What are you looking at that's so interesting out there?"

Jason started and turned to see her sitting up in bed and knuckling her eyes like a little girl just waking up.

When she threw back the comforter, got out of the bed, and sashayed over to him in just a pair of green silk boxers and a

matching tank, however, the last thing on his mind was the image of any little girl.

She was an all grown, sleek and sexy woman and he wanted her like he'd never wanted another woman in his life.

Watching her as she approached him, he had to wonder how he had lain in the bed with her most of the night and not ravaged her.

As soon as she was within reach, Jason stood from where he had been perched on the window sill, pulled her close, her back to his front, and wrapped his arms around her waist. He slid his hands beneath the tank and caressed her trim belly imagining what she would look like swollen with his child—their child.

His heart did a weird little jig in his chest in concert with the dance his cock was doing in his shorts at the idea of her pregnant.

She glanced at him over a shoulder. "What are you grinning about?"

"Just thinking about how good we are together."

"Hmm, that still remains to be seen."

He took her by the shoulders and turned her around to face him. "Last night was just a bump in the road. We're past it."

"You sound so sure."

"I am. There's no reason not to be."

"I remember being confident and certain like that when I was your age. But that was a decade and a bad marriage ago."

"Honey, I've had a bad marriage, too." He pulled her against him and rested his chin on her head, reveling in the feel of her soft black hair tickling his neck.

"Yes, but we can't all be as resilient as you."

"I'm not as unbreakable as you're making me out to be." He pulled back to stare at her. "And you're a lot more resilient than you give yourself credit for."

"What is it you're not telling me, Jace?"

He didn't know where his next words came from, but it certainly hadn't been on his mind to tell her. "I, uh, had a hankering for Monty a while back."

"Freeborn?"

"Phoenix, yeah."

"What, like a crush?"

"I was in love with her. Still am."

She pulled away from him, eyes wide.

Jason rushed ahead when he saw the disappointment and shock in her eyes and realized what he'd said and how his words must have sounded to her. "I mean I love her still, as a good friend and like a sister, Evie. But I'm not in love with her anymore."

"I'm sure Seth would be glad to hear that." She smirked.

Jason chuckled and pulled her back against him. "My point is I got over Monty same as I got over Bette. It wasn't easy, and it hurt like heck for a long time after, but I did get over them. Same as you can get over Todd."

"I am over him."

"Are you sure?"

Evelyn took a deep breath before answering him, as if measuring her words and how much she should tell him. "Truthfully, before last night, I didn't realize how much his condemnations had hurt me. At the time, they just rolled right off my back. Or so I thought they had. But last night was...enlightening."

"For me, too." He thought about that first inkling he'd gotten that she was pregnant and wondered how he was going to keep his pie hole shut until she figured it out and decided to tell him. "Actually, breaking up with Bette and losing Monty were the best things that could have happened to me, the *only* things that could have happened. I needed to go through both of them and be free to get to you."

Evelyn swallowed so hard he almost heard her gulp. Her eyes were glistening and bright as she looked up at him and returned his hug. “I didn’t know cowboys were so romantic.”

“Not romantic. Just truthful.” He took her by a hand and led her over to the bed. He sat down on the edge of the mattress and pulled Evelyn onto his lap. “There’s something else I have to tell you,” he murmured and thought he felt her heart stutter as if it was his own.

“More confessions? I don’t think my nerves can take any more.”

Jason chuckled, felt the seriousness beneath her tease and knew she was trying to cover her anxiety. He rubbed her back, comforting her as well as himself, then took a deep breath. “This isn’t easy for me to say.”

“I think we’ve already established it’s best to just get it out there and we’ll sort it out later.”

“You have no idea how many different times I’ve almost told you, or how many different ways.”

“It can’t be any harder than telling me you used to be in love with Monty, or—”

“I can read your mind.”

“Oh...well, that is a bit of a, uh...hmm...”

“You think I’m crazy, don’t you?”

She raised her brows and stared at him. “No. Why would you think that?”

“Evie, I just told you I can read your mind.”

“I admit it took me a little by surprise finally hearing it out loud.”

He frowned. “Only a little?” Dang, she was taking this remarkably well. He should be relieved, happy, instead of waiting for the other boot to drop.

Wait, had she said *finally hearing it out loud* as if she’d only been biding her time before he made his confession to her? And

here he'd been tearing himself up over whether or not to tell her and how to tell her?

Evelyn hopped up from his lap and took him by a hand. "All this purging is making me hungry. Let's go get some breakfast."

"Breakfast? Evie, I—"

She interrupted him with a finger to his lips and smiled. "We'll talk over breakfast. There are some things I need to tell you about my family, too. Maybe then you'll understand why I'm not running for the hills screaming you're a mad man."

Chapter 25

Evelyn searched through her bureaus for something to throw on as if the man she loved hadn't just told her that he could read her mind. Sure she'd have suspected it, but as she'd told him, hearing it out loud was a bit of a shock.

She felt him behind her, pictured his speculative blue gaze and blurted, "I don't have much in the fridge, so we're going to have to get dressed and run down to a restaurant for one of your country western do-dads."

"Who says there's not much in your fridge?"

She turned to him with a hand on her hip. "I should know what's in my refrigerator." What other surprises did he have up his sleeve?

"Admittedly there wasn't much in there when we stopped by yesterday. But there's plenty in it now. Angela and I went shopping and we stocked up."

"Well, of course you did."

"You don't cook all that much, do you?"

"Not one of my favorite pastimes, no. What gave me away?"

He sidled behind her and squeezed her ass. "Maybe the pitifully barren state of your refrigerator before we got to it."

"Your and Angela's shopping solves one problem. As for the cooking..."

Jason arched a brow. "How can you not cook?"

"I live in New York, bub, the city that never sleeps, including restaurants and convenience stores where I can pick up a meal to

suit my whims at any hour of the day or night.” Evelyn headed out the bedroom in her PJ’s with Jason on her heels.

“You have a perfectly beautiful, state-of-the-art kitchen, woman. I know some chefs who would kill to cook in it.”

She turned and smiled over her shoulder. “It came with the house.”

“You’re such a smarty pants.” Jason crouched, caught her around the legs, and threw her over his shoulder.

“Hey! Put me down.”

He carried her the rest of the way down the stairs like a fireman and all the way to the kitchen where he sat her on one of the barstools at her marble counter in the breakfast nook.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Now I put your beautiful kitchen to good use and make us some breakfast.”

“Suits me.”

He rolled his eyes and crossed the kitchen to the fridge, pulling out the food he needed to make them breakfast.

Evelyn got out the pans and utensils he needed—it was the least she could do, after all—and watched as he proceeded to whip up a batch of buttermilk pancakes, two western style omelets, and several breakfast sausages.

In no time, they were sitting at the counter, digging in and enjoying it all.

Evelyn glanced at him across the counter as she cut into a corner of her syrup-laden pancake stack with her fork and lifted it to her mouth. “You wouldn’t be trying to fattening me up now, would you?”

“Of course not. Just that a woman in your condition should start off the day with a hardy breakfast.”

She frowned at him. “A woman in my condition?”

“You know what I mean. You had a rough night last night. You didn’t eat much all day from the looks of it, and what you did eat, you threw up.”

She stared at him a moment longer before stuffing the small stack in her mouth and moaned at the fluffy texture of the cakes as the syrup and butter melded and melted on her tongue. Beat the chuck wagon cook’s food by a mile. A girl could really get used to this kind of treatment.

“You spoil me,” she said, meaning it.

“You deserve it.”

Did she? What had she done, really, to deserve someone like Jason Makepeace in her life?

According to her ex, she was a conceited, too-liberated woman, who wouldn’t know a strong, capable and loving man if he jumped up and bit her.

And maybe he was right.

Hell, back then she had halfway convinced herself that the miscarriage had been her fault but for the best, that perhaps her body wasn’t meant to carry a baby to term or maybe she just wasn’t meant to be a mother. Admittedly, she wasn’t the most maternal woman in the world. She knew if pushed, however, she would do everything she could to raise her baby right and give him or her all the best things she had had growing up.

Evelyn glanced up from her food to see Jason staring at her.

Had he read her morose thoughts just then? He said he could read her mind, but did that mean he did it whenever he wanted without any thought to her feelings or privacy?

She couldn’t imagine Jason doing something like that. She didn’t think his ethics would let him go that far with his talent. But if he thought he had a good reason?

“How’s everything?”

"Everything's delicious," she admitted, downing a bite of her omelet with a sip of orange juice, and trying not to feel self-conscious around him.

Damn, when she thought about all the horny thoughts she'd had about him since they'd met...Had he been reading her mind all along? Or was this gift something he had only just discovered himself?

Evelyn thought the latter to be the most accurate. She couldn't see Jason hiding something as momentous as his telepathy from her for longer than necessary. She wondered what made this morning necessary.

The possible answers made her stomach heave.

God, she had been so afraid that the man was going to tell her he loved her earlier or, equally as appalling, propose. Honestly, his telepathy came as less of a shock and more of a relief to her than it obviously did to him. She'd been so tense and prepared for something totally different and more traumatic that news of his abilities came as anticlimactic.

Evelyn almost laughed at the idea that she found her lover's mind-reading ability more palatable than the idea of his loving and wanting to marry her. Maybe because she at least had a little experience being on the receiving end of another's telepathy, evidently a lot more than she had with being in love.

"Tell me about your father," she said and watched as Jason spluttered the orange juice he'd just swallowed and hastily wiped his chin with a napkin.

She didn't know where the question came from, but she was glad she asked it and that she could still surprise him. Maybe he hadn't gained complete command of his talents yet, and he couldn't read her at will and at any time.

"Where did that just come from?"

She shrugged. "We're sleeping together, Jason, and I just confessed one of my deepest darkest secrets to you last night. Not that this is turnabout, I just think it's a fair request."

He looked at her doubtfully.

"Should I have just said curiosity?"

"T'ain't nothing to be curious about. He's dead."

"Oh. I'm sorry, Jace. How did it happen?"

He slowly put down his fork and napkin to look at her. "It's not really something I want to talk about over breakfast."

"It's not something you want to talk about at all, if you ask me."

"How would you know?"

"Because whenever I've made an allusion to the man, you either clam up or steer the conversation in another direction."

"I don't recall ever doing that."

"Trust me. You do."

"Maybe because there's really nothing to say."

Evelyn just looked at him, holding his blue-eyed gaze until he averted his eyes and gritted his teeth. She reached out to rub and squeeze his arm and immediately felt the tension in his body as his hard muscles flexed beneath her fingers. "Since I can't read your mind the way you can read mine, you have to tell me things for me to learn about you."

"Do you really need to know that he was a drunkard and a womanizer with a death wish who finally got what he wanted beneath the hooves of a bronco?"

"Jason, I'm so sor—"

"Please, don't say I'm sorry again. I heard it enough when I was a kid from all the men on the rodeo circuit and their wives at the funeral. Everyone feeling so sorry for the little boy Dunley Makepeace left behind. I lived my entire childhood as 'that poor motherless boy,' and when my dad got killed, I became that 'that poor orphan boy.'"

“My God...”

“It’s no big deal, really.”

“How old were you?”

“Eleven.”

“Of course it was a big deal and it couldn’t have been easy.”

“Maybe a little rougher than when my mama died, because I actually knew my father.”

It was all starting to come together. The older woman when he was sixteen, him being on his own at sixteen... “You went into the foster system, didn’t you?”

“I bounced around in it for five years before I filed for emancipation as soon as I could and struck out on my own with the circuit. I’ve been taking care of myself ever since.”

Maybe it was time for someone else to start taking care of him. The question on Evelyn’s mind: Was she the right woman for the job?

Jason made his time in the system sound like it had been a walk in the park, but Evelyn knew better. She could feel his sorrow and inner turmoil, see them in the haunted expression of his beautiful blue eyes when he talked about his father.

Evelyn thought of her sister-in-law Tabitha and figured Jason had had it as rough as her, if not rougher, during his time in foster care.

How hard must that have been, dealing with a mentally ill parent in Tabitha’s case or a grief-stricken, alcoholic father in Jason’s? How hard had it been raising oneself the way her sister-in-law and Jason had? What other traumas had he suffered at his father’s hands besides the obvious? “Were you there when it happened? When he died?”

“Unfortunately, I traveled with him everywhere he went. So when it happened, I had a front row seat and saw the whole thing.”

“Oh, Jason...” She reached to put her arms around him, but he moved away and stood up.

Evelyn watched as he paced the kitchen floor and raked a hand through his chestnut hair, making him seem that much more vulnerable when he turned his gaze on her.

“This is why I never said anything about him. I don’t want your pity.”

“It’s not pity to sympathize with someone you care about.” When she stood up to go to him, the phone rang. Evelyn paused and reluctantly made a detour to grab the receiver from its base on the wall.

It was Angela with an invite to dinner later in the evening. It would be a grown folks affair, couples night—Angela and Freddie, EJ and Tabitha, Nick and Slany, and rounding out the group, Jason and Evelyn—no kids allowed.

Angela had already arranged for EJ and Tabitha’s and her little ones to be out, either at friends’ houses on sleepovers, or at their grandparents.

Evelyn smiled as she listened to her sister’s plans.

“So, I can expect to see you two over here tonight, then.”

Evelyn knew it wasn’t a request. Her sister only gave directions and orders. She looked at Jason watching her and said, “I’m sure it won’t be a problem.”

“Should I ask how everything’s going with you and Jason?”

“Everything’s going fine.”

“I like him,” Angela said.

“Never one to hold your tongue.”

“What’s the point? We all know where things are going.”

Evelyn chuckled. What was the point indeed, when her sister had probably already sent out the wedding invitations since before Evelyn had gotten on the plane to Colorado? “We do?”

“Just bring him over to meet the family. We’ll be nice, and we won’t scare him away. We’ll leave that to you, but if you know what I know, you’ll hold on to him. The man’s a keeper.”

"If you say so." Evelyn totally agreed but was afraid to admit it or the chimera would evaporate and disappear.

"See you at seven. And bring your thinking caps."

"Bye, General." Evelyn grinned as she hung up and mentally prepared for a night of filling food and marathon card games, Trivial Pursuit, and Scrabble matches.

"Who was that?" Jason asked.

"Angela. We've been invited to dinner. You game?"

"I reckon."

"Good. Will go over there to meet the gang after I take you to the Botanic Gardens and we spend a day with each other exploring nature."

Jason grinned. "Sounds like a plan."

Evelyn didn't know if he agreed so readily because he was glad for the change of subject and needed a quick change of scenery, or if he genuinely wanted to go, but she decided to let him off the hook anyway.

They'd both had enough catharsis in the last twenty-four hours, and Evelyn was ready to spend some time with him having light-hearted fun.

She made it a point, however, to shower separately. She knew that if they got anywhere together naked, they'd probably never leave the house, and Evelyn was determined to show him at least as good a time in her fair city as he had shown her in his.

Not that she knew all that much about the Brooklyn Botanic Gardens, being the typical New Yorker that she was. But she figured the place would have some type of guided tours.

Freshly showered, clad in a pair of blue jeans and a yellow polo shirt, and with her hair pulled back in a casual ponytail, Evelyn got onto the computer to check out the Botanic Gardens website and get the information she needed while Jason showered.

She got so involved reading about the various exhibits and attractions that she didn't hear Jason when he came out of the bathroom.

He sneaked up behind her and bent to nuzzle the back of her neck as he wrapped his arms around her breasts.

"You're all wet." Evelyn chuckled and squirmed in his arms when he stuck his tongue in her ear, then circled the shell.

"I was hoping to make you wet with me."

"You're a naughty cowboy."

He released her to take hold of the chair arms and swiveled her around to face him. "I never did get to thank you for that warm welcome yesterday."

"No thanks nece—Jason!"

He lifted her in his arms, stalked several paces across the room where he tossed her onto the center of her bed.

Before Evelyn knew it, he climbed between her slightly bent knees, unbuttoning and unzipping her jeans, and slipping his hand down into her thong.

His rough-hewn palm sent shivers through her center as it rasped over her pussy hair.

She writhed as he moved his hand down further, slowly sliding a finger into her wetness and wiggling it around as he leaned in to devour her mouth.

Evelyn returned his kiss with equal fervor, moaning into his mouth as her hands roamed the smooth expanse of his firm wet chest and abdomen. She undid the towel he had tucked around his waist and dropped it to the carpeted floor as Jason reached for the waistband of her jeans.

She lifted her hips to assist when he moved to pull her jeans down past her thighs, exposing her wanting pussy to him.

"Tarnation, I missed this. I missed you, Yankee."

Evelyn's breath hitched in her chest as he buried his head between her legs and took her clit between his teeth. She plunged

her hands in his glorious silken waves, held tight, and pulled him closer as she thrust her hips against his mouth. “Oh, yes, that’s it, Jason. More...harder...”

He alternately nibbled, sucked, and stroked her pussy until Evelyn trembled beneath him in the throes of an explosive orgasm, simultaneously slamming her hips up into his mouth and pulling his face closer until she was depleted and Jason had licked her moist folds dry.

“Oh, God, cowboy...” Evelyn panted as Jason plopped beside her on the bed possessively resting a palm on her belly. She distractedly ran her hand through his hair as his hard cock nudged her thigh. “That was fantastic, Jace.”

“I reckon I enjoyed it myself.”

She laughed and reached down for him, but he rolled off the bed and bent to retrieve his towel. “But what about you?”

“I’m good. Or at least I will be in a minute.”

“Why don’t you let me...”

He came back to the bed, leaned on his palms, and bent to kiss her. “I’m saving the rest for later tonight.”

Well, damn, she didn’t think she could wait that long to have him again.

Four weeks had been long enough, too long, but not nearly as long or painful as the lifetime she was mentally preparing herself to do without him.

Chapter 26

Strolling through the grounds of the beautiful fifty-two acre Garden wasn't nearly enough to get Jason's mind off of how much he wanted Evelyn and how hot and sexy she'd looked earlier in the morning when he'd gone down on her, but it helped.

The tour guide was well informed, enthusiastic, and took them through some of the most vivid and fragrant landscapes Jason had ever seen outside of Colorado. From the Cranford Rose Garden, to the cherry tree esplanade, to the Japanese pond and hill, to the fragrance garden for the blind, the Garden had everything to appeal to the most dedicated horticulturist or just plain nature lover.

What Jason enjoyed most was his own look of wonder reflected on Evelyn's glowing face as they went through each exhibit and the guide identified the various flowers and plants on the paths they took through the Garden.

"Don't tell me you've never been here before," Jason said.

She shrugged. "What can I say? Except for a couple of trips to The Bronx Zoo, I'm not the culture-loving, New-York-tourist type."

"Well, I reckon it's a good thing I came up and gave you an excuse to be a sightseer in your own city."

"I reckon it is." She slipped her arm around his waist, and they spent most of the day in the Garden walking around like this, or either holding hands like high school kids in love.

Jason hadn't been so at peace with himself or anyone else in a long time, not since first leaving his last foster home and striking

out on his own for the first time in his life. Back then he hadn't had a dad to look after or anyone to pity and care about him.

He'd thought it would be hard to share that part of his life with Evelyn, but her bossy and open manner made it easy for him to open up, made him feel it was okay to resent what his father had done to him by dying the way he did.

By the time they had finished the tour and settled down to eat a gourmet lunch at the Terrace Café, Jason had opened up even more to tell her about the many sleepless nights he'd waited up for his dad to come home from a night of carousing and the anxiety-filled days he'd spent wondering if his dad would come back in one piece after a drunken ride on a bronco or a bull.

He'd had no control over what his daddy had done, he knew it, but it took Evelyn to make him see that it was his father who'd failed him and not the other way around.

Near the end of lunch, they got off the subject of his father and childhood and onto Evelyn and her family.

Jason had heard a lot of the anecdotes Evelyn shared from Angela, although Evelyn put her own unique and personal spin on the tales that had him clearly seeing what a commanding little tomboy she had been as a kid.

What he had hadn't heard, and what Angela had failed to share, was the psychic ability that seemed to run in the Vega family.

"Since you're going to be seeing Angela again and meeting my brother soon, I thought it only fair to prepare you," she said.

"A brother and a sister who can read minds?" His own ability still flabbergasted him, but he guessed he shouldn't be shocked that there were other people out in the big wide world who could do what he could and even more.

Evelyn slowly nodded, and he understood then why she had been so nonchalant when he'd told her what he could do.

"So you see I'm almost used to weird."

"Do you ever really get used to it?" Jason asked.

She shrugged and took his hands across the table they were sitting at. “Were you...able to read Angela the way you can read me?”

He sensed her reluctance to voice her curiosity despite growing up around a brother and sister who could do ‘weird.’

Jason shook his head. “As far as I know, I can only read your mind.”

“That’s odd, not to mention selective.”

“Monty and the—” He caught himself getting ready to mention Alyosha and snapped his mouth shut. She may have a mind-reading brother and sister, but he didn’t think she was ready to deal with the existence of elves and centaurs yet. Heck, Jason didn’t think he was.

“Monty and the what?”

“She’s psychic. Did you know that?”

“I had a feeling she was special, especially since my sister connects so well with her.”

Connects was putting it mildly. The two women existed on a whole other plane from Jason with their gifts and affiliations.

Evelyn squeezed his hands. “When did you first know that you could read my mind?”

Should he tell her it was when he first started to fall in love with her or that his feelings for her were the impetus for his gifts?

He didn’t think either would go over too well with Ms. Practical, and knowing Evelyn the way he did, she might just order him to shut off his gifts and his feelings the same way he’d turned them on, which was impossible.

Angela and Monty had opened up Pandora’s Box when they put him and Evelyn together; there was no turning back now.

“I can’t pinpoint the exact time. It just started to happen. I think it might have been that time when we had, uh...sex in the woods.”

“That *was* kind of a mind-blowing experience. But I never heard of telepathy being a side-effect of a blow-job.”

Jason laughed, loving her sense of humor. In fact, the more he was around her, the more he fell in love with everything about her.

Why couldn't he just come out and tell her? Put them both out of their misery?

Evelyn let go of his hands to stand, smoothing her hands down the front and back of her jeans as she smiled down at him. "Can't put off the firing squad any longer."

"I'm sure you're exaggerating."

"Just remember, I warned you."

"Your sister's not so bad."

"You only spent a few hours with her. I grew up with the woman."

Jason laughed as he took her hand and they headed out of the café.

They left the Garden at the 900 Washington Avenue exit, retrieved Evelyn's metallic-blue sedan and started the drive to Long Island...and the Vega/Calminetti firing squad.

* * * *

Next to Evelyn's townhouse in Brooklyn, Angela's large two-story tract home was the biggest slice of country living that Jason had come across since arriving in New York.

He was in love with the towering and lush trees lining the smoothly paved sidewalks and the rich sprawling green lawns and spruce gardens in front and back of every house they drove by.

Evelyn parked in the driveway to the side of the house behind two other cars that were already parked there. The driveway in front of the house was occupied by two more cars.

"How many of us are there going to be at this shindig?" Jason asked as he grabbed the twelve-pack of beer from the backseat and followed Evelyn up the steps to the front door.

"Four couples, us being the fourth."

He slid his free arm around her shoulder as she pulled open the outside glass door, then turned the knob to the second door and entered the house.

Compared to the minimum two locks Evelyn had on her townhouse in Brooklyn, the unlocked door was a refreshing change and another reminder of home in Colorado.

Jason followed Evelyn's lead and toed off his boots at the door as she took off her cross-trainers. They left their footwear near the already overflowing metal shoe rack behind the front door and entered the house proper.

The place was abuzz with salsa music blaring from a set of so far unseen speakers and loud voices floating through the house from the kitchen.

Jason caught the scent of charbroiled food on the air as he and Evelyn entered the kitchen where several people were sitting on high chairs around the large oak island playing a raucous game of I Declare War.

"The guests of honor are here!" a man yelled right before slamming down the cards in his hand and telling the rest of the group at the table to pay up.

Jason grinned as he saw the man pull his jackpot towards him, a pile of nickels, dimes, and quarters.

Evelyn leaned towards him to say, "Angela doesn't like any serious gambling with big pots under her roof. She says the Vegas are too competitive as it is and she doesn't want to tempt fate and have a wild brawl break out in her house."

Jason chuckled as Angela turned away from what she was doing at the kitchen counter to make her way across the floor to him and Evelyn.

She hugged Evelyn first, then Jason. "I'm making your favorite," she told her sister.

"Sex on the Beach?" Evelyn asked.

"You got it."

“Yummy!”

“How about you, Jace? What would you like?”

“Don’t ask the man a silly question, Ang. No sissy mixed drinks for the men. Just get him a beer like the rest of us are drinking and call it a day.”

Jason watched as the speaker, a tall, bearded brunette sidled beside Angela and bent to nuzzle her cheek.

“Jason, this is my husband Federico. We all call him Freddie.”

“Nice to meet you, Freddie. Jason Makepeace.”

Freddie took his hand in a firm grip and shook. “We need someone like you around here, since we’ve got Mr. Make War over there cleaning everybody out.” He jerked his thumb over a shoulder at the last pot’s big winner.

“Don’t hate me because I’m lucky, Freddie.”

“Freddie, go put that beer on ice.” Angela pointed to the twelve-pack under Jason’s arm and Jason handed it over before Angela took him by a hand. “C’mon. Let me introduce you to the gang.” She led him over to the island and introduced him to her baby brother, the aforementioned big winner, EJ, and his wife Tabitha, and her other brother Nick and his wife Slany.

As soon as the introductions were over, Nick gave Jason a friendly slap on the back, stood from the island and headed for the fridge. “You’ve got some catching up to do. I’ll get you a beer. Any particular brand?” he threw over a shoulder.

“Whatever y’all are having.”

“You guys have perfect timing. The food is about ready and we were all preparing to chow down on some barbecue and char-grilled eats,” Freddie said.

“My husband will char-broil the Christmas turkey in the dead of winter if you let him. He loves to barbecue,” Angie confided as she handed Evelyn a glass of some pink-reddish concoction that she sipped from and moaned directly after.

“Let me taste that.”

Evelyn smiled and held her drink up to his mouth. He took a sip and licked his lips at the fruity-tart taste of the drink and Evelyn.

“Not bad.” Jason didn’t know about Sex on the Beach, but he was ready to have sex on the kitchen counter with Evelyn for darn sure.

He wondered if the drink had an aphrodisiac in it, or maybe her nearness made him feel naturally randy.

Although he didn’t taste that much alcohol in the drink and at the thought, Angela caught his eye and winked as if to reassure him.

Nick elbowed him in the ribs and whispered, “Once you get past the honeymoon period, you can start speaking your mind and not fake liking girly drinks.” He punctuated this by handing Jason an open longneck, and his wife playfully cuffed him upside the head.

“Don’t listen to him, Jason. He drinks the sissy drinks at home when I make them.”

Nick made a face and mouthed, “No, I don’t,” behind Slany’s back.

Jason chuckled, loving the group vibe, and loving this family as much as he loved Evelyn.

Freddie and EJ started bringing platters of food in from the grill out on the deck to spread out on the island.

Tabitha brought the potato salad from the fridge and Slany brought a pot of boiled corn on the cob from the stove.

Rounding out the meal was the grilled steak, spare ribs, chicken, warmed garlic bread, and baked cheese-and-macaroni from the oven, and collard greens and red beans and rice.

If this was how the Vegas did a regular Sunday evening dinner, Jason couldn’t wait to see what they did for the holidays.

As soon as everyone had a seat and was settled at the island, Angela bowed her head and directed everyone to do the same

while she said grace. Once she was done, she raised her head and exclaimed, "Dig in everybody!"

None of the couples wasted a minute before they helped themselves to and passed around the aromatic fare until all their plates were full.

Jason felt like he was at an old fashioned hoe-down, the cozy welcoming sensations making him feel right at home and like one of the family.

The conversation was light and easy, nothing like what he had expected from the family 'firing squad.'

Midway through the meal, Evelyn leaned close and whispered, "They're on their best behavior for you, Jace. Give it time," like *she* could read *his* mind.

"So, Jason, how do you like it here in New York so far?" Angela asked, as if on cue.

"It's not Colorado, but it's nice."

"How'd Evie get along on that ranch of yours for two weeks?" EJ asked.

"Not too bad."

"He's being nice," Nick said.

"Oh, you hush. I'm sure Evie dug in with her usual resourcefulness and did just fine," Slany said.

"Actually, she won the award for most improved rider."

"That's right, I almost forgot. It's a nice big trophy, too. Puts all your track trophies to shame, EJ."

"Now that's the tomboy spirit I'm talking about." Angela laughed.

"You'll have to show it to us," Tabitha said, voice tinged with genuine interest and excitement.

"Of course I will. And my custom-made, personalized saddle, too." Evelyn turned to Jason with a smile, and his heart liked to melt from the adorable sight. "Jason made it for me."

He shrugged. "It's nothing special."

“He’s being modest.” She pushed him in his arm with hers. “He bet me that I couldn’t stop smoking for the two weeks I was on the ranch.”

“Oh, mistake. He challenged the Vega competitive spirit. A definite no-no,” Nick joked.

“I know that now.”

Everyone had a good laugh at this.

“I’m just glad you got her to stop smoking, Jace.” Angela reached across the table to squeeze his hand in her warm one. “Thank you.”

“That is a neat trick. So now we have to see this saddle, too, Evie,” Slany said.

“Next time I come over, I’ll bring them...both...oh, no...”

Jason turned to her when he heard the distress in Evelyn’s tone. He stared at her face and immediately noticed her pallor. “Evie?”

She grabbed his arm and squeezed as if to keep herself upright, but Jason could see that she was losing the battle, stood, and caught her around the shoulders.

“Evelyn, are you okay?”

She shook her head. “I think I’m going to be sick.” No sooner had the words left her mouth, than she heaved all over Jason’s western shirt and jeans.

Chapter 27

Someone knocked on the door as Evelyn sat on the floor beside the toilet in Angela's upstairs master bathroom, stomach empty and brains swirling.

She was absolutely mortified.

"Evie, honey, let me in," Angela said.

"Can't you let me wallow in my misery in peace?"

"What kind of big sister would I be if I did that?"

"Go away."

"Evelyn, open this door."

Oh, great, now she had to deal with Angela-the-drill-sergeant while her head pounded and her stomach rolled around like a ship on the high seas during a storm.

Maybe she shouldn't have had that second helping of potato salad. Or maybe it was that second Sex on the Beach that had tipped the scales. She hadn't done any serious drinking in a while and her body wasn't used to the alcohol overload, surely. Though, she couldn't remember tasting all that much alcohol in her drinks, not as strong as Angela usually mixed them.

Or maybe...

"Evie, please."

Okay, that was unexpected and totally out of character for her interfering sister. Angela didn't do please. She gave orders thinly disguised as requests and expected everyone in the family to do her bidding for their own good.

Evelyn knew she'd never get rid of Angela and that she had to come out of the bathroom sooner or later, so she stumbled to her

feet, took the several faltering steps across the room, and opened the door.

“Oh, you poor thing.” Angela immediately drew Evelyn into her arms as she entered the bathroom.

Evelyn started to cry for no particular reason other than she felt like a total idiot after the scene downstairs and her big sister was holding her and making these comforting cooing sounds assuring her that everything would be all right.

After a long moment, Angela kissed Evelyn’s forehead, then pulled the door closed behind them and came into the bathroom.

“I’m sure Jason’s thinking I’m a complete mess,” Evelyn murmured.

“Actually, Jason’s the complete mess.” Angela chuckled but stopped when she saw Evelyn wince. She patted her sister’s shoulder, closed the toilet seat, and directed Evelyn to sit down before taking a seat on the edge of the adjacent bathtub. “It’s nothing a little detergent and fabric softener won’t make right, so quit fretting.”

“I don’t know what happened.”

Angela arched a brow. “Don’t you?”

Evelyn shrugged, trying to deny the queasy feeling in her stomach and the sudden awareness overwhelming her heart. “I think I overdid it with the food and drink.”

“First of all, your drinks were virgin.”

“Virgin? Why would you make—?”

“And second of all, you’re eating for two, so you didn’t overdo anything.”

“No.” Evelyn shook her head, moaned, and buried her face in her hands.

“Oh, yes, so suck it up and decide what you’re going to do.”

Evelyn popped up her head to stare at her sister. “What do you mean decide what I’m going to do?”

“Are you going to have him?”

She hadn't even gotten used to the idea of *being* pregnant, much less *having* the baby. What was Angela asking her? And she wasn't even going to go there and ask if she were using 'him' in the literal or figurative sense.

"I'm asking you to take stock of your life and figure out how you really want to live the rest of it and with whom."

She guessed she should be used to someone answering questions she hadn't even asked yet since she'd been living with Angela and EJ for most of her life. But it was still annoying and a little creepy to have her sister tooling around in her head uninvited.

Angela took her hand. "Honey, I'm sorry to be so blunt and...intrusive. But you've got big decisions to make."

"I don't have to make them this instant, do I?"

"No, not this instant. But you do need to start considering what you're going to do."

"About Jason?"

"Him and the baby."

She didn't need to be able to read Jason's mind to know he'd want this baby. Evelyn could already picture him cuddling the swaddling-covered infant in his big protective arms and falling in instant love with their child.

All well and good, but did he love *her* as much as she loved him? Or would he just stay with her because she was his baby's mother?

Evelyn hated that term, had never wanted to be a baby's mama, the woman who had a man's baby, but otherwise was nothing but a thorn in his life to be tolerated.

"Evie, you know it's not like that with Jason. He loves you."

"He hasn't said it."

"Have you told *him* how *you* feel?"

"I don't know how I feel." It wasn't a total lie. She knew she loved him—God, so much it hurt—but she wasn't sure how she felt about it, especially since she'd only come to the realization

several today. She didn't even question Angela's assertion that she *was* pregnant. She knew it was so without benefit of an early pregnancy test, or her sudden inability to hold down a meal. But she didn't know how she felt about it anymore than she knew how she felt about loving a man that didn't love her, contrary to her sister's contention.

She was pregnant with Jason's child.

Rather than deal with her feelings for him, Evelyn decided to address the former issue, not that it was easier or less distressing, but that it was something she at least had some control over. "I...I can't be pregnant."

"Did someone mention pregnant?"

Evelyn and Angela both jerked their heads to the door as Tabitha closed it and crossed the floor to lean back on the large sink counter, folding her arms across her breasts.

"Did everyone know except me?" Evelyn groaned, then had a sudden thought and goggled at Angela. "You didn't tell Jason, did you?"

"I wouldn't do that. I may be a meddler, but there are some things I do leave for my 'victims' to work out on their own." She smiled.

"If he doesn't know, he might have figured it out by now," Tabitha said.

"You think so?" Angela asked. "I don't know. Men can be so oblivious outside of football, food, and sex, I sometimes wonder if Freddie would notice if I grew another head."

"EJ's pretty sensitive to...my needs."

Evelyn watched Tabitha blush, then said, "I'm glad to have the two of you together. I need help to deal with—"

"Jason's fey and that makes you nervous," Angela said.

"Jason's fey?" Tabitha gawked.

Evelyn nodded and turned to Angela. "I wish you'd stop doing that."

“What, dipping inside your head?” Tabitha spoke for Angela.

“It’s so invasive and...rude.”

Angela rubbed her arm. “Oh, honey, you know I don’t mean to be. Sometimes, I just can’t help it. Things sort of...jump out at me.”

“She’s telling the truth.”

Evelyn looked from Tabitha to Angela and back again before asking, “How do *you* deal with it? I mean, I grew up with them, but you, you’re married to EJ. With that amount of intimacy...”

“It’s a little trying sometime. But actually EJ’s helped me a lot with controlling my transmissions.”

“Transmissions?” Evelyn asked.

“The thoughts I send out. He says I have a natural ability to block and suppress, and I just needed to learn how to channel it. He’s been helping me with that.”

“EJ’s giving up secrets of the inner circle?” Angela teased.

“What secrets am I giving up?”

All three women turned to the open door where EJ stood on the threshold watching all of them before he came into the room to hug Tabitha around the shoulder and draw her close to his side.

Evelyn watched how cuddly and cozy they looked, and suddenly envied them their relationship, wanted the intimacy they shared and didn’t know how to go about getting it with Jason without bearing her soul. She didn’t know if she could do that again, not even with someone as steady and solid as Jason and so unlike Todd Cole.

“We really need to learn to lock the door,” she muttered.

“What? And deprive me of finding out secrets of the inner female sanctum?” EJ asked.

“Tell me everyone else isn’t on their way up here to check on me.”

“They’re not. Freddie and Slany are finding Jason something to wear while Nick threw his shirt and jeans in the wash.” EJ got

down on his haunches and squeezed Evelyn's thigh. "What about you, kiddo? Are you okay?"

"I'm all right."

"Jason mentioned it's the second time you've thrown up on him in as many days."

"I'm so embarrassed." Evelyn buried her face in her hands again.

EJ chuckled. "So, what's the story, Evie?"

Evelyn pulled her face out of her hands to look at him, saw the piercing look beneath the teasing smile and wished she knew the secret of blocking and suppressing that Tabitha mentioned earlier.

Was EJ reading her? Would he try to tap her for information rather than wait for her to answer him? She thought it would stand to reason since of the three women in the room, she was the weakest link when it came to psychic ability. "There's no story," she said.

"He's worried about you." EJ reached up to pat her arm. "We all are."

"There's nothing to worry about." She looked up at Tabitha and Angela as if for back up.

"You're sure?"

"She's sure, EJ. Now go downstairs and make sure you relay the information to everyone else, so they don't all start popping up here in droves. We'll be down in a minute." Tabitha proceeded to push her husband towards the door.

EJ paused on the threshold and stood his ground for a moment looking at his sisters and wife before silently turning to go.

Tabitha closed the door after he left and leaned back against it. "Whew, that was a close one, wasn't it, girls?"

"I'll say." There was still a chance that Jason didn't know if Angela's theory, that men were oblivious to their women, was true.

But Jason had never been oblivious to anything about her from what Evelyn could see. He'd had a keen sense of whom and what she was from day one.

How was she going to keep this from him? More importantly, did she really want to?

Chapter 28

Jason could feel the mental and physical turmoil emitting from Evelyn in waves.

The entire drive to her townhouse, he kept waiting for her to either throw up on him again, or blurt out the reason behind her episodes of nausea. But Evelyn did neither, and Jason wondered if she would tell him that she was pregnant.

It was killing him to hold in his excitement and act like he didn't know there was a bun in the oven, especially when he could *feel him*.

He couldn't exactly explain the feeling. It wasn't as intense as reading Evelyn's mind or knowing what she was feeling. It wasn't anything on a conscious level, just this deep visceral awareness of life stirring inside his woman.

If Evelyn didn't freak out with the revelation of his telepathy, then knowing that he could sense their baby inside her might get the job done and ultimately alienate her.

Jason tried to find comfort in Angela's words when she pulled him to the side on his way out to join Evelyn in her car when they left the Calminettis'.

"She'll come around and talk to you, Jace. Give her time."

But he couldn't help feeling like time was running out for him and Evelyn, couldn't help feeling like he was auditioning for a role in a play that had already been cast, or a play that would never see the bright lights of a stage.

Impatience and desperation had him breaking his tenuous ethical code regarding his newfound gifts and trying to read Evelyn

as she found a parking space in front of her house and turned off the ignition before turning to him. But nothing came to him. *Nada*, zip.

He wasn't sure if he was disappointed at his failure or afraid that he'd lost his gift altogether. The latter would have served him right for scorning it in the first place.

"Wild night, huh?" Evelyn said.

"Being with you these last couple of days has done wonders for my laundry bill."

She chuckled and he waited for her to say something. Still nothing.

"We'd better get inside, cowboy." She opened her door and Jason did the same, silently following her up the stairs outside her building.

He watched as she turned on the overhead chandelier and yawned and stretched, hunger raging through his core at the sight of her soft sensuous curves in bas-relief.

Jason sidled behind her, sliding his arms around her waist and palming her belly, energy rising up from her abdomen through his fingertips to his shoulders before finally dispersing through his chest in an explosion of heat.

The sensation was so powerful and overwhelming, it pushed his next words out before he could stop them. "Marry me, Evie."

She turned in his arms, peering at him in resignation rather than shock. "Angela told you I'm pregnant didn't she?"

"She didn't have to. I already knew."

"How? Because I threw up a couple of times? I barely knew before today, and to tell you the truth, I'm still not sure. I might just have a bug or something."

Jason gave her a skeptical look that propelled her out of his arms with a heavy sigh before she stalked to the other side of the living room. "We both know it's not a bug."

She turned back to him, arms folded across her breasts as if for protection. “Sure you and Angie don’t want to hold off on those wedding invitations before the result are in? You don’t want to strap yourself with someone who might not be the mother of your child.”

“Do you think that’s the only reason I’m asking you?”

The look she gave him said that this was exactly what she thought and Jason’s stomach pitched at the uphill battle he was facing.

“Why else?”

“How about because I love you, Evie?”

“Just when did you come to this miraculous conclusion? The first or second time I threw up on you?”

Jason released a particularly foul curse and saw Evelyn’s eyes widen in surprise as he marched across the room to confront her, and he wondered what good was the ability to read her mind when what he needed was for her to see inside his soul?

He took her by the shoulders, had to stop himself from shaking her before he said, “Don’t be sarcastic. We’re talking about our future.”

“Based on what, Jason? The fact that I’m pregnant and that you say you love me?”

“I do love you. I’ve loved you since Freeborn.” And at her continued doubtful expression, Jason’s heart pounded with the magnitude of his mistake.

He should have said something way sooner and could have kicked himself right then and there for his procrastination.

But was there ever a right time to tell a woman so skeptical and down on intimacy and romance that you loved her? Was there ever a right time to tell this woman that he didn’t want to live another day without her and it wasn’t just her pregnancy that had him professing his feelings? “What do I have to do to make you believe me?”

She averted her gaze and murmured, "I don't know."

Jason got down on one knee before her, hugged her around the waist, and rested his face against her flat stomach. He knew it was way too early, but he could swear he felt something—their child.

"Jason, don't..."

"Evie, I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you if you'll let me. I want to raise this child and a bushel more with you or no more at all. I just want to be with you."

She shook her head, tears welling in her eyes.

"Evie, just trust me. Trust us."

"I can't," she rasped.

It hurt him to hear the doubt and pain in her voice, and then she took him totally by surprise when she looked at him and asked, "What if I don't even want to have this baby, Jason? Have you ever considered that?"

He hadn't considered it and maybe he should have, especially after what she'd gone through with Todd. "He's my baby, too," he said and Evelyn instantly pulled out of his arms and stumbled back.

"See, this is exactly why I didn't want to tell you despite all of Angela's assurances to the contrary. I knew you'd want to control the situation like all men do."

"I think you're just looking for excuses to end this." Jason stood to follow her. "It's not controlling to want to marry you and raise our baby together."

Evelyn opened and closed her mouth several times before finding something to dispute him. "You weren't too happy with my allusion to not having it."

"What man would be?" He threw up his arms, took two steps to confront her, and saw her flinch as he towered over her. He reached out to grab her shoulders despite the knots she had his guts tied up in. "I'm not Todd. When will you get that through your head?" he bit out.

“Maybe never. And maybe I don’t want to be just a vessel to carry *your* baby because you want it. It’s my body and I’ll do with it as I please!” She turned on her heels and headed for the staircase, head high and shoulders back.

His heart caught at the notion that she might...Jason swallowed hard at the possibility.

She wouldn’t really get rid of their baby would she?

He stood and headed after her, caught her arm at the third step from the bottom. “Please, Evie. Talk to me. Don’t leave it like this.”

“There’s nothing else to talk about.”

“This baby.” He put his hand on her belly expecting her to jerk away, but she didn’t, just looked at him, cool and emotionally cut off.

“It’s not your concern what I decide to do. We’re not your concern.”

“Evelyn, if you turn your back on us, if you do what I think you’re insinuating, you’ll only regret it.”

“Don’t threaten me.”

“I’m not threatening you and you know it. I’m just stating facts.”

She gently pulled out of his grasp. “I have to do what’s right for me, Jason. And if that includes not going through with this pregnancy...” She stared at him, shaking her head before turning to continue up the stairs.

Jason stood where he was and let her go, heart twisting at her ominous words.

He listened to her bedroom door close and felt like the lid had been lowered on his coffin with him inside.

* * * *

Evelyn leaned back against her closed bedroom door, thanking God she had gotten away from Jason when she did. She didn't know what she would have done or said had she had to stay in the same room with him for a minute longer. As if what she'd done and said hadn't been bad enough to drive a permanent wedge between them?

What she felt like doing more than anything was crying.

Ever since they'd left her sister's house earlier in the evening she'd been near tears. The smallest thing brought them to her eyes, but usually it had something to do with Jason—his voice, his body, his face, his scent—and the thought of not enjoying any of these things about him again.

Why was she so emotional, so irrational? First, last night at the bar with Jennifer (she didn't care what Jason said, it was mauling and not a hug!) then earlier at Angela's in the bathroom, finally with Jason just now.

He probably thought her some kind of unstable nut case and that he would probably be better off without her. She knew this is what she'd be thinking if the shoe was on the other foot. Good riddance to the headache.

He was better off without her anyway. She knew it and had only made it easier for him to be free of her. He may not understand her motives, but she did him a favor.

Besides, what woman in the world wanted to be with someone, anyone who could read her mind, know her innermost thoughts without her consent. And if this wasn't creepy enough, he'd known she was pregnant before she did. It could have been an educated guess, but Evelyn knew better, knew that Jason could feel the baby as well as he could read her.

Yep, he was better off without her and *she* was better off without *him*.

But if this were so, then why did she feel such a terrible hollowness in her chest where her heart used to be? Why was she

missing him? Most important of all, why was she denying him when she knew she wanted to be with him more than she wanted anything in her life?

Did she still not trust him after everything he'd said to her and all they'd been through together? Could any man lie that well, and with that much sincerity?

When she remembered Todd, she knew the answer was a resounding *yes*.

Todd was a prime example of a wolf in sheep's clothing. He hadn't begun to show his true nature until well into their second year of marriage and once he had let himself hang out, well, damn there had been no turning back. Why she had stuck it out with him afterward was a mystery to everyone except Evelyn. She hated the idea of failure and had wanted to make things work with Todd, his puritanical, chauvinistic ideals notwithstanding.

Evelyn faulted her parents and Angela's successful marriages for her stubborn, romantic mindset, for her not wanting to give up on Todd.

I'm not Todd. When will you get that through your head?

Obviously never. And if she *was* still hung up on Mr. Cole and what he had done to her, to their marriage, then maybe she wasn't ready to be in a mature and stable relationship with any man, much less someone as capable of assuaging her damaged psyche and soul as Jason was.

She didn't deserve him, and she refused to drag him down with her neuroses.

Sure, maybe she didn't deserve him, but she wanted to be with him more than anything she'd ever wanted in her life.

Evelyn trudged over to her bed and flung herself back in the middle of it.

The ever-present tears were right there in her eyes waiting to be shed, but she held them back with the supremest efforts. If she

let them fall, the sobs would quickly follow and she didn't know if she could stop the waterworks once they started.

She did *not* want Jason to see her like that, did not want to put either of them through another one of her emotional breakdowns after everything else that she had already put him through this weekend.

Evelyn closed her eyes nowhere near sleep or sleepy, mind in a whirlwind trying to decide what to do. She didn't think sleep would help her, didn't think anything would, not even a new day like tomorrow.

Tomorrow she'd still be pregnant with Jason's baby. She had no intentions of changing that despite what she had implied to him. Better to let him think the worst of her. It would make it easier for him to walk away.

Evelyn choked back a sob. Despite her best efforts, despite her best intentions and what she had told him, the thought of being without Jason ate away at everything that she was and had become since knowing him.

She turned onto her side and curled into the fetal position on top of the comforter, exhaustion finally catching up with her before she gradually drifted off to sleep with tears warming her cheeks and Jason's name on her lips.

* * * *

Evelyn woke up disoriented beneath the bed covers and in her PJ's several hours later.

Sunday morning sunlight spilled through the slats of her window blinds and she automatically blinked a few times before yawning and stretching her arms overhead.

Jason's distinct, clean woodsy smell from the day before engulfed her senses and she looked forward to seeing him before

she remembered their disagreement the night before and how she had purposely rebuffed him.

Had he tossed in the towel and decided to give up on her?

Evelyn closed her eyes again and hugged herself, holding onto the vague memory of him when he undressed her for bed and put her under the covers. She certainly didn't remember putting on her PJ's herself, had been too exhausted to move once she'd fallen asleep.

Slowly she got out of bed and noticed Jason's bags were gone as she left the room.

With a sense of impending doom, she headed downstairs and caught the eerie quiet and emptiness before she even reached the bottom step.

She scanned the living room and didn't see any signs of Jason, stomach churning with alarm and sudden awareness as she headed to the kitchen.

He was gone.

Never had she thought he'd just leave her without a word, without fighting for or with her and trying to persuade her that his feelings for her had nothing to do with the baby as much as they had to do with her as a person.

Shouldn't she be glad that she didn't have to keep up her guard any longer, that she was free to be herself, and make her own decisions where the baby was concerned?

Just as she was on the verge of convincing herself that she was relieved she didn't have to face Jason and brave a gut-wrenching morning after, she spotted the envelope tucked between the salt-and-pepper shakers on her immaculate kitchen counter.

Evelyn reassured herself that she had made the right decision as she picked up and opened the envelope, but all her self-confidence went right out the window at the first line she read.

I've never been one to give up and quit without a fight...

She felt like a kid who'd broken her favorite toy from playing with it too much and too rough and expected it to bounce back like new. But the frustration and hopelessness emanating from the couple of paragraphs on the page told Evelyn that there would be no bouncing back from this for her or Jason.

He might as well have written his little missive in blood. The pain wafting up to her from his words was so deep.

She'd ruined him. She'd ruined them

The tears and sobs came then, a flood of water streaming down her face and wails emerging from the bottom of her spirit before spewing from her mouth in a tone so harsh and racking that she barely recognized the cries as coming from a human, much less her.

The kitchen phone rang in the middle of her crying jag, and Evelyn blindly reached for it.

When she heard Angela's voice on the other end, she cried even harder, hiccupping and taking in great gulps of air. She felt her sister waiting on the other end, and tried to rush her recovery.

Once Evelyn's sobs died down, Angela said, "I'm coming over," and hung up.

Evelyn felt instantly better at the idea of her big sister coming to her rescue, but didn't think even Angela could fix what she had broken.

Chapter 29

Freeborn Ranch, Colorado Springs, CO – Three Months Later

Evelyn had let Angela convince her that Jason's letter was an open invitation for her to come to him once she came to her senses to believe his professions of love.

"He loves you, Evie. That's not going to change even though he did leave."

Loving someone and knowing whether or not that someone was good or right for you, however, was two different things, and Jason had obviously made the distinction when he hopped on that plane back to Colorado.

How could she argue with his logic? She'd pushed him away after all, despite loving him and because she knew it was the best thing for both of them.

Evelyn knew now that she had made a mistake and nothing had showed her the glaring error of her ways more clearly than her daily growing belly.

Their baby needed his father, but more importantly, Evelyn needed and wanted his father in her life. She knew this now, would rather live in Jason's world in Colorado, than live without him in her world in New York.

The problem now was convincing Jason that she was sincere and really knew her own mind.

On Angela's advice, Evelyn now found herself in a cab and only fifty yards outside the gates of Freeborn Ranch ready to surprise Jason with her arrival.

The rest of Jason's 'surprise,' however, had been all Evelyn's idea.

She just had to get past the gatekeeper in Montana now standing on the front lawn of the main house waiting for Evelyn with her arms crossed over her breasts.

Evelyn paid the driver, got out of the back seat of the cab, and just avoided shivering beneath the glacial gaze Montana gave her as she started across the lawn to meet Evelyn halfway.

Damn, she'd thought she would have her work cut out for her getting to Jason. She hadn't counted on Montana being so forbidding. The only thing missing from the younger woman's protective, mama bear stance was smoke coming out of her nostrils and ears.

How could she explain to this happily married woman that she'd had to push her friend away for his own protection? She couldn't because it sounded lame, even to her own ears. She knew Montana would take it in with suspicion and rightfully so.

Why should she believe that Evelyn meant her friend well after what she had done to him?

But Evelyn hadn't wanted Jason to sacrifice his optimism and youth on her, an older woman still so emotionally damaged by her ex she wasn't sure what love was anymore.

You're sure. You're just a coward who rejected it.

Would he ever forgive her for making him think she was going to abort their child?

She realized now she had really gone over the top with that allusion. She'd been so desperate to get Jason away from her, desperate to save him from a fate that could have been worse than death—a once-burned woman scorned and too afraid to take a chance on love when it was staring her right in the face—that she'd said the one thing she knew would alienate a family-oriented man like Jason.

She was ready to take the chance now, and it had taken her all these past three months to realize that loving Jason and accepting his love wasn't really taking a chance at all. Loving Jason was the safest, surest bet in the entire world for her.

"You're lucky Angela called ahead to warn me you were coming. Otherwise, I wouldn't have let you on my property."

"I know we're probably not your favorite people in the world right now, but I appreciate you listening to my sister and letting me come."

"Angela's my friend and I like her."

Evelyn didn't miss Montana's omission, that she didn't consider Evelyn a friend anymore and that she didn't like her.

Since the woman already hated her, she figured she couldn't make things any worse between them and decided to get right to the point. "Is he here?"

"If you're referring to the man whose heart you ripped out and stomped on, yes. Jason's checking fences out at the west pasture."

"I'd like to go out and see him."

Montana stared at her for a long moment before finally hissing out a breath as if in resignation. With one lingering look at Evelyn's slightly rounded belly, she said, "I'll have Seth take you out to where Jason's working."

"Thank you, Monty."

"Don't thank me. It's against my better judgment, but as much as I think he hates you right now, I think he'd hate me more for keeping you from him." Montana led the way around back of the house to the stables to find Seth. She directed Evelyn to wait in his nearby pick-up.

Evelyn told herself to be calm. She'd handled rooms full of hostile clients and made them come around to seeing things her way. This was no different, except for the fact that she had a lot more at stake than selling a commodity.

This time she was trying to sell herself and secure her own future.

* * * *

Jason had just gotten through tearing one of the newest buckaroos, a new A-hole, after finding out the youngin' had left one of the gates open and a horse had escaped the night before.

He knew not everyone understood the importance of his main rule—leave any gate you use exactly as you found it—but he still couldn't let the kid off the hook, new or not, could he?

They were lucky they had only lost one horse, and thanks to Seth and several of his crew, they had already located and rounded up the missing critter and returned him to the stables.

The loss could have been much worse and Jason knew it, but it didn't stop him from being thoroughly pee-oh'ed at the cowboy in question.

Heck, he might as well be honest with himself, his hide got chapped way too easily and much too often since he'd returned to the ranch from New York.

Actually, it was a wonder Monty, Seth, and his men continued to put up with him.

He knew his attitude was having a negative impact on his crew's morale from the wide berth his men had been giving him the last three months, and he knew he needed to get his temper in check or risk losing their respect. Except his foul mood was so entrenched now, he wasn't sure anymore how to rein it in, or how he'd become so ornery in the first place.

"Sir?"

Jason turned from where he was walking the fence line looking for downed wires to see Les with his hat in his hands.

He sighed and walked over to where the kid stood and fidgeted with his Stetson.

"I secured the rest of the perimeter and checked for any broken barriers all the way around. Anything else you need me to do, Mr. Makepeace?"

"First of all, call me Jason." He put a hand on the kid's shoulder and squeezed. "And what I need you to do now is take a break and accept my apology. I was way too harsh on you earlier."

"It's okay, sir. You were right. I should have closed the gate."

Jason smiled at the youngin's eagerness to please and wondered if he had ever been so green and innocent. If he had been, it was so long ago he couldn't remember. "It's not all right, and I need you to pardon me. Think you can do that?"

"Sure...Jason. No problem."

"Good man." Jason patted him on the back and watched as Seth's pick-up appeared over a ridge in the distance, just outside the fence line. "Why don't you go grab some vittles, and I'll catch up with you later, Les."

"Sure thing, sir."

Les put on his hat and jogged back the way he had come as Seth pulled up outside the fence.

Jason made his way over and his heart stuttered to a stop when he got a look at Seth's passenger.

Seth got out of the truck first and met Jason at the fence. "I have brought company that I believe will soothe your temper."

"Take another guess."

Seth just chuckled as Evelyn got out of the truck and waited beside it.

Everything in Jason wanted to stampede Seth to get to her, but he made himself stay right where he was and just stared across the meadow at her leaning against the side of Seth's pick-up looking more beautiful and awe-inspiring than a sunrise and a sunset put together.

"I will finish checking the fences while you two talk," Seth said, his tone leaving no room for argument as he left Jason and began to walk the fence line.

What was he supposed to say to the woman?

It had been three months since he'd laid eyes on her, yet it felt like only yesterday when he'd stood on the steps in her townhouse and argued with her about their future.

Had he really given up on her so easily to come back to Colorado alone?

Evelyn strolled from the truck to the fence where Jason stood.

Despite the mid-December chill, she wore her sheepskin coat open. Beneath it she had on a western shirt in her favorite hot pink and a pair of black jeans that hugged her curves the way he wanted.

She stopped half-a-foot away from him, hands in her coat pockets, and Jason's heart sped as her familiar spicy scent wafted out to him.

"Hi, Jason."

"Hello, Evelyn."

"You're looking good."

And you look like a piece of heaven. "Thanks. So do you."

"Thanks."

The need to pull her into his arms was a growing physical ache. He didn't know if he could last another minute with her standing before him looking so edible and vulnerable and sexy without him touching her.

Had she gotten rid of the baby? He couldn't see her doing something like that, not after going through a miscarriage, but then she didn't look pregnant, either.

Lordy, she glowed though, always glowed to him like a beacon showing him what his future could be. But then she'd seen fit to snuff out that light in one night.

Suddenly, Evelyn gasped and put her hand on her belly, momentarily glancing down before raising her hazel eyes to stare at him with an awe-struck expression. She reached through the fence post, grabbed Jason's hand and guided it under her shirt to rest on her slightly rounded belly. "He just moved. It's the first time. You have to feel this!"

Jason gaped, his heart leaping as he held his palm where she'd placed it and felt the fluttering beneath his hand. "What in Sam Hill!"

Evelyn chuckled and met his gaze, eyes lit as if from a fire within.

"But I thought—"

"I couldn't, Jason. I wouldn't."

"Why did you let me think you would?"

"It was cruel and I was wrong. Can you forgive me?"

"Tarnation, Evie..."

"You don't know how much I missed hearing you say that."

"I missed you, too, but you can't just come here out of the blue and..." He sighed and shook his head, remembered he had his hand on her stomach and pulled it back.

The woman simultaneously chapped his hide and filled him with unspeakable joy in the same breath, always had. But he couldn't allow himself to fall so easily this time. He wouldn't.

Evelyn took his hand again. "Please forgive me, Jason. I need you to. I need *you*."

Just need? Not love?

"How can I be sure you won't turn tail and run away from me again? Run away from us?"

"I know you don't have any reason to, but I'll tell you like you told me: Trust me. Trust us."

He swallowed hard, felt his Adam's apple jumping, and was sure Evelyn could see it, that she could hear him gulp.

Dadgummit, this was killing him. It wasn't in him to be detached with someone he knew so intimately, someone he loved and wanted to hold.

It had taken everything in him not to call her in New York, not to call her family and check on her. He'd told himself she had made up her mind and that she didn't want him in her life. End of story.

And here she was, right when he thought he was over the pain, flipping his world upside down and inside out, dangling an olive branch in his face.

"Why are you here, Evie?"

"How's the house hunting coming?" she asked instead of answering his question. "Don't tell me you've given up."

He shrugged. "It's coming." Should he mention that he'd decided to go on and buy the dream house she and he had looked at, only to discover that someone else had bought the property right from under him?

When Susan had delivered the news to him a couple of weeks ago, it had been like having his heart ripped out all over again.

"Come with me, Jace." She squeezed his hand. "Please. I promise you won't be sorry."

He released her hand to climb over the gate, couldn't say no to her as much as his good sense told him he should.

She took his hand again and led him over to the pick-up where Seth had left the keys in the ignition.

He got into the passenger seat beside Evelyn and buckled up as she did the same and started the truck. "So, do I get to know where we're going?"

"It's a surprise."

Jason held his tongue, curiosity eating at his gut as she doubled back the way she and Seth had come and steered the truck off of Freeborn property proper.

He remained silent and tense beside her until they reached Woodmen Valley where his curiosity peaked at the familiar, breathtaking views.

When Evelyn pulled up in front of the house that Jason had only just inquired about a couple of weeks ago, he turned in his seat. "Why are we here?"

She looked out the window, then back at him with a frown. "Someone bought it?"

"Yep. I found out about it a little while back."

"So you were still looking into buying it?"

"I figured I might as well go for it. But I was too late."

"Damn, that sucks."

"I thought so."

Evelyn got out of the truck and headed up the walkway to the front door.

Jason got out to follow her, and caught up just as she slid a key in the lock, unlocked the door, and entered the house. "Evie, what are you doing?"

"I wanted to make sure it's what you still wanted before we moved in. But since you said you were still interested, I know I made the right decision."

"Before we move in?"

"Yes, Jason. Before we move in to our house."

"You bought it."

"You're slow, but you eventually get there." She laughed and came close to hug him.

Jason frowned, remaining stiff in her arms and not returning her hug.

She pulled back to stare at him. "Jason, what's the matter?"

"You think you can just buy your way back into my life?" He almost regretted the harshness of his words, especially when he noticed her hurt look. She looked like he had just killed her mama, and Jason almost immediately wanted to take back his words.

Almost, until he remembered the pain he'd been going through since he'd left her.

She stepped away from him and threw her hands in the air. "That wasn't my intention at all, Jason. I bought this for us, for our life together."

"What if I don't want your charity?"

"Why are you being so proud and stubborn? It's not charity. I did it because I love you, cowboy and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Plain and simple. Didn't anyone ever tell you that it's rude to look a gift horse in the mouth? Didn't anyone ever teach you manners and humility? Didn't anyone—"

He caught her by the arms and pulled her close. "Say that again."

"It's rude to look a gift horse in the mouth?"

"No. Say you love me."

She took a deep breath and relaxed as he pulled her against him. "I love you, Jason Makepeace. I love you so much."

He smiled, leaned in and kissed her hard and long, thrusting his tongue into her mouth and snatching her breath away with his hunger.

After an endless moment, he pulled away to let Evelyn catch her breath. He stared at her dazed expression, pushing a stray tendril of hair away from her face and tucking it behind an ear. "There's just two things I need to know."

"What's that?"

"This is a big investment, and I'm not even going to ask where you got the money to do this—"

"You'd better not."

He chuckled, pulled her close again and turned serious as he searched her face. "Are you sure about all this, Evie? Uprooting your life to move here and that I can make a go of a ranch? It's a big gamble for you all the way around."

“Not a gamble at all.” She smiled and cupped his whiskered cheek. “I have faith in you, Jason. I always have. It’s just taken me all these months to realize what Angela and Montana realized two years ago.”

“What’s that?”

“That you’re my destiny.”

Epilogue

J&E Ranch, Colorado Springs, CO – Eight Months Later

“You’re sister Emilia’s looking a mite fretful,” Jason murmured and Evelyn laughed at his concerned tone.

“Probably because she thinks she’s next on Angela’s hit list.”

“Why? Because she caught your bouquet?”

Emilia had caught it all right, despite her and their other sister Donna’s best efforts not to. “No. We just know our big sister and she’s on a mission.”

Jason grinned and spun her around the dance floor to the melodious strains of Shania Twain’s *From This Moment On*.

Evelyn hadn’t thought it possible, but in the last year, she had turned into something of a country western fan, at least she loved Shania Twain to distraction.

“And what mission would that be?”

She giggled as Jason leaned in to nuzzle her neck before planting a soft kiss on her throat. “You know. The mission to fix up all her brother’s and sisters in holy matrimony.”

“I reckon I got no complaint about her methods.”

“I reckon you don’t, cowboy.”

“So, who do you think it is?” Jason asked.

“Who?”

“The guy Angela’s trying to hook Emilia up with.”

“Oh that!” Evelyn scanned the floor and tables for a suitable candidate, but something told her Angela hadn’t even met Mr. Right for Emilia yet. “I don’t think he’s here.”

“You know something I don’t?”

“No offense to my sister and your cowpokes, but Emilia just doesn’t seem like the cowboy type to me. And aside from my family, that’s pretty much all that’s here.”

“You didn’t do too bad, Mrs. Makepeace.”

“But I’ve always loved cowboys, from when I was a little girl.”

“I’ll bet you did.” Jason dipped her back on the dance floor, bent his head to kiss her neck again, and Evelyn giggled as he finished his dramatic move with a flourish when he pulled her back into his arms and spun her around.

Spontaneous applause erupted all around them, led by none other than Angela, Montana, and Tammy who’d made it to the nuptials and stayed for the reception with her parents.

Evelyn noticed Emilia smiling and clapping, too, decided she’d have to nail down Angela sometime soon to find out what she had planned for their sister.

Now that her own head was no longer on the chopping block and she had gotten hitched, Evelyn could sit back, relax, and enjoy her other two sisters squirm while they tried to figure out Angela’s next move.

She knew Angela was meticulous and had a good eye for character, but Emilia was the sweetest, most naïve, and sensitive almost forty-six year old that Evelyn knew. Very special care would have to be taken in fixing her up.

“Now *you’re* looking fretful,” Jason said.

Evelyn saw his frown and rushed to reassure him. “I’m fine. Just thinking.”

“Don’t want to leave the baby behind so soon?”

“I’ve gotten over those jitters already, and I know Angela is going to spoil him rotten while we’re gone. He may not want to come back to us.”

“Are you sure it’s just Angela who’ll be spoiling him?”

Evelyn followed his glance to see their three-month-old son, Evan Joseph, in the arms of his Aunt Emilia while his other doting aunts Angela and Donna hovered on one side of her seat, and their mom, Montana, and Tammy hovered on the other side.

“They may not want to give him back to us,” Jason joked.

“Can you blame them? He’s the most gorgeous, sweet-natured baby I’ve ever seen.”

“Sounds like a doting new mother to me.”

Evelyn chuckled, couldn’t argue with him.

“Know what I think?”

“No, what?”

“I think Evan’s mother is the most gorgeous woman in this room and he’s as lucky a baby as I am a lucky man.”

“You didn’t mention sweet-natured.”

“Let’s not get ridiculous.”

She moved her hand from his shoulder to playfully punch his ribs.

“No fighting on your wedding day. Save that until after the honeymoon.” Nick called from the sidelines.

Jason laughed and leaned in to give Evelyn a sloppy wet one right on the kisser, taking a moment to trace her lips before sliding in his tongue to another round of applause.

When he was done, he stared at Evelyn and her stomach dipped at the hungry look in his ocean blue eyes.

Breathless, she teased, “You put on quite a floor show, Mr. Makepeace.”

“Wait until you see my private performance, Mrs. Makepeace,” he murmured. “It’ll be enough to make your toes curl.”

Evelyn laughed because Jason may not have known it, but he’d been curling her toes since she’d met him and hadn’t stopped yet.

MANIFEST DESTINY

The Matchmaker, Book 3

THE END

WWW.GRACIECMCKEEVER.COM

AUTHOR'S BIO



Gracie McKeever is an author from the Bronx, and aside from several side trips along the way, has lived and worked her entire life in the New York City area. She has been writing since the ripe old age of seven when two younger brothers were among her earliest, captive audience for various short story readings and performances.

An eclectic and voracious reader whose audience has grown outside of the supportive family members, she's had the great fortune of being able to incorporate two of her favorite passions and talents—reading and writing—as a book reviewer for several online e-zines, both as a regular staff member and freelancer.

Her short stories, novellas and poetry have seen exposure in various lit and art magazines and other venues—online and in print. Of particular note, heard over the airwaves on KFJC's morning show, *Dancing In The Fast Lane With Ann Arbor* (Unbedtime Stories) out of Los Altos Hills, CA (*New Life Incognita* was the story of the month for March 2000). She's also proud to be a member of the ("Worlds' Oldest Active Homeless Paper") Street News family and has seen numerous articles, poems and novel excerpts published within its pages as well as having had

a poetry reading on Pseudo On-line Network (Street News Review).

In 2001, Gracie caught the erotica bug, sinking her teeth into her first erotic e-book for a review, and hasn't looked back since, an instant affinity for the genre spawning her first erotica title, *Beneath The Surface*, published in 2006 by Siren Publishing, Inc.

**Visit Gracie's website at
www.graciecmckeever.com**

Other books by Gracie C. McKeever at



BENEATH THE SURFACE

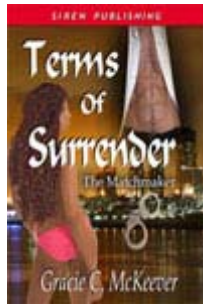
[The Matchmaker 1]

by **Gracie C. McKeever**

[*Paranormal/ Psychic/ Light BDSM/ Interracial*]

The fix is in, and even EJ Vega's telepathy can't save him from his matchmaking sisters once they decide he and Tabitha Lyons belong together. **"5 Klovers"** —CK2S Kwips and Kritiques, **"5 Magic Wands"** —Enchanted

Ramblings, **"4.5 Blue Ribbons"** —Romance Junkies, **"4.5 Stars"** —Euro Reviews, **"4.5 Roses"** —A Romance Review, **"4.5 Hearts"** —Love Romances



TERMS OF SURRENDER

[The Matchmaker 2]

by **Gracie C. McKeever**

[*Contemporary Paranormal/ BDSM/ Interracial/ Suspense*] Advertising execs Nick and Slany are thrown together on a marketing assignment and by Nick's matchmaking sister Angela who decides the two are soul mates.

"fraught with more twists than a coiled-up

Copperhead. 5 Klovers" —CK2S Kwips and Kritiques, **"throbbing with both sensuality and danger. 4.5 Kisses"** —Two Lips Reviews, **"4 Stars. WINNER 2006 Reviewers' Choice Award"** —Ecataromance.



SPELLS CAST IN SHADOWS

by **Gracie C. McKeever**

[Paranormal/ Shape-shifter/ Urban Fantasy/ African-American] In the predawn hours during a solitary ride on her ranch, Montana Freeborn collides with Seth Phoenix, centaur-turned-man and the embodiment of her psychic visions. *"a talented author ...this book is a definite must read. **5 Stars**"*—Euro

Reviews, *"a beautiful romance and a suspenseful plot promising several twists! **4.5 Klovers**"*—CK2S Kwips and Kritiques, *"a romance to-die-for, and sizzling sensual peaks. **4.5 Kisses**"*—Two Lips Reviews

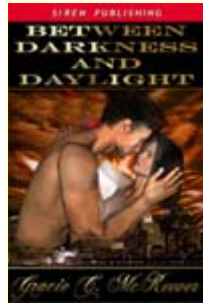


IN PLAIN SIGHT

by **Gracie C. McKeever**

[Interracial/ Reincarnation/ Suspense] Part Amazon, part seductress, all trash-talking cynic, Dara Kelly is murdered in front of her latest skip. Her job on earth, however, has only begun. *"Any book by Ms. McKeever is well worth a first read and subsequent rereads, but ...this is one of her best! **5 Kisses**"*—Two Lips

Reviews, *"Wow, Ms. McKeever, wow! This one is truly a tour de force. **5 Hearts**"*—Love Romances and More, *"magnificent and full of erotic pleasure. **4.5 Blue Ribbons**"*—Romance Junkies, *"will keep you glued to your seat. **4 Stars**"*—Romantic Times BOOKreviews.



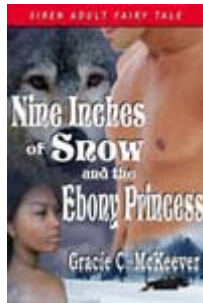
BETWEEN DARKNESS AND DAYLIGHT

by **Gracie C. McKeever**

[*Paranormal/ Psychic/ Interracial*] High school social worker Zane Youngblood wants to save the world one child at a time...Reluctant psychic, Nova Foxx, wants only to save him.

*"rapidly paced and intriguing, steamy sensuality interwoven into a wonderful storyline. **5 Kisses**"*—Two Lips Reviews

*"almost combust from the heat of desire... frightening suspense and passionate romance. **4 Hearts**"*—The Romance Studio



NINE INCHES OF SNOW AND THE EBONY PRINCESS

[An Adult Fairy Tale]

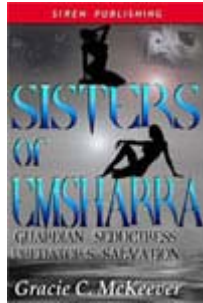
by **Gracie C. McKeever**

[*Erotic Paranormal: Urban Fantasy, Light BDSM, Interracial, Shape-shifting*] When a wealthy philanthropist is critically injured by a spiteful friend-with-benefits, only the kiss of a dedicated and empathic young nurse can bring

him out of his coma. *"A well written new styled fairy tale...*

*delightfully well crafted with a guaranteed special twist! **4.5 Flags**"*—Euro Reviews *"I feel the need to race through and see what's going to happen. Shape-shifters, mind readers and bunny boilers. Just my cup of tea. **4 Champagne Flutes**"*—

Cocktail Reviews, *"An excellent fairy tale...a cross between Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty. **4 Stars**"*—Ecataromance



SISTERS OF EMSHARRA

[Print Collection]

Guardian Seductress
Predator's Salvation

by **Gracie C. McKeever**

[Urban Fantasy/ Shape-shifter/ Interracial]

Unrest is afoot in Emsharra. Genesis and LaMia, two opposing Sisters, are left to their own devices to quash the rebellion. **"4.5**

Klovers" —CK2S Kwips and Kritiques, **"4.5 Stars"** —Just Erotic Romance Reviews, **"4.5 Flags"** —Euro Reviews, **"4.5 Kisses"** —Two Lips Reviews



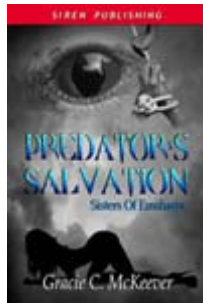
GUARDIAN SEDUCTRESS

[Sisters of Emsharra 1]

[Urban Fantasy/ Shape-shifter/ Interracial]

Alex Ryan discovers he's not who and what he thought he was from a woman who's been watching him his entire life...and who isn't human. *"a double scoop of Moose Tracks ice cream. 4.5 Stars!"* —Just Erotic Romance Reviews, *"prolific writer of erotica..."*

demonstrates her remarkable talent. 4.5 Flags!" —Euro Reviews, *"exceptional ...sure to heat up anyone's warm night!"* **4.5 Klovers"** —CK2S Kwips and Kritiques



PREDATOR'S SALVATION

[Sisters of Emsharra 2]

[Urban Fantasy/ BDSM/ Interracial] Embittered after her exile from Emsharra, LaMia Enlil meets her match in empath Mateo Diaz whom she kidnaps and falls in love with. But can he forgive her for the deaths of his father and his brother years ago? *"passionate, boiling sex made my toes curl. 4.5 Stars/Orgasmic"* —

Just Erotic Romance Reviews, *"Exceptional... will keep you involved from the start to the finish. 4.5 Kisses"* —Two Lips Reviews



Siren Publishing, Inc.
www.SirenPublishing.com