

ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS

Treva Harte



Time Will Tell
Part 3 of the Time Series

TIME WILL TELL

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Chapter One

"One thing, J.B."

"Uh huh."

"If you want the job, you don't mess with my sister. I'd have to kill you."

Shit. What did Kevin know? How had he given himself away?

J.B. didn't look up until he'd efficiently drawn the wire tight and tapped the fence staple with the hammer. He figured that'd hold the fence up for a while. It probably should've been done a long time ago, but there'd been far too much else he'd had to work on during the past two weeks. He made sure not to hurry, not to look too startled.

When the job was done to his satisfaction, he smiled slightly at the taller man in front of him. "Why, I'd be real interested in seeing how you did that, Kevin. It's been a while since we had a tussle."

Kevin shrugged. "I'm not saying it would be easy. But she *is* my baby sister. I'd have to do it. I thought I'd give you a friendly warning. Just in case."

J.B. had learned how to lie convincingly a long time ago. "All I want is a job, friend. I think my life is safe."

Kevin mopped the sweat from his face. "You do? You'd take the job?"

"I think I can do the job. It hasn't been offered to me."

Kevin swiped his forehead again. J.B. could tell his old army buddy was thinking hard about just what to say next. If Kevin was planning to tell him he wasn't going to work out, J.B. would be...relieved. Annoyed. Like he'd escaped. Like he'd missed out on something extraordinary.

He was starting to make himself at home in the small guest house. He'd been getting to know the horses. They had potential. A lot of potential. But the horses and the house weren't the only things he had to live with on the ranch.

There was his boss. Molly Turner.

"Molly was pretty damn exhausted after the funeral." Kevin stretched, rubbing his back. "Taking care of a dying man and a newborn was no picnic. She looks a little better now. I'll bet she talks to you about a job really soon. She knows I can't stay here much longer and she needs help pretty badly."

J.B. thought Kevin was being overly optimistic about how much better his sister looked. Or, if she did, he'd hate to think how she'd been before this. Right now she was a walking zombie. A sexy, beautiful zombie but still someone who wasn't quite with the rest of them. She smiled, sweetly, when she needed to. She did what she had to. But J.B. could tell she didn't give a damn. He'd never seen a woman grieve harder – or more quietly.

He shouldn't be thinking about her as anything more than his boss or someone who was hurting. Why the hell had Kevin threatened him? Had his buddy sensed what J.B. didn't want to say – didn't even want to think? Maybe other folks could tell that when he looked at Molly, he didn't see the sad woman who stood there. Instead he imagined silky legs wrapped around him, short, sharp nails clawing him, a broken voice begging him to take her –

Shit.

He shouldn't take the job. Kevin's baby sister was off limits for too many reasons. He'd do better to leave before Molly decided to take him up on his offer. He didn't need the job. He needed something to do and the ranch intrigued him, but right now he could leave tomorrow without a backward glance.

Almost as if her brother had willed it, the ranch truck came up the rutted tracks and lurched to a stop nearby.

"Bet she came to talk to you." Kevin tilted his hat back. "She's no fool. You're the best thing that could happen to her and the ranch right now."

Yeah, J.B. thought, or the worst.

She had to get a grip. She had a ranch, a veterinary practice and a baby to take care of. Molly shut her eyes, fighting back tears. It was stupid to cry. She'd save her tears for real problems. Not for trying to get up enough courage to face her own brother and his friend.

She was just so tired. Hot, tired, and almost at the end of her rope. The baby whimpered a little in the car seat.

Well. She'd agreed to take on all this. If it proved to be a little difficult, that was just too damned bad. No one else was around to step in now. Daniel was dead. The neighbors had left. Tomorrow Kevin would be gone, too. She had to make her decision.

A panicky voice in the back of her head shrieked she shouldn't hire the man. She needed his strong back but there was something about him that made her shiver.

Maybe the problem wasn't him. Most likely it was her.

She couldn't stand to deal with anything more. No more strangers. No more changes. Nothing that threatened the numbing calm she'd managed to achieve these past few days.

But she had to have someone take care of the ranch. She had to think. To choose. To take control.

Molly almost turned the truck around right then, running from the two men lounging before her.

Coward. When had she become so afraid? She'd get out and talk to Kevin's friend.

Now.

Molly spent several minutes fumbling with the straps and buckles that held the baby in her car seat. Finally, she slid out of the truck, balancing a covered dish in one hand and her baby in the other.

"I brought some cookies," she called. "Don't worry, Kevin, I didn't make them. Someone brought them over this morning along with their condolences. If I ate everything people left, I'd be even fatter than I am now. I thought you might like some with lunch."

"Sounds good." Kevin glanced over at his friend, who had stepped back. "Hey, Sis, if you came to talk business with J.B., I can just take Hope and go have lunch out of earshot."

Well, Kevin was always one to give his little sister a push when he thought she was wavering.

"I'd appreciate that." Molly hoped she didn't look as terrified as she felt. "It won't take long."

What was it about the man that scared her? He was quiet. Slim. Slightly taller than average height. Sandy hair, gray eyes. Soft voice. You wouldn't think he could make anyone shake. But she knew better, even without Kevin's stories. You could tell from the man's eyes. They always held steady, staring at you as if they could get down into your soul and draw out every secret. The quivering inside her wasn't all fear. She didn't want to think about what else she felt when she looked at J.B.

"Problem, boss?"

For all his mouthing off about her being the boss, all spoken in that West Texas drawl of his—a drawl that was sometimes faint and sometimes bowled you over, depending on his mood—he was no ignorant cowboy. He wasn't anyone's subordinate, either. Kevin had told her about his army background and hinted J.B. had gone on to other, bigger things after he left the military.

"But that would be something for him to tell you," Kevin said. "It didn't have anything to do with the job he can do for you on the Esperanza. He might not want me telling you everything. I think it's enough to tell you he was a combat sniper."

Maybe that was supposed mean something to her. Kevin obviously thought so. He sighed when he saw her face. "Listen, Sis, combat snipers are a breed apart. They go underground for weeks. They have no backup, no supplies, nothing. They're on their own. You figured out they shoot, right? And tend to hit what they are aiming at? Sniper, Molly. Is this getting through?"

"I think so," Molly said. "But this obviously is a big deal to you and I'm not sure I know why. You're saying J.B. was a very high tech, sophisticated hunter in the military. Sort of an army hit man, right?"

"Well, I wouldn't put it like that but yeah, I guess." Kevin hesitated. "I saw some of those guys after they got back from weeks out in the field. They were spooky, man. You didn't want to get too close. But they would do what they needed to do, pretty much isolated from any help, in the middle of enemy territory. Oh, hell, Molly, you still don't get it, do you? All right, just remember this. J.B. gets the job done, ok? Whatever needs to be done, he'll do it."

Now that she thought about the conversation, it seemed like Kevin wanted her to hire a very competent, trained killer. That might be Kevin's criteria for a good ranch employee, but she wasn't so sure.

She'd tell him no.

Molly took her cowboy hat off her head and absently fluffed her honey-colored hair. It was hopeless—the hat mashed her hair flat—but it was a familiar habit. Most of the time she didn't even realize she'd made the gesture, she did it so often.

Molly stared down at J.B.'s boots. They were scuffed and worn—working boots. A rancher's boots. Somehow that reassured her. Kevin said J.B. would get the job done. He could handle what she needed from him.

She'd be a fool not to hire him. Who else would take this job? The ranch had too much work for one man and too little pay. Lord, why would this man take the job? Surely not just as a favor to Kevin.

"I meant to talk to you earlier but—" She trailed off, and then spoke in a rush. "Daniel's attorney still needs to look at the books and get things figured out as to where the ranch stands financially, but I know we need to hire someone. More than one someone, of course, but at least one for a start. Victor Ruiz is my partner but he's willing to let me make the day-to-day decisions about the ranch. We both know we'll need help."

As if he wanted to know any of this. He was just waiting for her to say yes or no. Her heart hammered. This was her first decision about the ranch that Daniel hadn't agreed to, that they hadn't talked over together. Not that she had a choice. She had to hire someone and J.B. was her only real candidate.

Damn the man. Why was she hesitating? Her hands were actually sweating.

Go ahead, Molly. Ask him.

"Anyhow, if you'd like the job of helping to keep this ranch going, you have it. Just remember that I make the financial decisions." She was too close to the edge now to not know where every dime went.

"Suits me fine."

God. He'd thought she'd tell him no. When she'd asked him to stay, he damn near kissed her. It made no sense for him to be worried. She needed him more than he did her.

Molly held out her hand for him to shake.

He could talk about leaving, but that was just his big head. His little head wanted the opposite. When his pecker talked, he found it damn hard to disagree.

They shook, briefly.

Until Molly, his cock had been a little too quiet for a little too long. It was making up for lost time, already stiffening inside his jeans, reminding him how good it would feel inside... Damn it, he should have told her no.

"Yes. Well, then—" She hesitated again, then spoke more decisively. "You'll have to stay at the guest house. The bunkhouse is in terrible shape."

He had to tell her about himself now. It was only fair. Hell, maybe she'd do the smart thing for both of them yet. But he wasn't going to make it easy for her. He pitched his voice to its calmest, most soothing tone. He could reassure any nervous mare with that voice.

"I should warn you, Miss Turner, that if you take me on, I do have one big drawback."

He almost saw her wandering thoughts snap back to focus on him. "Yes?"

"I don't... I've been sober almost two years. Before that I was well on my way to being a drunk." He spoke evenly, refusing to let her see how much the admission bothered him. This wasn't about what irked him. This was for her. "I know some folks who drink call themselves alcoholics. I was going for a step below that before I pulled back. I won't make any guarantees as to whether or not I'll stay sober. I want to stay that way and you're welcome to kick me off the ranch if I'm not, but—well, you ought to know." He paused. "I don't suppose Kevin told you."

"Why do you smoke like a fiend, Daniel?" She laughed as she took the cigarette from his lips.

"A man has to have some vice."

"But it could kill you."

"That is why they call it a vice, Molly."

Lord. Not another man with a vice that could kill him. She couldn't stand it again. Well, here was her chance. If she wanted to back down, this would be easy. No hard feelings.

Idiot. As if she could afford to turn him down. As if cowboys never drank.

"I won't judge your past, but I can't be your babysitter, J.B. If you have problems, you're on your own. And if those problems come to the Esperanza, you'll be off this ranch in a heartbeat. You have this job as long as you can work it. No second chances. I don't believe in them any more."

He looked a little insulted. "I didn't ask for any, boss. I can take care of things on my own. I just thought I ought to tell you where things stand with me."

"I appreciate it. Deal?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Please call me Molly. I'm not very formal."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Hey, Molly! Hey, shrimp!" Kevin's voice jarred them both back from their thoughts. "The natives are getting restless here. I'd say little Miss Turner could use a change."

"The diapers are in the truck, Kevin. I'm sure you can figure out how to do— just *who* are you calling shrimp?"

"That would be me." J.B. appeared unruffled by the insult.

Molly stared at him. "Why? You're a bit shorter than he is, I suppose, but—"

"When I was a boy, my grandfather figured I might be a jockey. I was a real tiny kid. Everyone called me that. I'm afraid I had to disappoint my grandfather

eventually, but compared to the rest of my family I am a little puny. Of course Kevin ought to remember what I did the last time he called me that."

Kevin grinned. "This time I'm holding a baby. You wouldn't touch me. You might hurt the child."

"You won't be holding a baby forever." J.B. shrugged. "I can afford to wait."

The two men eyed each other for a minute, identical grins on both faces.

Molly let out a short laugh and relaxed, just a little. If J.B. could tease and be teased, he must be more approachable and human than she had first believed. Besides, anyone with the nickname Shrimp couldn't be as completely in control of himself as she'd thought.

No, he hadn't always been in control. She thought about what else he had told her and frowned. Only time would tell whether that calm of his was just a façade. She hoped he was even half as tough and competent as he seemed. If he wasn't—well, there were other hired hands to be found in the world, even if she really didn't want to be bothered with that chore right now. Even if one more thing needing to be done was going to make her sink to the ground and never get back up.

Chapter Two

"What can we do for her, Sis?" Jen leaned over the bed.

"When has Molly let anyone do anything for her?" Cecilia scowled. "Stubborn idiot."

"I don't know why Molly called Vic, but I know it wouldn't be for a simple hi, everything's fine." Jennifer scowled, too. "She should have said more on the answering machine than 'The attorney thinks we have some problems here.'"

"I'd fly out there now if I could."

"You can't, Cee Cee, you just got back from the clinic. Besides, you showing up on the ranch didn't work so well last time."

"Stupid trash reporters." Cecilia folded the edge of her bed sheet a little too carefully. "Can you believe they'd do that at a funeral?"

"Yes. Unfortunately."

The bright flash of light had dazzled them all for a minute. What was it? Victor reacted first. With a growl, he sprang toward a small man holding a camera. The cameraman ran like an Olympic sprinter.

Victor's limp prevented him from catching the intruder, who leaped into a waiting car and tore off.

"Let him go." The closest onlooker reached out to grip Victor's shoulder. "He's only one of a bunch of vultures."

Victor glared at him a moment and then followed the other man's gaze to the small hill overlooking the burial plot.

"They've been there the whole time," the man told him. "Taking photos long distance. Wondered a bit and then realized what was glinting out there wouldn't kill anyone."

"God damn it." Victor spoke through his teeth. "Those sick bastards – I wish I had a gun."

"Is the sheriff here?" the other man asked. "He can try to get 'em for trespassing. If they aren't too smart or quick enough to get out of the area, that is."

"I'll get out of range right now instead." Cecilia made a prompt decision. "I'm sorry, Molly. I didn't think they'd do this."

"Those are photographers up there?" Molly tried to comprehend. "Why?"

"Because I am a very minor celebrity and they think it's worth money to them to take photographs showing me here." Cecilia began walking towards the car. "If I leave, they will, too."

"But she's out there all alone. No us. No Kevin. No one." Jennifer rubbed her hand against her neck.

"She has J.B., and Kevin seems to think he walks on water." Cecilia stopped folding and unfolding her sheet. "He did seem in command of things at the burial."

"A stranger? We're depending on a stranger to help?"

"Just a minute." Vic jerked his head toward the stranger. "While we're at it, who the hell are you? How do you know so much about these people?"

"That's J.B. Jared Boyd." Kevin made the introduction as he slung an arm around the man's shoulders. "Hell, he's practically family. J.B. was in the army with me."

Molly was dazed, but polite. "How do you do, Mr. Boyd?"

"Call me J.B., ma'am." The man's gray-eyed gaze held steady on her face.

"We're depending on our Molly. She might be hurt, but she'll do whatever she needs to do."

"She's our baby sister." Jennifer shut her eyes.

"She's almost twenty-seven years old. Besides, she's wanted to do things herself since she was a toddler."

Jennifer shook her head. "Well, since we can't go out and run her life for her, we'll have to wait and see what's going on." * * * * *

When she swung out of her truck, J.B. was standing there.

"Did the truck act up on the way?" J.B. asked. "It didn't sound too good the last time I drove it."

Two weeks. Less than two weeks. That was how long it had taken for the nasty rumors to start. She was so mad she could spit. So embarrassed that she couldn't look at the man.

God, at least some of the gossip she'd overheard today had been right. He was a damn fine-looking man. He looked good in those worn jeans. Masculine. Strong. Sure of himself. Molly scowled. Now she felt a little self-conscious around him, which was really, *really* the last thing she needed. What the hell had she ever done to deserve this?

She'd gotten herself a baby and lived in a man's house without a wedding ring, that's what. Of course people talked. But why did they have to start linking her with J.B.? Was she the main topic of conversation in town nowadays? Or had those snakes at the gas station meant for her to hear their chatter?

"Come to think of it, it did some sputtering on the way back." Molly resisted the urge to slam the door shut. "Wonderful. Just when I can't come up with anything more to make my day worse, anything more shows up. I don't have the time or money to fix the truck."

No money. That's what Daniel's attorney said. How long could her checking account cover the bills that kept coming in?

J.B. shrugged. "I tinker a little with truck motors when I have to. Sounds like the fuel filter. I'll take a look."

"Thanks," Molly said, gratefully, as she finally turned around from the truck door. She had to face J.B. sooner or later. Lord, she hoped she wouldn't blush.

"I hear he's a damn fine-looking man."

"Could be, but I don't know as to how particular the lady vet is anyhow about her menfolk."

She saw J.B. take in her mud and blood-spattered clothing.

"Jesus. Are you all right?"

"It's just my clothes. I started off all dressed to go to the estate attorney and got an emergency call on the way back. The important thing is I managed to get the foal out. Poor thing. It was a little tricky for a while."

"A foaling, huh?" J.B.'s face gentled a little more. "It's always a source of satisfaction to see them when they're born."

Her face looked drawn and white and her good clothes were pretty much good for rags now. But her smile had been huge when she'd mentioned the foal. Damn. That smile was a killer. He needed to be real careful. A man didn't mind appreciating a good body and admiring a real lady's fine character, but he didn't need anything...complicated.

"Yeah. The foaling was a bit worrisome." Her feet dragged a little as she headed toward the house. "Bye."

"Lay off the worrying a bit. You aren't looking so good. It won't do any good to worry yourself sick."

J.B. stayed where he was, his eyes narrowing just a little, fighting an insane urge to run after her, to offer—to offer help. Stupid idea. He was just the hired hand. He was going to step back and let the lady run her life just like he did his level best to run his. Right. Absolutely damned straight.

He watched her all the way to the house, right until she closed the door shut behind her. * * * * *

“Fucking damn machine. Worthless piece of—” This was not how he had planned to spend most of the day. He never should have said anything yesterday.

What the hell was he doing anyhow? It was easy to think about Molly Turner, to want to help her out. But it was becoming clear that she didn’t have enough money to keep the place running properly. He might be busting his butt trying to turn things around on a ranch too far gone to recover.

He cursed slightly louder as he banged his knuckles on the bolt he was trying to undo. Ah, hell. If the Esperanza was in trouble, maybe he could swing a deal to buy it himself. He liked the place. He probably still had enough capital to work something out. In the meantime he didn’t want to be in the business of working the books, figuring out the profit and loss. He wanted to train horses.

The wrench slipped. He cursed again. Fixing trucks was low on his list, too, but—as always—if he didn’t do it, there was no one else.

J.B. stopped cursing.

No one else. That was what was nagging at the back of his mind. Molly wasn’t gone. Of course with no fuel line her truck couldn’t go far, but she ought to at least be asking how much longer things would take. More likely she wouldn’t ask, but just hop into the old ranch truck and be off, taking care of business.

Molly’s work generally took her out by early morning until late afternoon. Sometimes she took the little girl with her, sometimes she left her with Maria.

She was always gone by noon. It was well past that now. J.B. frowned a little. Maria had taken the day to go to town. Maybe the boss had chosen to stay and watch Hope at home.

No. Even though he had been distracted, in the back of his mind he'd noted there'd been no sounds of life from the ranch house. He was in eyeshot of the place and he would have noticed something. Hell, he always noticed whenever the woman was within eyeshot.

"I guess she can sleep late now and again if she wants to," he muttered.

But no little kid slept late. No mother of a little kid did either. J.B. forced the lines onto the new filter's fittings and tightened the clamps. He didn't take the time to prime the carb. Not now. That could wait. Wiping his hands on a rag, he headed for the ranch house, walking just a little faster than usual.

When he reached the porch, everything was silent. He hesitated, knocked. For just a minute he thought he heard a whimper and then there was silence again. Old Poppy, Molly's useless mutt, began to howl mournfully. J.B. let out a short, exasperated breath before he opened the door.

The first thing he saw was the huddled figure of a small child. She'd fallen asleep in the hallway, her face still tear-streaked. She blinked her eyes open when he came in. Her lips trembled.

"Hello, Hope." He hadn't spoken much with the kid — she was too young to speak and whenever he had seen her before, she pretty much hung near her mama and ignored him. He hoped she remembered him. He didn't need her to set up a screech right now.

"Where's your mama, sweetheart?"

She looked at him with big, troubled eyes, then got up and wobblingly made her way down the hall. He followed behind, wondering what he would find and what would happen to him if something wasn't wrong.

The little girl led him to a half open door that J.B. could see was a bedroom. He hesitated again. "Hey, boss?"

He heard a faint moan in response. Hesitation gone, he stepped over the threshold. Molly was lying on top of the covers, her hand over her face. J.B. swallowed. He wouldn't have taken the boss for a red silk nightie kind of female, but obviously looks could be deceiving.

Lord. That was all she was wearing. The nightie was bunched high up one pretty thigh. One strap of that sheer negligee slipped further down her shoulder when she moaned softly again. She looked like a fantasy come to life.

"Don' worry." Her voice slurred. "Mommy will be up in a minute. Jus' a minute."

Something was wrong with this fantasy. J.B. stepped forward and cautiously laid his hand on her skin. She was burning up. Damn, the woman had worked herself into a fever or the flu or something. At least she was still talking. She couldn't be that bad off then, could she?

He had to stop staring and help. The medicine cabinet in the tiny bathroom off the hall held a baby eyedropper, some out of date painkillers for Daniel Aguilar, and shampoo. Eventually he found aspirin. He filled a cup with water, took the bottle and returned to Molly.

He sat behind her on the bed, gently pulling her to a half sitting position, supporting her from behind. For a moment he let her body rest completely against him. Soft silk, soft skin. Her body curled into his like she'd been made for him. It was easy to forget for a moment why he was there and how sick she was.

He couldn't help imagining what he could do in this position, where he could touch, what else might be soft against him...

She moaned again. Shit. His stupid cock had hardened as if she was really responding to him. Damn it, now wasn't that inconvenient? A hard dick was the

last thing either of them needed right now. "Take this aspirin, boss. You've got a fever."

"I know." She managed a brief smile.

"I'll call the doctor —"

"No!" She gripped his wrist, about as strong as a ninety-year-old lady. "I'm a doctor. Don't need one. Just aspirin."

Damn it, that's what a man got for trying to help. He'd just see what some medicine would do before deciding whether to disobey the boss. He got the aspirin down her and most of the water. For a moment he looked at the woman who rested against his body.

The tiny pull on his sleeve reminded him there was another person who needed help.

"Mmm?" The little girl looked like she might cry again. J.B. figured she was trying to say mama.

"Hell—excuse me, honey. I wonder how long your mama's been out. Are you hungry?" He sniffed. "I'll bet those diapers need a change."

He'd fed hungry babies before. Changed their damn diapers, too. It just wasn't one of his favorite chores.

Fortunately, he found a bottle in the refrigerator and a box of baby cereal in one of the kitchen cabinets. Fixing the cereal was easy enough from the directions. The kid liked spooning it in, even if most of the mush seemed to go down her front rather than in her mouth. Was he supposed to feed her? When he tried, she jerked her face away and grabbed for the spoon.

"Independent, huh?" J.B. grinned. "You take after your mama, all right."

She gave him a big grin, just like she knew what he was saying. Then she waved her spoon triumphantly. He laughed and let her have it. She had worked pretty hard to make her point.

He changed her diaper too, while he was at it, before he went back into Molly's bedroom. The woman was sleeping hard, but her color was better. He touched his hand very gently, very correctly, to her forehead. She didn't feel quite so warm.

But the horses needed feeding soon. Why wasn't Maria here today of all days?

After some thought, he wrote a note and left it propped on Molly's dresser. She didn't look like she would be awake soon and he would hurry with the feeding, but he didn't want her worried over where the kid was. He couldn't leave Little Bit alone.

One hand brushed against a lace bra when he put the note on the wood surface. Molly's clothing was everywhere. There were a lot more lacy under things than he would have expected before he had gotten a look at her nightie. A bottle of perfume sat near her hairbrush. He didn't think she used much scent but—he unstopped it and sniffed...it was pretty. Light. Lingering. A little musky.

J.B. wet his lips. He'd love to smell that on Molly.

He glanced over at the photograph of a man. It must be Daniel Aguilar—he looked remarkably like his son, Victor. Daniel looked to have been a strong man. A kind one. There was no reason for the faint prickle of...of something that made his gut clench at the sight of that photo.

Hope was at his heels as he turned. He'd forgotten how quickly little children moved and how unpredictable they were.

"You gonna let me pick you up?" He didn't want to scare her. "I'll take you down to see the horses."

She relaxed and lifted her arms. When he hauled her up, she seemed lighter than his nieces and nephews, but it had been a while since he had seen them.

Maybe he had forgotten. He gripped her hard, as if she would keep him from lingering a little too long in the boss' bedroom.

Hope watched everything while he fed and watered the animals. He figured she was wondering what was going on, so he told her about the right mixture of grain and hay the horses required and how much. The child would grow up with horses. He might as well start teaching her now.

But it wasn't until she snuggled her head against him and fell asleep while they walked back to the ranch house that he was sure his heart had completely melted. He could hear her soft sighs in her sleep as she lay against his shoulder, completely relaxed.

He tucked her into the crib in her bedroom, made sure she was asleep.

Time for the other Turner lady. When he stepped into Molly's bedroom he saw she had pushed down the sheet. He touched her forehead again, let his hand linger just a little. Damn it. She was hot as hell again and it was too soon for more aspirin. Looked like he was the lucky man who got to bathe her.

"Daniel, I've wanted you ever since I first visited this ranch four years ago. You let me come back during the summer to work and learn and I know you were interested then –"

"I never touched you, Molly, not once during those summers –"

"That doesn't mean we both didn't look and fantasize. Don't deny it, Daniel. Now I tell you I want to settle here, be a vet here and suddenly you tell me no. Why?"

Daniel turned his back, lit a cigarette and didn't look at her. "You deserve more. You had planned to go back to your family's home in Virginia when you left veterinary school. Molly, I don't have anything to offer you. Nothing that you should be taking, anyhow."

"I shouldn't have to take anything. You ought to give. We both should."

"I'm too old for you, child."

"Too old for what? I don't recall asking for anything but you to – to make love with me. You aren't too old for that."

He sighed and threw the cigarette to the ground. Then he seemed to come to a decision. He walked to her and traced a tear on her cheek. "I can't stop you if you want to stay around here for a while. See if you really like living here, miles away from anything. I'm sure a vet in Carrizozo could use some temporary help. Just don't expect more, Molly. Don't. I don't want you to be sorry."

She could feel the heat from the flames licking all over her. *Finally*. He was touching her at last. The way she'd always wanted. The way she'd damn near begged him to do. She didn't wonder why Daniel's touch made her feel dizzy and weak, but why did she feel so ill?

When she felt the wet washcloth over her face and shoulders she pulled herself up out of her dream and opened her eyes.

Those weren't Daniel's face and hands. It wasn't his touch.

"J.B.!"

He looked at her, about as close to sheepish as she had ever seen him. The washcloth lay still for a moment just a few inches from her breast. Her almost naked breast. The strap from her nightie was slipping down. She tried to sit up but the movement hurt her head and she sank back into the bed.

"You're sick, boss. I'm just cooling you down."

"Go 'way," she managed. Another thought entered her mind. "Hope?"

"She's fine. I'm gonna dry you off, pull some new clothes on you and fix some soup. You hear? I'm not much of a cook but I can heat up something from a can. Rest now." He began to pat her dry.

Molly cleared her throat. "Dress myself. Don' look."

She had just enough strength to slip the silky clothing over her skin. Molly sighed with pleasure. The sweaty nightie she'd had on was uncomfortable.

Strong hands smoothed the nightgown down. J.B. was gentle, not touching more than necessary. She would kill him later, of course, as soon as she had strength. But maybe she'd do it painlessly.

"Lot of work to do," she muttered.

"Later."

He sat behind her on the bed and held her up while he spooned soup into her. Her head lolled back on his shoulder and some of her hair spilled over his chest. As she sagged against him, he could feel the weight of her breast against his arm.

"Daniel?" she asked, groggily. "So glad you're here. Missed you so much."

He gritted his teeth and kept spooning the soup in. She moved restlessly against him, her hand drifting to rest against his crotch. One finger just grazed the head of his cock. He damn near tossed the soup onto her.

"Señor Boyd?" Maria's shocked voice said at the bedroom door. "What is wrong?"

The way the two of them were sitting, with Molly settled against him tightly probably didn't look too good. J.B. gradually eased himself as far back as he dared without dropping Molly.

He put on his most soothing voice. "Miss Turner is real sick here. I've been holding down the fort until you came. I'll go call the doctor if you're willing to finish this up."

Forget what Molly had said not to do. The woman didn't know squat about taking care of herself. He knew from the start she'd taken on too much but she'd die rather than admit the truth. She just proved that today. She needed a keeper.

She needed him more than as just the hired help. He'd been avoiding taking her on, but he'd been trying to go against his own nature. He didn't take orders or shirk worth a damn. J.B. picked up the telephone to make the call. Molly was trouble. Nothing but trouble, but this was for her own good.

Aw, hell. It had been a while, but he used to live for trouble. He figured he could still remember what it was like.

Chapter Three

"You just got well enough to sit up. You shouldn't be working so hard." Maria shook her finger.

"If I wait, doing all this will give me a relapse." Molly shoved one of the pieces of paper away from her. "There. One down."

"This isn't good for you."

"As soon as I can afford it, all of it goes to a bookkeeper, even if I go to Albuquerque to get a good one. But until then—" Molly shrugged. When she could afford it indeed. Maria sniffed and stalked toward the kitchen.

Molly ignored the woman's apparent annoyance. She kept one ear out for Hope who was babbling to Maria. Her baby talk was closer and closer to words every day. She thought of how Daniel had insisted she marry him when she told him she was pregnant. Of course it was too late then. She couldn't marry a man who felt only responsibility toward her. She thought about when, soon after, he'd received his lung cancer diagnosis. They had given him a year. He'd used those months as best he could. He stayed with her for her delivery, even though he had to sit in a chair for it. He —

Daniel was dead.

Her lips trembled. The realization hit without warning, without a chance to cushion the blow. The defensive wall she had carefully used to hold her feelings back inside fell apart. In that instant everything came flooding out. All of it.

With a gasp and then a moan of pain, Molly leaned over the desk and began to sob. He was dead. Gone. She'd never see him again. They'd never be what she'd hoped for so long ago.

Dead.

She couldn't stop crying. She couldn't.

Dimly, Molly heard Maria run out the door. She didn't blame her. At that point Molly was on the floor, hugging her chest to her knees, trying to contain the racking pain she felt with each sob. But she couldn't stop the weeping.

New footsteps hit the floor, heavier than Maria's. Someone else hurrying toward her. Molly shut her eyes and gasped for air. Gagged against the pain.

Arms held her tight against a warm body. Arms that were secure against her diaphragm, somehow helping to stop her retching. Her pain eased, just a little. Enough to be able to talk.

"I probably scared Hope."

"Maria took her outside to look at the horses. She's fine. How are you?"

"Better."

To prove it, she carefully raised herself up to her knees and opened her eyes. J.B. was sitting on the floor next to her, his eyes as calm as ever. If his mouth looked a little pinched at the edges, she couldn't fault him for that. He was handling her hysterics much better than anyone else she could think of.

"I'm getting you some water." His gaze didn't move from hers. "Will you be all right?"

"Yes."

She wrapped her arms tightly around her body when he moved down the hall, trying to retain the warmth J.B. had given her. It wasn't enough. She couldn't stop shivering. He came back, tilted the cup of water up against her mouth. She knew her hands were shaking too hard to do it herself. The coolness did help her throat.

"Better?"

"Much. I'm sorry. I don't know what happened. I bet you've never seen anything like it before."

"I've seen something like it. Even felt that way once or twice."

"I don't believe you. How many people just—just crack like that?"

"Strong people who have seen bad things happen. It's a way to cope. Better than some other ways. I saw it happen once in the army. Felt it myself once."

"What happened to you?" Molly reached for the glass herself and managing to get it to her lips. She was only shaking a little bit now. What he had to say was too interesting for her to think about herself.

"I was on a SWAT team. It was a hostage situation. A man had his girlfriend's little baby and a revolver. I tried to get a clear shot. We all did. He shot the kid and jumped off the roof before we could do anything."

Molly moved closer to him and put her arms around him. His eyes weren't calm now. They were molten with burning memories.

"That must have been hellish." She thought of Hope. "J.B. —"

"Yeah?" His mouth had shut tight.

"Is that when you took up drinking?"

"I always drank, Molly. Just like my daddy drank. My daddy was in the army, too. He dragged my mother and our family all over until the drinking got bad enough that he brought us back to my mama's home in West Texas. Then he pretty much drank himself to death. I hated what his drinking did to us but I understood, too, because I liked drinking. Liked the taste, liked the buzz I got—just liked it. But—yeah, I suppose I was able to handle it pretty well until then."

"And then?"

"Things changed. I didn't just like drinking. I needed it. I wanted it to get me out of—of feeling things I didn't want to feel. Things I couldn't handle. I found out I couldn't handle being on the SWAT team. I found out after that I couldn't handle running my own security business. I found more and more things I

wanted the booze to help me with. It took me a long time before I finally realized it wasn't helping me out at all.

"It's better to howl it out, Boss." He smiled and stroked her hair once. "A lot better. And then you need to talk it out."

"I guess that is what I needed to do," Molly mused. "I didn't know I did. J.B., I guess you've seen dead people before."

"A few."

"When I saw Daniel was dead, I knew there was no use wishing him back. There is something so—so important missing when a person is dead. His soul, I suppose. You know he won't come back when whatever it is that was there before is gone. I told myself I knew he was dead and that was that. But it wasn't."

"It hardly ever is."

"I didn't think about how I was going to feel knowing it was over. I guess I should've."

"You have some time to think about it now, boss. And time for talking, too."

"Can I talk to you sometimes?" Molly's voice was hesitant. "I can talk to my sisters and they'd understand but you're not family. It wouldn't hurt you as much."

"Don't count on that, Molly. I'll listen, but...it hurts me, too, to see you in pain."

His callused fingers began to trace patterns on the palm of her hand. Her breath began to skip again, though not from sobs. Now that she had allowed her deepest feelings to come through, was she oversensitive and feeling too much? Tiny flickers of desire after her outpouring of grief seemed completely wrong. What was even more frightening was she knew the tiny flickers could become overwhelming fires if she didn't resist.

She shivered again. Maybe it was because, although nothing else was physically similar between them, J.B.'s hands seemed like Daniel's—rough and gentle, clever about giving pleasure and clever about taking, too. But he wasn't doing anything overtly sexual. It was meant to be comforting.

Lord, she was a mess right now. She had to be because she was confusing her grief with stoicism and now someone's comfort with sexual desire. Then again, she'd done that before with Daniel. She never could get things right with men. Stupid. That's what she was. Needy and stupid.

"I have to get some air." She managed to stand and walk steadily to the porch outside.

He followed her. He didn't put his hands on her again and, perversely, she longed to have them back. What was wrong with her? Emotions swept over her—lingering sadness, a bubbling desire, guilt, compassion. It made her feel itchy inside. She turned to look at J.B.

He leaned against the porch railing, his thumbs hooked into his front pockets. Was he relaxed—or making sure he wouldn't touch her again? Please, she didn't want to be wrong this time. Molly looked again and smiled.

Thank heaven for that hard-on, pressing against his jeans. He wanted her, too. His touch hadn't only been meant for comfort.

"You always operate this way, don't you." She didn't make it a question. "In the army, with the horses. You don't move. I bet you just wait and make things come to you."

"I guess so." He didn't twitch. "It usually works."

He'd wondered what Molly was like without the grayness of depression. Now he knew. Her eyes were alive with emotion. Her lips were full and smiling. He shifted. The desire he'd been able to ignore or postpone when he had seen a shadow woman roared into life now that he saw the real one in front of him.

Lord, he could feel himself getting harder. He didn't move, wondering how his stillness would work this time. It was becoming pretty damn painfully obvious what was happening to him. He wasn't altogether sure what was going on with her.

"Well, surprise. I think I'm coming to you now." She stepped toward him.

God, yes. He could feel blood pulsing hard—into his erection, into his head, into his heart. His fingers dug hard into the material of his pants. He mustn't demand. Mustn't. Not yet.

Waiting now would kill him. But he made himself say the necessary words. "Molly, this isn't the right time."

But it felt right. Had never felt so right.

"I say you're wrong." She kissed him, almost shyly, at the juncture of his jaw and neck, where the pulse beat hard.

He let out one short breath. It was just one gentle kiss but somehow the woman knew exactly where to put her lips to get him going—or maybe anywhere would get him going right now. All he needed was her touch. Her.

"I'm not Daniel," he reminded her, speaking more harshly than usual. "I'm not a substitute for him, either, even if I was hired to do his job. What you're thinking of has nothing to do with my duties."

"I never thought or said it was." Molly didn't back away. "I don't pay men to have sex with me. I may have to ask them really nicely to do it, now and then, but..."

Her hands had slid from his shoulders to slip under the waistband of his jeans, where there was a small gap in the back at the base of his spine. Those hands touched his rear, traced lightly, and he jerked forward, his crotch grinding into hers. They both gasped.

"Merciful Jesus," he thought he said before his hand was under her shirt and he was unfastening the front clasp of her bra. He had to fight to keep his hands from shaking as they stroked her silky skin. Damn it, all the feelings he'd tried not to remember, tried not to fantasize about when he saw her lying there, helpless, in her bedroom, tore through him. He knew what those breasts looked like, felt like. He wanted to be allowed to touch them this time.

He wasn't sure which of them made the growl of encouragement when he touched her nipple but he knew he hadn't felt this hot since he was fourteen and had finally got his hands on Kathy King's fifteen-year-old breasts. Except this might even feel better. He needed to be inside her. He *had* to be inside her.

"I want you." She sounded breathless. She sounded sure.

"To hell with it then. I know I want you."

His hand lifted her shirt and his mouth followed. His breath, then his tongue, teased her nipples. The soft wet rasp made her gulp. Her legs started to shake. *Yes*. He wanted her. He wasn't going to make her go to him. She didn't have to plead for attention. Thank God, J.B. was in charge, teasing her, making her want...

Before she slipped down onto the boards of the porch, she heard a sound that made her want to scream—not with grief or sexual desire, but with pure frustration.

No one could mistake the sound of a car slowly making its way up the rough driveway, carefully maneuvering each turn. J.B.'s mouth and hands eased away from her breasts.

"Nooo."

"No? You sure you want me to stop, boss?" His fingers suddenly returned, pinching one nipple harder. "We have maybe five minutes before we put on a real show."

Molly gasped. She tried to speak, but J.B. had already unsnapped the top of her jeans, and then she forgot to say anything.

Five minutes before someone arrived... She'd been wet before his words shook her. His hand boldly slipped down into her jeans, letting them both know she was getting even wetter at the thought.

Molly bit her hand as J.B. leaned her over the fence rail. The car door slammed out under the mesquite tree where guests always parked. Was J.B. actually going to—one probing finger reached up inside her.

She could hear footsteps in the quiet. Someone was walking up the path. Someone would be there, watching them, in just a minute or two. Desire ripped into her, as painful and intense as a knife slicing through her skin.

J.B. wasn't going to stop until she came.

"Oh, God!" Molly hid her face in her hands and let go.

Wave after wave of pure sexual relief hit. Nothing in her life had ever felt so good—so necessary. J.B. was a miracle man. He knew exactly what she'd needed, even when she hadn't realized it herself. But it wasn't over. He still wasn't going to stop. One finger, then two, wrung out every last drop of pleasure from her. She ground the heel of her hand against her lips to muffle the cries.

"Miss Turner?" the voice called from around the corner. Oh, God. Her neighbor, Jim Farrow.

J.B.'s fingers slipped outside her body. She tried to stop quivering. J.B. held her hard against his body for one brief second more, steadying her, before letting her go entirely. Molly looked, almost blindly, toward the voice.

"You around, Miss Turner?"

J.B. quickly clipped her bra together, pulled her shirt down, refastened her jeans. Kissed her neck, lightly. Lord. He hadn't—she hadn't—they hadn't even kissed each other properly before...

My God.

"Lucky he didn't show up a few minutes later." J.B. straightened up. "I'll let you greet him."

"I can't believe he'd arrive now."

"Just as well. You know it's best we stopped."

"Why?" It wasn't like they hadn't been intimate. Fast, maybe. But there was no way to pretend what she'd just felt wasn't intimate.

"I think I'd be wrong to take advantage right now."

Molly didn't want to leave it there. God, she didn't want him to think they could leave it there. "I don't feel exactly myself right now. But I'm still sorry we stopped."

Oh, no. What if he thought she was some kind of slut—someone who liked cheap thrills? He had to have heard some of her history by now.

"This doesn't mean we can't start again. Sometime. When and if you want." J.B. smiled. Picked up his hat to cover his jeans. "You let me know."

She straightened, still gripping the porch railing for support, as Jim Farrow put his boot on the first porch step.

"Hello, Jim." Her voice was calm. "What's up?"

Oh, Lord. What was up, indeed. She was afraid to look at J.B.

"Well, I need to talk to you about that, Miss Turner," Jim said. "I'm not sure how to go about it, either."

Trouble. She knew it was. How much talk was going around? Jim Farrow had always been one of the kind neighbors. What if he decided to stop being kind?

"Why don't you just tell me and then we can figure the problem out." Don't let it be what she feared. Not in front of J.B. Not now. She didn't know if she could bear the embarrassment.

"Well, now, I had a promise with Daniel that this spring he would be training some of my yearlings." The man looked faintly uneasy. "Daniel was a fine trainer, none better. We had ourselves a handshake agreement, you'd say. But Daniel ain't here now and I'm wondering what sort of agreement we have left."

A little tension left. She'd prepared for this kind of trouble.

"That's why I hired someone who can train horses. Maybe you should meet him. Jim Farrow — Jared Boyd. If you aren't satisfied after speaking with him, we can just say there never was any agreement."

Lord, please make Kevin right about his confidence in J.B. Make J.B. able to forget the last few minutes and talk. Right now her mind was jumping like a grasshopper. She couldn't talk business to save her life.

"Oh." Jim Farrow looked relieved and uneasy at the same time. "That's real fair of you."

"What did you have in mind by way of training? Having 'em saddle-broke or something more?" J.B.'s drawl cut in.

"Depends." Jim still looked uneasy. "Pardon me, Boyd, but I'm real fond of my animals and I can't say as I've ever heard of you. You ain't from here and..."

"Understood," J.B. nodded. His half-smile appeared. "You may've heard of my grandpa, though. He has a reputation out in West Texas. His name is Hamilton. Jared Hamilton. I was named after him. I worked with him many a summer from the time I was a boy until I joined the army."

"Hell, of course I've heard of him." The man's face brightened. "It'd be hard not to hear of him. His Quarter Horses are famous. Winners at the races, almost all of them. And you're his grandkid, huh?"

"That doesn't mean I'm as good as he was — is," J.B. corrected himself. "But he taught me horses. If you want, you're welcome to call him and ask his opinion

of me. He's an honest man. Grandson or not, he'll tell you the truth. I'm comfortable enough with what I can do not to be worried about what he'll say."

"Why didn't you say anything, Molly?" Jim Farrow looked reproachfully at her. "That does ease my mind considerably."

It would have eased hers, too, if she'd known. She'd have enough energy to be peeved that her hired hand forgot to mention something like that...if he hadn't wrung out every drop of energy she had a few minutes ago.

"Tell you what. You send the first horse to me, tell me what you want done and if you aren't satisfied with what I'm doing, you can quit the deal and you don't owe the ranch anything." J.B. cocked his head.

Molly looked at him. Did she want to step in, assert her authority? Jim Farrow already looked calmed and reassured.

"You bring your horse on over when you're ready, Jim," Molly broke in. "You've got some beauties this year. I noticed that first thing when I was vaccinating out at your place."

J.B. smiled a little as he watched Molly take charge again, chatting with her unexpected visitor, shooing him toward his truck without making it look too obvious. She was reminding everyone who was boss.

Well, he'd taken orders before. He could take more. He wouldn't mind watching while she told him what's what.

He already knew when she could give up being boss. Lord, he could hear how she'd tried to strangle back the cries she had made when he'd put his finger inside her tight little pussy. He'd felt her shake when she came.

He listened to her earnestly talking, making her good-byes. He watched her. Truth to tell, it was hard not to watch her. She was a pretty thing. He watched her hair catch fire from the sun as she nodded over something the neighbor said.

Her hair sure could attract a man's eyes. He couldn't turn away once he saw her that first day. The right kind of man could write a poem about her hair. And her body. Now her body could do more than just make him think lovely thoughts. Lush and sexy – that body could make a man sit straight up and then make him beg.

Her body had given him a hard-on at the funeral. He'd seen her and, no matter how wrong it was, he'd responded. Now he knew what she was capable of, and he wondered if he'd ever be able to do anything but want to get inside her the minute she was near.

Want? Hell. Next time she shook with a climax, he *would* be inside her.

"J.B., I need to speak with you." She tried to keep her stomach from knotting.

"Yes, ma'am?"

Was he laughing at her? He damn well better not be.

"I do appreciate you taking up the slack for me with my neighbor." Molly started off the lines she'd rehearsed on her way back to the house. "But I would've been able to handle the situation."

"But you didn't know enough about me or the situation to make a decision." J.B. cut through her speech. "I figured that was why you wanted him to talk to me instead of handling it on your own. Figured that's why you hired me in the first place."

Molly was silent. She knew – they both knew – he was right.

Molly opened her mouth. She shut it. Tried again. "I never set out to be a rancher. I appreciate horses and I can treat their illnesses, of course, but raising them? That's different. Half of this ranch belongs to my baby now. I damn well am going to know what's going on here."

She waited for him to ask why her child had been given such a gift. To make the assumptions everyone else made. Hope was Daniel's bastard child or Molly was a clever gold-digger. What else could make a man bequeath half his estate on a child?

Instead J.B. asked, "What if you let Victor or some manager run it and did what you want to do? What would you choose?"

"Are you offering?" Molly thought she understood.

He shook his head.

"I don't want to get into managing anything but myself and horses," he said, flatly. "I'm asking about what you want to do. After all, being without a loved one is hard. You should take advantage of whatever you can. One advantage when you're alone is you don't have to consult with anyone about what you want to do. You can just go out and by God do it."

Molly stared at him. Then she shook her head a little, as if to clear it. "You're right, of course. I'm afraid I'm one of these people that gets set on doing something and once I start, I don't think about whether I should do something else or change course. Daniel was here and so I was here, too. But —"

She looked out at the mountains again. There was a time she'd been so homesick to be back in Virginia and with her family that she could have cried. She *had* cried in veterinary school at night when no one could hear. That was a long time ago. But she could go back. She could set up a nice suburban practice in McLean and be with her sisters and brother.

It would be a good life. There'd be big family celebrations and lots of visiting back and forth. Hope would know her cousins and not grow up feeling like a lonely only child. She and Victor could even try to keep the ranch and run it from long distance. God knows Daniel wasn't here to care.

But —

"No." Molly felt something loosen inside when she said the word. "I want to make this ranch prosper. I want Hope to think of it as home. I think of it as home now."

"It's a beautiful place."

"I need to do better about taking on my responsibilities." Molly turned to him. "I need to be making informed decisions. Grown up decisions."

J.B. stuck his thumbs back in his pockets. Did he want to touch her? And if he did, would it be to strangle her? "I was out of line for saying what I did, boss."

"No, you were right. Thank you." Molly smiled. A real smile. When had she last wanted to do that? "Just so you remember I *am* the boss."

"Couldn't forget that."

Couldn't he? Could he forget what they'd done just before Farrow showed up? She couldn't. That was the main reason she'd lit into him now. He probably knew that, too.

"J.B.?"

"Yes, ma'am?"

"Come over tonight after dinner. We need to talk." Not just about his plans for her ranch—and she knew he had plans. But she owed him the truth. Because he wasn't asking, she had to tell him why she was on the ranch. About Daniel. About Hope. Why she was scared as hell of what might happen next between her and him.

Because she knew something would.

His face softened suddenly, looking almost as gentle as if he had caressed her. Her knees suddenly felt weak.

Something definitely was going to happen. Good or bad, she wasn't sure. But something.

"Sure thing, Molly."

Chapter Four

"You didn't have to rush out so quickly."

"Discovering the ranch is close to bankruptcy is worth a quick trip here, Molly. Damn. You can't afford not to have me step in, seeing as you've just started out on your own with your practice. Aren't you in debt up to your eyeballs?"

"Well, yes, but —"

"Oh, hell. We both knew Daniel wasn't much of an accountant, but I had no idea the ranch was this bad off."

"Truly, Vic, I wouldn't have even mentioned any problem if I'd known what was going on with you. I'm so sorry to hear Cecilia lost the baby." Molly tried to keep her voice as calm as — well, as J.B. would. "I know how much children mean to you both."

Inside she was still jumping. No one visited the Esperanza for weeks, months sometimes. Now suddenly she had nothing but visitors. Would J.B. stay away when he saw another car had arrived?

Would she have the courage to tell J.B. everything if she had to wait?

She couldn't wait. She just couldn't.

God, she had to pay attention to Victor. This was sad news. But she wanted to scream with impatience.

"My family means something to me." Vic scowled into his beer. "I don't know how much we mean to Cecilia."

"Victor!" He couldn't have meant what she heard. "You know how hard Cecilia has had it with her pregnancies. She's desperate for another baby."

"I know she went back to work the second the doctor told her she was able. Well, she's back with her band and her manager anyhow." He turned his head. "Jen is watching Danny right now. It isn't right."

What could she say? What should she say? "You and Cecilia struggled over her singing career before. I thought you two had resolved the issue."

"I'm sorry, but I can't resolve the issue that my wife is having an affair." Victor got up and shoved the chair back. "I had to get out of there. I was afraid of what I might do to her when she gets back."

"Vic, Cecilia likes to flirt but she wouldn't—she wouldn't." Molly gasped, her previous impatience with Victor's presence forgotten.

"Wouldn't she? I thought not, either. Then suddenly she is taking all these very private telephone calls from her manager and flying up to New York for unexpected business with him. I told myself I was being stupid. I tried not to be jealous, but then I called her hotel room at three in the morning after she told me she was putting in an early evening and she wasn't there. The hotel told me she had decided to check out that morning." Victor swallowed. "What do you think I have left to believe? She's lying to me, avoiding me... Hell, her manager is a handsome guy. Married, too, but I don't suppose that stops either of them."

Molly stared as Victor paced. Suddenly he turned around and grabbed Molly's shoulders.

"You wouldn't do that, would you?" he asked. "You loved my father. He was afraid for you, because you were younger than him, but he was happy with you. He never doubted you loved him for a minute."

She looked at the face that looked so much like Daniel's and yet so unlike.

"No, I loved him completely," she said. "But it wasn't like that for us—"

"Molly, what the hell do I do to push the women I love away?" His voice cracked and she soothed her hand against his head. She'd never seen Victor quite so vulnerable.

"Vic, there's something not right here. But whatever the problem is, it isn't you."

"Damn straight. I picked the wrong woman again. You Turner women can't keep interested in me." Vic looked up, tried to smile. "But I'm such a sucker for you all."

"Oh, sweetie. Don't." She kissed him.

For a moment things got confused. Victor looked like Daniel, he sounded like him. Her hands clutched the back of his head, clinging. They tightened in his hair. She could imagine his tongue expertly stroking hers, the way she'd longed for Daniel to do —

No. She couldn't. She wouldn't. Not after that crazy first half-second.

Victor looked startled. Lord, what had she done?

She moved away and patted his shoulder. "Victor, why don't we just forget this and go to bed."

She watched him blink. *Idiot. What a stupid thing to say.*

"You go to sleep once you straighten this out with my sister. You need to talk to Cecilia, you know. Now if not sooner."

"Yeah." He rubbed the back of his neck. "I—There is no good excuse for me, Molly, but—sometimes I go right back to being the kid who was used to being kicked in the teeth. Then I try to show I didn't get hurt. I'll do anything to pretend that. I've got to stop it."

"I expect you gave plenty of kicks back when you got old enough."

"Of course. But you don't forget what it's like to be kicked first."

"Cecilia won't kick you." Molly put a hand tentatively on his shoulder. He held himself rigid as if he was afraid she might attack him. Slowly he relaxed when she went no further. "I can't promise she won't slug you, but she loves you. Go to bed. But make the call, Victor."

"Thanks, kid." Victor kissed her hand, gravely. "Thanks."

He left the room. Molly looked at herself in the mirror. She shook her head. There didn't seem to be anything different.

"I'm on quite a roll today," she told her reflection. "I don't understand it."

A sudden prickling at her neck made her turn. She glanced out the window but saw no one.

By then J.B. was already back at the guest house, searching for the bottle of Jack Daniels he'd kept with him for years.* * * * *

She hauled out dirty straw with a little more energy than necessary. She'd already realized that she'd made a fool of herself yesterday. No wonder J.B. had said it was smart to stop things before they got started.

What normal woman howled with tears over the death of the man she'd loved one minute, and then tried to seduce her hired hand the next? Even worse, who contemplated for even a millisecond seducing her brother-in-law? She'd been out of control. Letting loose her grief, it seemed, had let in other emotions to replace the numbness she'd felt for so long. But—it was wrong. She was only just starting to realize Daniel was really dead and to let herself give him up.

Of course she'd stopped herself with Vic. But sleeping with Jared Boyd was a little too outrageous a way to let Daniel go. Heaven. Maybe she was ready to throw herself at anyone. J.B. Victor. The next man who walked into her life. Any man who walked into her life.

Why hadn't she learned from her past mistakes?

Was her behavior why J.B. had decided not to come to work this morning? Maybe he was afraid to see her this morning in case she jumped him. Maybe he was going to leave altogether, convinced his boss was sex-starved or just plain crazy.

How was she going to act when she saw him? J.B. never created scenes like she had. He was always in charge. She was the lunatic here and she was ashamed of herself. How could she put them back to the working relationship they'd had?

She swallowed. The worst part was, despite what she had just told herself, she didn't want just a working relationship with her hired hand. His body. She wanted—Oh no, there she went again.

Then she looked up, saw him, and realized all her assumptions about what he was thinking and doing were completely wrong.

J.B. began to muck out the stall next to her. Neither of them said anything. The shower and clean clothes had helped some, but he figured the look on his face and the fact he had started work close to mid-morning told her exactly what was going on. Anyhow, she was doing his work right now, instead of him. That should be enough for her to kick his sorry ass out.

She stayed silent. Only the creak of the stable door let him know she was still there. He'd expected her to start yelling, had braced himself for it. The silence was a little unnerving. For once he was going to have to give in first.

"I'm sorry, boss. I messed up. Am I out?"

He hadn't known how much it was going to hurt to say those words. He saw her brown eyes on him, measuring him. The churning in his stomach now had something new to churn over. What would she decide?

"I guess a man is entitled to sleep late once." She spoke in measured tones. "Once."

He paused in his work and looked at her. "No."

"No?"

"We don't let it just slip. That's too easy. I got drunk. I didn't do my job. You and I both know it. Right now you're looking at me like I'm a worm. Maybe I am. So we aren't gonna pretend it didn't happen. What do you want to do about it?"

She didn't know what to say. She honestly didn't.

"I want you to stay." Molly looked at those gray, somewhat bloodshot, eyes that looked back at her steadily. He had come in looking sheepish, but he had gotten over that. "But I can't stand wondering if you will or won't stick."

"Neither can I. I want to stick. I want—I want you to feel as though you can depend on me. Damn, I want a lot of stupid things from you. But for now I just have to start working on being dependable again. Will it be here or somewhere else?"

"Here." She moved closer to him.

They both smelled like the stables, but she couldn't help but touch his unshaven face. Couldn't help wanting to be near. She understood why the horses were so willing to be trained by him. She felt like one of those young foals being broken in, haltered and tied to a strong post to learn they can't just run away. She didn't want to run. Instead she felt an invisible leash drawing her steadily closer to him. "What are the other stupid things you want from me, J.B.?"

He jerked away from her slightly. "Don't."

"Don't *what*? J.B., you gave every—" she searched for the right words, "every indication of interest in me just last night. This morning you come in with a hangover and start backing away. What's going on?"

He felt his back against the stall and gradually eased his way to the ground. Damn if he wasn't feeling just a little unsteady—and it wasn't all from the whiskey last night. She slid to the floor with him, her legs over his, sitting a half inch away from being crotch to crotch with him. He clenched his fingers in the straw, but he didn't move. He wasn't sure what he would do if he did.

"You're damn forward this morning," he said, but she heard the note of amusement – maybe bemusement in the words – and smiled.

"Well, I've always had to work hard for my men." Molly decided to stay honest. "I'm not as pretty as my sisters. Jen never had to lift a finger to have the men she wanted fall for her. Cecilia was the same way until Vic was available. Cecilia was so amazed that he didn't jump when she whistled that she actually did work to get him. But she didn't really have to break a sweat to finish the job. Anyhow, I have to work much harder than they ever did. Daniel resisted me for years, you know. And now there's you."

She moved just that half inch closer and then his hands did reach out. Her eyes widened when one hand tipped her head up to his face, none too gently.

"Stop it," he ordered, his voice rough. "I'm not sure where you picked up this idea you aren't pretty, but trust me. You're more than pretty enough to get any man you choose."

"You've seen my family photos hanging on the walls. I was a pudgy little plain-faced teenager who –"

"Molly, you're not pudgy. You're stacked, yeah. You're curvy, yeah. If there was anything more, you've worked it off long ago. Now I don't know about the plain-faced, but I'd say your face looks just fine. On the other hand, if you want to work to convince me –" His mouth was very close to hers when he jerked back again and scowled.

"What?" Molly and he both winced at her scream.

"What kind of game are we playing here?" he responded harshly. "I need to know the rules. Last night damn near wrecked me and I'm not going into this blind."

"I don't understand."

"Yesterday we damn near had sex on the porch. I know I was hot enough for you right then and there, and I thought you were, too. Then your good-looking brother-in-law shows up. I saw you two last night. That wasn't any sisterly kiss you gave him."

Molly began to blush.

"I guess people who spy get paid back by misinterpreting what they see." Molly lifted her chin. She wasn't going to lie but she was never going to tell J.B. that one crazy moment where she'd hoped for the wrong thing. "We did kiss each other. J.B., I was still on edge from being with you. I still don't exactly know why it happened but... Listen, last night was crazy. But afterward we straightened things out, Vic and I, and went to bed. Separately. This morning he took off to do some of the tasks you weren't around to do. I didn't—I don't—jump from one man to another, as if any one would do. Victor and I have never ever had any kind of—of sexual relationship. Satisfied?"

"Not yet." His gray eyes glittered.

Molly gulped. "I didn't mean—"

"But I intend to be soon. I'll make sure you are too, Molly. Again. Then no one will have to misinterpret anything."

"Jared, you listen to me!"

He loved to hear how she said his name, with all crisp syllables. The only other people who called him Jared were his family and they drawled it out. He wondered if she would keep calling him that later. "Mmmm, honey?"

"Are you telling me that you started drinking last night because you saw me and Vic?"

"I saw you and I got drunk. It's not your fault, Molly. But, yeah, I guess that triggered it for me. You throw me off my stride. I did the drinking all by myself but now I know I need to be careful around you. What you can make me feel can be pretty damn powerful—powerfully good and bad."

"I need to be careful, too," Molly whispered. "The same goes for me."

She could feel what was going on with him since their bodies were so close. His erection pushed hard, insistently against her thigh. Her breath caught. J.B. gently nudged her off his lap before he got to his feet. He reached a hand down to effortlessly pull her up.

She lifted her chin for his kiss. He pinched it instead, letting his fingers slide down her throat to rest just above her collarbone.

"Now I have a lot of work to catch up on," he told her. "I know you've got plenty of your own work to do without taking on mine. I want to see you tonight, boss. If he's back in time, you think Vic would be willing to watch little Hope tonight while we go to town?"

"You mean, you're asking me out? Like—like a date?"

"Yeah. Can you take the time?"

She hesitated.

"Do you trust me enough to go?" he asked, huskily.

"I'll make the time, J.B." Molly gave him a hard kiss on the mouth. Whether he liked it or not, she wanted to kiss him. So there. "I think that is a great way to start to—to get to know each other. Slowly."

They had things to resolve, Molly figured, and maybe he had even more to resolve than she did. But they needed time together if they were going to. Besides, it had been far too long since she'd had a date. Lord, had she *ever* had a date?

It would be nice to have a normal relationship with a man—one where she didn't chase him, one where they had time to take things slow with each other. She smiled again. If slow was what she wanted. She thought so, until she got near the living, breathing J.B. instead of the one she just pondered over from a

distance. When she was close enough to get her hands on him, she was willing to take things a lot faster.

"Boyd." Victor looked J.B. over as they met in the stables.

The taller man pulled the saddle off Major quickly and with a fair amount of ease. J.B. knew Victor wasn't too practiced with horses, but it appeared he'd inherited his daddy's knack.

"I appreciate your help exercising the animals today."

"I did it for the horses and for Molly." Victor was brief. "I don't owe you anything. If it was up to me, you would have been out today. Molly doesn't need any more grief in her life right now."

"You figure you have the right to give her trouble?" J.B. began feeling a certain cool, humming satisfaction as he let some of the anger out.

"I don't have any rights over her," Victor said, shortly. "But I've known her since she was wearing braces on her teeth. She is my wife's sister and she was my father's...companion. That gives me enough interest to step in when other folks try to hurt her. She doesn't deserve it. She is a good woman, just like she was a good kid. Nothing that has happened to her recently is fair."

"None of that was my doing." J.B. looked at the other man's face and knew anger was bubbling up there, too.

"Not yet. But now I hear that after you got drunk last night and dropped your share of the work today she's decided to go out with you." Victor looked unimpressed with the man he saw in front of him. "I'm just telling you to treat her right."

"I'm unattached, I treat my women well and I'm old enough not to be told what to do," J.B. said through his teeth, though the words were still calmly spoken. "Molly isn't your daddy's anymore, if she ever was. I know she

wouldn't have looked at me twice otherwise. I wouldn't have tried anything if she was. Both of us take wedding vows seriously."

Victor glared. "Sounds like you're trying to tell me something."

J.B. kept his voice soft. "Right now I have no rights to Molly. But I damn well know you don't, either. Molly is feeling bad about kissing you. But I have a feeling you were working on her sympathies first. If I see you try anything on her, I'll do my best to stop you cold, whether I have the right or not. Because Molly doesn't deserve that kind of grief and she isn't asking for it."

He saw Ruiz take a step toward him. J.B. smiled and shifted lightly on the balls of his feet. He'd enjoy this fight.

Then the taller man stopped.

"You're right." The words sounded forced out of him. "I was out of line last night. It's not the way you say, but I—I was whining to Cecilia's sister and that wasn't right. I'm damned if I apologize to you but—I promise you won't ever see it again. If you do, you're welcome to stop me any way you want. I'll deserve it."

"That's fair," J.B. drawled, imperceptibly relaxing.

Victor's smile almost reached his eyes when he added, "If you hurt her I'll be happy to do the same for you."

"That's fair, too."

"On the other hand, she may kick you in the teeth. Women. Turner women in particular. You just never know with them. I'm not excusing it, but my woman managed to make me feel stupid. I've never felt stupid enough before to try something with another woman now that I'm married. I swear. I know I can't feel justified tearing you apart. But, if she tries, Molly can make you feel about as stupid and small as her sister made me feel."

"I think she already managed to do that last night," J.B. said, half under his breath.

"I hoped there was some reason you got juiced." Victor looked narrowly at him. "Hell, there wasn't a good reason for me to have begged for sympathy from a woman who was already hurting. There wasn't a good enough one for you to have done what you did. Why don't we call it even?"

Damned if he wasn't starting to like the man. Who would have thought it? Not that there wasn't this nagging desire to hit him. But only once or twice. He might not even enjoy it too much.

"Be happy to, Ruiz."

* * * * *

"Kevin?"

"Sis? What are you doing calling here?"

"Gee, thanks for saying hello and how are you. I'm fine, thanks. Why aren't you home? You always seem to be traveling on some construction job or another."

"Yeah, well I've started renovations on an old place in Charlottesville. I'm kind of camping in the place until it's ready to be put on the market. Even if I could, I don't feel right anyhow, living in Cecilia and Vic's place."

"It's our home too," Molly reminded him. "We all grew up there."

"Yeah, but we all sold out to them years ago. It's their home now, not ours."

Molly didn't argue. Cecilia had made the place more modern, more tasteful and kept a lot of the old things but—it just wasn't home.

"Well, strange as that may sound, I didn't call to talk about that. I want to ask you about J.B."

"J.B.?" Kevin sounded thoroughly startled. "What about him? Isn't he working out?"

"Umm—" Molly realized this might be tricky. "He's doing fine on the ranch. I wanted to know a little more about him, that's all."

"What?"

"Well, I'm thinking about going out with him."

"Going out with J.B.?"

"Yes. What do you think about it?"

"What am I supposed to think about it? I've never gone out with him."

"Kevin! I know he is your friend. But is he the kind of man you would want your sister to go out with? I have Hope to think of besides myself. Right now this is very casual but..." She trailed off uncertainly.

"Well, I—I don't know. I guess I can tell you if he is serious about you, you'll be a lucky woman. He takes his commitments seriously. It's just that—well, I've never actually seen him serious about a woman. He went out with them and all but—shoot, Sis, I don't know what to say. I like him. I like you more. Be careful. Don't make me have to come out and pound him."

"That's all you can offer in the way of advice? Gee, thanks."

"J.B. and I know a lot about each other's weaknesses." Kevin hesitated. "We don't blame each other for having them and we don't talk to other people about them."

Molly, knowing how Kevin had struggled all his life, softened. "Kevin, what happened with you isn't your fault—"

"I'm not talking about me." Kevin cut her off. "I know J.B.'s problems pretty well. I met up with him again about two years ago when he was feeling pretty low. He stayed with me for a while. I saw him start to make some changes and I think he's stuck to them. He's trying to work out some tough things on his own. I don't know if he has. Anything more he needs to tell you about."

"I know about his drinking."

"Well, then you know one of the worst things about him. He figured if he went back to what he did when he was younger, before he got into the military and before he started drinking so much, it might help him stop. Has it?"

"Pretty much." Molly hesitated on her side. "He's trying hard to stop."

"As your brother I'd rather you had said a good solid yes, it has stopped." Kevin sounded rueful.

"I think that's something he's going to work on for the rest of his life."

"Yeah. Sometimes you just have to keep trying, no matter how hard."

"Listen, things sound like they are going well with you." Molly tried to get the uncharacteristically sad note out of her brother's voice. "Don't you enjoy the work you're doing now?"

"Yeah. I like working for myself, even if I have to lean on Jen to help me with the bookkeeping part. I'm starting to try to plan a little ahead finally. And, well, I met this girl – this woman, actually." Kevin fell silent.

"A woman, huh?" Kevin never talked about women he went out with.

"Yeah, well, she owns the house I'm working on."

There was another silence.

"Does she live there with you?"

"Huh? No, I'm the only one crazy enough and cheap enough to try camping here." He laughed. "She comes from money. Hey, I don't mean any of this the way it probably sounds. We aren't together or anything like that. She just got me thinking, that's all. That's her job – to get people to think. She's an English professor."

"An English professor?" Molly's eyebrows rose. "Sorry, Kevin, but she doesn't sound like your type."

"I don't sound like hers, you mean." Kevin laughed again, defensively, this time. "I probably last read a whole book when – do you remember when?"

Molly couldn't remember when. She cleared her throat. "That doesn't mean you aren't a great guy, Kevin. Someone a woman would be proud to be with."

"Whatever. Anyhow, it isn't like that," Kevin repeated. "But—well, I suppose I brought it up because she is a serious lady, you know. Classy. I'd treat her differently if I took her out than I would most women. You're the same type of woman, Molly."

"I'm like an English professor?" It was Molly's turn to laugh. "Please. Mom and Dad wondered where I came from. I was the kid who scored high in math and science. They bragged about me, but they didn't understand my high school science projects. No one in the family did."

"I don't mean that." Kevin was impatient. "I mean you are a serious, classy lady. A man would treat you differently than he would someone he picked up in a bar when he was on leave."

Careful, big brother. Don't go there. Even though I never told you, someone did pick me up in a bar almost two years ago. God, she wasn't looking forward to telling J.B. that news.

"You mean like you and J.B. used to pick up women and treat them?"

"Uh—I didn't say that."

"So what are you saying, big brother?"

"I just mean I know how I would treat a woman like you. I figure J.B. knows, too. If he doesn't, well, I'll have to come and kick some butt, that's all."

"Will you?" Molly was touched.

"Of course J.B. could always kick my butt when we were in boot camp. With all his training since then he probably could do me serious damage now—but I'd have to come try. On the other hand, I think he's going to treat you right. Like I said, I know him pretty well. He isn't stupid."

After they said their good-byes, Molly hung up, feeling both comforted and just as confused as when she first called Kevin. Then she smiled. It was hopeless to try to get help about a date from an older brother. She needed to talk to a sister.

* * * * *

"Hey, Jason." Jared leaned against the wall of his kitchen as he spoke into the telephone receiver.

"Hey yourself, big brother," the familiar voice responded. "Where the hell are you? You haven't bothered to let us know for months now."

"New Mexico."

"We all could be dead here for all you checked. Hell, *you* could've been dead," Jason grouched.

"How is Laura?" J.B. thought of Jason's spitfire wife and smiled. "The kids? Should I be inquiring about my grandfather or Ma or the sisters?"

"Fine, fine. That isn't the point —"

"You sound more like Grandpa every day and make even less sense when you're fussing." J.B. grinned at the wordless sputters. "Listen, this is costing me money, you know. I called to cut a deal with you and the old man."

"Hmm?" Jason stopped ranting and started listening. Old Jace had always known what he wanted and how to get it. As soon as he got out of high school he'd married and taken over as Jared Hamilton's foreman. He was perfect for the job of his grandfather's right hand man because the two of them thought alike.

For example, neither he nor Hamilton ignored a business deal.

"How is Hellion?" The damn animal had a fancy name but everyone at home called him Hellion — for good reason.

"Mean as ever."

J.B. smiled. He'd had a fondness for the stallion ever since he'd been a cocky twenty-year-old at home on leave from the army. He'd thought he could teach the feisty young horse what it was like to have someone riding him. Hellion had explained to him that it wasn't quite time yet. J.B. absently rubbed the old scar on his leg. Hellion had explained it very clearly.

"I could use a good stud. Found me a fine mare."

"You're back to horses, then, Jared?"

"I'm back. It's not my place but I'm trainer here. The boss will let me work out the details though, I think."

A half hour later, after much abuse from his baby brother, J.B. had hung up knowing there was every chance Hellion and Molly's mare, Madam Desiree, would have a truly remarkable foal.

He could show Molly he was worthy to be trusted as a trainer.

He could show Molly he could be trusted in her bed.

J.B. looked at himself in the mirror. Yes, indeed. He figured he had worked most of the alcohol out of his system. Even though there was this nagging urge to work some back in, he figured he was all right. He wasn't going to get drunk again. Not today anyhow. That was no way to treat a lady. No way to treat himself.

Once he shaved off that all day stubble, he could plan his strategy with the boss tonight. As he began to lather up, he wondered who he'd see tonight—the boss or Molly. Either one fascinated him.

In fact, the way he figured it, she might appreciate him taking charge—at least for a while. It sounded like it would make a change for her. She'd said she was used to making the moves. He stopped plying the razor long enough to give

himself one quick, fierce grin in the mirror. He was used to making moves himself.

He'd move slow. He wasn't going to scare her. But something told him she might be interested in the sort of thing he enjoyed himself. He had a collection of restraints and blindfolds sitting in a box, waiting to be used. Dark cloth would contrast against Molly's pale skin...

J.B. took a short, quick breath. Steadied himself. He wasn't taking them out. Not yet. But if she was willing—He imagined her sobbing cries as she strained for more, accepted more...

God, if she was willing, they'd melt the bed.

* * * * *

"Listen to me, Cecilia, you need to come out," Molly urged. "You're making Victor crazy."

"I can't." The voice sounded very desolate. "Don't ask why. I just can't be near Victor right now."

"Are you angry with him?"

"No. I don't want to talk about it. How are you, Molly?"

Molly thought she felt better than Cecilia sounded at the moment.

"I'm fine." Molly gave the automatic response and then thought about it. "A little shaky, but doing better than you'd think. In fact, Cecilia—"

"Yes?"

"I suppose Victor will tell you anyhow, since I'm asking him to mind Hope for me. Cecilia, what would you say if I told you I was going on a date tonight?"

"Really?" The voice was a little too neutral.

"Really."

"I'd say – what are you going to wear? Your wardrobe seems to run to blue jeans and huge shirts. I'm amazed anyone would ask you out with clothes like yours."

Molly laughed. Cecilia sounded more like herself every minute. "I don't know. I don't even know if this is a fancy date or a casual date or where we're going. I left that up to Jared." When had she started to think of him as Jared?

"Jared Boyd? You haven't known him long."

"No, and Daniel hasn't been gone long, either." Molly's voice grew tight. "I'm aware of all of that."

"Molly, I'm not trying to be critical. Still – just don't jump into anything. Flirt, have a good time, but be careful. And wear the dress I got you for my wedding. That's a party dress."

"It's awfully dressy." Molly hesitated, defensiveness forgotten. "I'm not even sure it will fit any more. I was heavier then."

"It has a sash, for heaven sake! Maybe Maria can help take a few tucks in. I know that's probably the only halfway suitable thing in your closet and that you haven't worn it since the wedding."

"Well, maybe I'll check with J.B. about where we're going." Molly wavered. She knew that she could trust her sister's taste in clothes more than she could her own but she didn't want to act as if she was expecting – well, expecting something too much.

"Molly, you may not be planning anything like this but – well, besides the dress, do you have any protection? You know, for sex?"

"I've heard of sex, yes." Molly's face warmed. "No, Cecilia. This is just a casual thing. I hardly know the man."

"Molly, your record on taking care of yourself isn't the best." Cecilia's voice shifted into big sister mode. "I want you to be sure you don't get to know this

Jared a little too well, if you get my meaning. You get to a drugstore and buy some condoms at a minimum."

"Cecilia, I'm going out with J.B. tonight and the nearest drugstore—if I wanted to use the nearest one and start a lot of gossip going—isn't exactly around the corner. I guess you'll just have to trust that J.B. and I aren't going to do anything that requires protection."

God, they weren't, were they? Jumping a man without thinking first was long since out of her system. Right?

There was a long, waiting silence. Molly gave in first. "Oh, all right. I'll get some—even though that doesn't mean I plan to need them any time soon. Well, not very soon. Don't worry."

"Wear the dress, Sis." Cecilia was deliberately casual. "Gotta go now. Tell Victor I'll call soon. Give him my love."

As she hung up, Cecilia looked down at the note next to her telephone and her lips trembled. The momentary relief of dealing with Molly and a normal problem faded as she stared down at the note.

IF YOU ACT LIKE A SLUT, YOUR FAMILY WILL BE SORRY.

Chapter Five

"Hello, Jared." Molly met him at the door.

He deserved to be called Jared. He'd shaved and wore some actual dress pants instead of jeans. And he had on a jacket. She checked his feet. At least he had on cowboy boots. Yup. He must be the same man who had invited her out.

"Molly."

He looked her up and down. She resisted the urge to pull at the dress. The dress had taken hours of altering to finally fit her. She had to admit the cocktail gown now made her look almost sophisticated and sexy. The matching shoes, long hidden away in the corner of the closet, were as uncomfortable as ever when she'd put them on. Wearing them, she stood almost eye level with J.B. More importantly, her legs actually looked thin.

She couldn't do much with her hair, but she had put in some pretty barrettes. She missed her sisters. They would have known what to do with her hair and told her what to say. But just Vic was here, standing in the background. He had kept silent through the whole getting ready process. Molly prayed he wasn't disapproving.

"Boyd." Vic finally found his voice.

"Ruiz."

The two men eyed each other, neither shaking hands. Molly hastily said, "I hope this outfit wasn't too fancy. My sister told me it was the only thing I had to wear for a date."

"I'm real glad she did. You look good. Real good."

"You clean up pretty nicely yourself."

"Thank you." His smile flickered across his mouth and then faded. He kept his eyes on her. What was he thinking?

"Where are we going? I need the telephone number in case Hope has a problem," Molly said.

In answer, J.B. wrote a number on a piece of paper and handed it to Victor.

"It's a surprise for you." He took her hand. "I didn't think there would be much going on in Hondo but I put some thought into it and came up with something you'll like. I hope."

Hondo was one of the biggest towns near them. Molly ran her mind over all the nearby smaller towns and wondered what there was for a surprise. There were some dance halls, some bars, one or two movie theaters and a diner or two. If she had really thought, she would never have worn this dress. It just wasn't appropriate for anything he could take her to.

"I'm sure I will. Victor, thank you for babysitting. I appreciate it."

"Be careful." Victor's gaze flicked over J.B. "Be very careful."

Molly almost pushed J.B. out the door before he answered.

* * * * *

"J.B., I had no idea this place existed." Molly took another bite. "It's beautiful."

"Too many folks don't know about it. But Tommy was an army buddy of mine and I looked him up once I realized he was only a county or two over from your place."

"People should know." Molly glanced over the almost empty dining room. "I think a dude ranch with food like this should be publicized."

"Well, Tommy says the owners are working to keep their heads above water and, in the meantime, Tommy's job is cooking some fine food every night and he concentrates on that. He cooks real well but I don't know if either of the owners

are much of an advertising genius. Then again it takes a while to get established any time you start a business."

"Some wine, Boyd?" Tommy Juarez approached their table.

"None for me. Molly?"

"No," Molly said, quickly.

J.B. leaned over so his lips almost brushed her ear. "Don't hold off on my account."

Then he turned to Tommy. "Give the lady a glass, anyhow. It might help me when I try to take advantage of her later."

"You never needed any wine to do that before, Boyd." Tommy poured. He added, hastily, to Molly, "Just kidding, ma'am."

Molly blushed and then sipped her wine. She looked over a little doubtfully across the table. Her date reached out to take her free hand.

"Don't try to spare me," he told her. "I know Tommy picks good wine. Enjoy. Mind, I didn't want to take you to a dance hall and order you a few beers. I could probably handle it, but I didn't want you to worry about me. That wasn't the atmosphere I wanted for us right now, anyhow."

Molly shivered a little as his voice soothed her and the finger tracing patterns in the palm of her hand shook her. He had picked a sure way to get her interest. This handholding trick of his seemed innocent, but it was really quite seductive.

"This is perfect, Jared."

He didn't seem like a J.B. at all now. J.B. was a hired hand on her ranch who knew horses. Jared knew women. And he didn't act like any hired hand she knew.

"But you're nervous." His hand lifted her palm up, letting his thumb stroke the pulse of her wrist. It jumped under his touch.

"A little. It's been a while since I went out with a man."

"I'm nervous, too, honey." He sounded sincere. "You're a classy lady. It's been a while since I went out with one of them."

Molly thought of her brother and smiled a little. It sounded as if Kevin wasn't going to have to kick butt after all.

As their meal ended, music wafted through the room. This wasn't the sort of thing you heard in the local bars. This was slow and romantic. One couple got up to dance and Jared looked at her. Then he got up and held his hand out again. Molly wanted to tell him that she was clumsy and hadn't danced in years, but somehow she was compelled to get up.

She caught her breath as he swung her close to him. He was a smooth dancer. Damn, he was just plain slick all around. What was she getting into with him? And did she want to?

She felt his breath on her neck and shivered. Oh, she wanted to. Nervous date or not, no matter what, she couldn't fool herself about that.

"I didn't take you anywhere nearby for another reason." He resumed the conversation as if they had never stopped. "I didn't want any gossip about you. These are early days for us—I don't even know if there is gonna be an us. You don't need any strangers to be sticking their nose into what concerns you and me."

So he *had* heard some of what was being said. What did he think of her?

"I appreciate that," Molly said, faintly. "I appreciate everything you've done. I do feel like I'm in over my head here, though."

"This evening is simple," he promised. "A meal, a little slow dancing, maybe a good-night kiss or two. Not complicated at all. I'm a simple man, honey."

"I may be a little rusty at all this, but I'm not stupid. You're a very complicated man. I think I'm going to enjoy getting to know you. If you let me."

"Oh, I want you to know me all right." This time his lips actually brushed her ear when he spoke. "You don't have to wonder about that. But we can work out how we get to know each other later."

Molly swallowed hard and almost missed a step.

"It's getting late." She knew it was a cliché and she didn't care. "I don't want to impose on Victor too long. Hope isn't used to having me stay out at night like this. Well, unless I'm called on an emergency or something but that—that's different."

She stopped before she babbled any more. He smiled at her and smoothed a stray hair tendril off her forehead.

"Fine. I've got another early morning myself. My brother may be here by tomorrow, too."

"I hope you know what you're doing, J.B.," Molly said, unconsciously switching back to his nickname. "We used to breed a lot of horses on the Esperanza but we don't have much of a reputation for anything but having a few decent saddle horses for sale now."

"I know how to publicize my work, boss." He seemed unconcerned. "And Hellion has a reputation, too. Don't worry."

They moved easily off the dance floor. Jared paid the check and said his good-byes to Tommy on their way out the door. Then they got back into the truck.

Molly felt the warmth coming from the truck's heater as the darkness isolated them in the truck's cab. Out here, it quickly turned chilly once the sun went down. After Jared started the truck, his hand reached out to touch hers as he drove. The radio played softly about country heartache and joy.

Jared's hand was warm and comforting. Molly's eyelids drifted downward. She was almost relaxed and asleep when the truck stopped and pulled off to the

side of the road. She sat up as he unfastened his seat belt. She blinked in confusion.

“Wha —” she began. Then his lips were on hers, just lightly.

“Here come a few kisses.” His voice was amused. “Ready?”

His tongue parted her lips, touched her tongue. At first the kiss was exploratory, gentle. Molly relaxed. Here was a man who knew what he was doing.

He truly did. It took a moment before Molly realized the easy kisses were drifting into something else. By then she was ready for that, too. She felt herself seeking him, turning her face to take the kisses a little deeper. The cab’s warmth, Jared’s body heat, all were making her warmer, almost unbearably hot. Breaths grew harsh, quickened in the quiet but she wasn’t sure which one of them was panting. Did it matter? Molly struggled to get closer, inching her hands under his shirt. *Oh, wonderful*. His skin was warm and his muscles were hard, just the way a man’s should be. They both tensed under her touch.

Then something inside her—something between them—seemed to explode. She wasn’t quite sure who did what first or how, but she was under him and gentle kisses turned ferocious. Caressing fingers ripped at clothes. Both of them writhed, desperate for release. Molly had tears on her face before she felt Jared’s fingers reaching under her dress and her panties, going up her thigh and—stopping.

“Let me watch you this time, Molly.”

“Nooo.”

She couldn’t. She’d never—God, she’d thought that the last time, too. His hand placed hers over her mons. His other hand slid up, his fingers tweaking her hardened nipples.

She touched herself. There was no help for it. She had to. Even with her eyes shut, she could tell Jared was watching every movement. But she couldn't stop. Couldn't wait.

She screamed, gasped, screamed again. She needed those stroking movements of her hand. She couldn't be ashamed. In fact, she wanted Jared to see her. Wanted him to help her push over the edge.

"Open your eyes, Molly. You know I'm looking at just how you pleasure yourself. God, I'm hard." His voice was thick, rich with satisfaction. "I want you to see, too."

Molly shook her head, squeezing desperately at her clitoris. Lord, his words were getting her hotter yet. She was so close...

"Stop then." His voice sharpened.

"No!" She echoed her last words, but with a whole new meaning. But she found herself, quivering, resting her hand—hard—against her clit. Her hand was wet from her pussy. She was aching. He wouldn't make her stop now. He couldn't.

"If you won't do what I say, you'll pleasure me instead." She heard him shift. He pulled her up, pushed her head down. Her lids were still closed, but there was no mistaking the hard cock against her lips. "Open up for me, Molly. Mouth or eyes. Which will it be?"

She shook her head.

"Molly, do what I say. Open."

What the hell had he done with that voice of his? Hypnotized her. That's what. Molly found her lips parting, closing over something hard and hot and thick. Something she suddenly wanted more than her own orgasm.

"We're out here on an open road, Molly. You've already discovered you like the idea of maybe—just maybe—getting caught. Now let's see what else you like.

Things you didn't dream you could admit to anyone else. Things you're gonna do – with me."

He was a devil. How did he know what her fantasies were? How could he dare act on them for real? He wouldn't. Would he?

Molly shivered with a sudden longing. His cock jerked as if in response. She licked the satiny tip with her tongue, tentatively. One salty drop oozed from the cock head. Greedily, she lapped at it. She wanted more. More of him.

"Suck me, Molly. Hard."

"I'm not—I'm not very good at that." She hated to confess that. Not when she was on fire. Not when she wanted him to think of her as desirable.

"You will be. Honey, the only thing you need to do is listen and do just what I say."

She shivered again. How did he know that's what she'd always wanted a man to tell her?

"You're never gonna have to ask me for anything in bed, Molly." He paused. "Unless it's to ease up. Understand?"

She kept her eyes shut. Now it was to hide her tears of relief. To never have to plead, never have to wonder... How did he know that was yet another fantasy? "Yes. If I ask you to ease up, you will."

"The only time I will, honey. You'll have to say it out loud. Those words. 'Ease up, Jared.'"

"Yes." She wondered if she ever would.

"I'll keep you safe, Molly. You know that, don't you?"

Did she? How could she know that? But she did. She nodded.

"Now you're gonna take me. All of me."

Molly nodded again, obediently. God, when had she fallen into trusting Jared? But she did. With her pride, with her needs, with *everything*.

"First, put one hand around my cock. There. Grip tight." His penis felt so strong in her hands. So alive. She squeezed, tentatively, and heard him laugh.

"That's right, Molly. Even harder than that. Don't be afraid. Now. You're gonna slide it down your throat. Take it slow. That hand of yours is gonna help. Nothing goes in faster than you allow with that hand. But, fast or slow, my cock is going in just as deep as it can."

Strong, alive and insistent. She sucked in the first half inch and heard him mutter what sounded like a strangled curse. Feeling bold, she took him deeper, using her tongue to sweep up and down the length of his penis. She traced the vein, the underside of the head. She slid the top of her tongue against him, then the underside, tasting and absorbing.

"Good, Molly. Real good."

She liked the hoarseness in his usually quiet voice. She loved the light shudders shaking his body. But she was afraid to take more.

With her other hand, she traced a pattern against his testicles. She cupped them, so tight and small, drawn up close against his skin. Jared's breath came in and out loudly, as he rocked himself against her hand for a moment. But he didn't push.

"Now. *More.*"

She realized then he wouldn't force her physically. But he was going to have her take him. Just the way he'd said. The force of his will was going to be enough to make her forget her fears. That and the sheer intoxication of knowing she was powerful enough to make him want her.

She was safe. She could do whatever he wanted and be safe.

Molly whimpered, her moans vibrating against his shaft. She felt Jared shudder again, harder. God, she couldn't stand it any longer.

Molly opened her eyes.

Jared's face was intent, almost savage in the murky light of the cab. His hands gripped her shoulders with fierce intensity, his body bowed over her. God, he looked sexy. She slipped another fraction of his cock's length down her throat. A thin trickle of semen eased his way.

"Fuck. Oh, fuck," he muttered.

Jared had been right. Of course he'd been right. She should see him. The sight of him was making her need all the more. Her thighs jerked closer together, restlessly. Damn it, if she'd just opened her eyes like this at the start, he'd have —

He released his grip on her. Pulled that thick cock back. Then, as if he'd heard her thoughts, he thrust his finger up inside her hard, almost as hard as she wanted. Molly jerked her hips, unable to move under his weight. He pressed two fingers into her wet sheath and rotated them. Oh, God. That was too much. Short, sharp intense pleasure snapped through her.

"Jaaa-red, ease—" she stopped. He hadn't done too much. God, his actions were just what she needed. *He* was what she'd needed. His fingers pressed again, knowingly.

Heat cascaded, pulsing shocks of sensation that made it hard to breathe or moan or do anything but let feeling pour through her. As she climaxed, her body, released from its pleased torment, went limp.

Jared's body, his erection still hard against her belly, stayed absolutely still.

"Good girl. You opened up for me," he whispered. Then he pulled away. Bent down and kissed her hair.

The man wasn't superhuman. He couldn't stop then. Could he?

"What—what about you?" Molly was grateful he couldn't see her blush in the dark.

"It doesn't matter about me just now." His voice was almost back to its usual quiet tone, although traces of breathlessness remained. "This was going to be a simple date, remember?"

"Well, I guess it's simple." Molly tried to laugh, tried not to pant. "If you call wanting to go to bed with you simple. I think that was clear as a bell."

He'd been ringing her like a bell just a few minutes ago. That was over. Now he helped straighten out her clothing. They fastened buttons, she smoothed her hair, making herself look as if their desperation had never been.

Molly realized her hands were shaking. Her clothing might be back on, but she didn't feel normal. She still ached. Still wanted Jared. She glanced over at him. How could he act as if nothing was changed?

Then again, maybe he was still affected as strongly as she was. Jared laid his head against the steering wheel for a moment. Molly kept her hands clenched. Would he change his mind and finish? She wouldn't beg, but she wanted him still. Badly.

Very carefully, Jared started the truck up again. "We got a little carried away. I hadn't planned on that. Not tonight anyhow."

Obviously the man had a much stronger will than she did. Molly cleared her throat. "I didn't mean to go that far either. It's too soon and I'm not—I don't—you know, I seem to always be saying that to you and then going ahead and doing what I said I wouldn't."

"I've no problem with that."

"I do." Molly clenched her nails hard into the palms of her hands. This conversation was past due. "You must've heard something about me by now. I doubt you've heard the truth, though."

"No?"

"No. But you will now. First off, Hope isn't Daniel's."

He cleared his throat. "Molly, I breed horses. It seemed real unlikely that Hope was kin to Daniel, at least based on her looks."

Molly stared out into the dark. "Her father's name was Ken. Ken Lanham. I met him at a bar when I realized I was nearing twenty-five and the man I cared about more than anything in the world was never going to care as much about me."

Jared was so quiet. Of course he usually was. Besides, he wasn't going to say anything until she was done. She knew that. And she wasn't done yet.

"Ken's a local rancher's boy, home on leave from the navy. We—it didn't mean anything. We'd been careful, but by the time I realized our careful hadn't been good enough, he was off on tour. I heard he'd gotten engaged just before he left. By then, I'd decided it wasn't worth it to tell him. He didn't want ties to me any more than I did to him." Molly stopped talking. What more was there to say? She could keep on babbling over how lonely she'd been or how scared once she realized she was on her own again. But what difference did it make? She'd made a baby with a man she could have otherwise completely forgotten.

"Daniel took you in."

"I wasn't a stray." Molly's chin went up. "But yes. He couldn't bear for a woman and child to be left without anyone. I suppose it reminded him too much of what happened to Vic. He always felt guilty that he hadn't known about Victor."

"I can see that line of reasoning."

"Can you? And me? What do you think of me?"

"I think it's time to get you home, Molly. Now. Before one of us changes our mind. Or goes out of it."

The truck surged forward. Jared reached out one hand and she hesitantly put hers in it. He gripped her hand tightly. It wasn't enough, but it felt surprisingly good.

"Jared—"

"Yes?"

"When I was younger, I wanted everything laid out neatly for me. After my parents died, I didn't want any surprises. Jen and the rest of my family stepped in, did what they could, but my life was crazy for too long. Everything I knew before had changed. So—so I like control. I like to plan my life out. I planned college and vet school. Nothing much threw me off until Daniel. Then Hope. Now you. I don't know what is going on any more. It's very confusing."

"Is it?"

"But, right now, I don't mind being surprised and—and not in control. Because of you."

"My pleasure, boss. Tonight, when you get into bed, I want you to think of me. Think of me and how we're gonna be together."

"I suppose you want me to touch myself again."

"Couldn't hurt. I'll be picturing that in my head. Do you have a vibrator?"

With just a few words he could throw her from wondering what he thought of her to wondering what he wanted from her. What would he do if she didn't answer?

"Cecilia gave me one for a gift once. She keeps teasing me to—uh—spice up my life." If he asked her if she used it, she *definitely* wouldn't answer. The evening had been exciting but the evening was almost over. It was time to be ordinary Molly again.

"You'll use it tonight. Wear yourself out, honey." He squeezed her hand, just slightly. "Won't be half of what we do together soon. I promise."

She could feel the responsive quiver all the way up from her pussy. Oh. My. God.

"I wonder about your promises. I think you did ease up on me, Mr. Boyd." She intended to give as good as she got. Even though she was beginning to tingle at the idea of Jared imagining... It was almost like a voyeur. Lord. The man could move like a cat. Maybe he would be watching. She'd never know.

She couldn't help licking her lips at the thought.

"You did what I asked tonight. That was as far as I intended to go. I want to leave you a little hungry for next time, honey. Even more ready to accept me."

Now she needed to lick her lips to ease the sudden dryness in her mouth. What did he have planned?

"That's all? I..."

Whatever it was, she wanted it. Craved it. The man had pushed out the old self-doubts she'd confessed to him. The only thing she had room for now was desire.

He tickled her palm. "You want more, baby?"

Her face was hot. Her body was hotter.

His voice grew softer. "All right, Molly. When you get into bed tonight, you're not gonna do anything. Not at first. You understand? You wait until you get my call. Then you'll get more. But not until I say so."

Molly tried to be amused to find her hands were still trembling when she let herself into the ranch house. Jared had conscientiously walked her to the door and then, without so much as a goodnight kiss, left. Her trembling subsided a bit without him. He'd been wise not to touch her again, she realized, even though she missed it.

She let out a sigh, turned, and squeaked at the sight of Victor sitting in the living room, with Poppy curled up at his feet. He reached to turn up the lamp over his head.

"Are things all right, Victor?"

"Hope's fine." Victor's eyes were watchful. "Are things all right with you, Molly?"

"Fine." Molly hoped her dress didn't look as rumpled as it should be, given her activities in the truck.

"I booked a plane for tomorrow morning. I can see things are going fine here now, or as fine as a nearly bankrupt ranch can go. I need to get back to raise some money...and settle things with Cecilia."

"I spoke to her tonight." Molly felt guilty about forgetting to tell him this until now. "She sent her love. Victor —"

"Yes?"

"She seemed worried about something. She said she didn't want to talk about it." Molly frowned a little. Cecilia always liked to talk about things.

"I guess I better find out then."

"Vic —"

"Hmm?"

"Are you angry about me seeing someone else?"

"Molly, my father isn't going to be any less dead because you get on with your life," Victor replied, after a long pause. "He thought of you as an unexpected bonus in his life but, much as I loved him, I know you didn't get much in return. You loved him, you took care of him, you kept him going and as happy as anyone could manage, given the circumstances. Maybe you're due now. But don't jump into anything, Molly. I worry about you. J.B. drifted in here and he could drift out again."

"I know. I'm all right. You take care, Victor. Take care of Cecilia, too."

Once she had the bedroom door safely shut, she sat down abruptly on the bed. She needed to catch her breath.

Was it all right to want someone this much so soon after you lost the man you loved?

She should have called Jen instead of Cecilia tonight. Jen would have known what to say. If Jennifer had been sure Victor was dead, would she have waited so long before loving Jack? Lord. It wasn't wrong, was it, to start to feel alive again?

Molly looked at her dresser drawer. She loved both her sisters. Jen might give good advice, but Cecilia had given her the vibrator. She opened the drawer. Tonight she needed it. Desperately.

Instead of taking the vibrator out, though, she left the drawer open. Forced herself to change into her nightie and get between the sheets. Put her hands out and rested them on top of the blankets. She was crazy. Jared wouldn't call. If he did, Victor might pick up.

He'd got her all hot and bothered and then told her to wait. The man was a tease. He was—

It had been ten minutes already. Time enough for him to get back to the guesthouse. Time enough to dial her number. She turned, punched her pillow. Why was she letting him do this to her?

Because she liked it. Because the waiting was keying her up, making her burn. Her nipples felt too sensitive, tight against her silk nightie. Her pussy was damn near dripping. And she hadn't done anything. Jared hadn't done anything.

He was just making her wait. Oh, God.

Jared walked into the guesthouse and shut the door carefully. He ran his hand through his ruffled hair once and let out a howl. He jerked the tie off his neck and threw it carelessly onto a chair.

Oh Lord, that woman was dynamite. He wasn't sure exactly how he was going to do it, but she'd be in bed with him before long. Preferably tied down

and wanting more. Thank heaven she was giving him every indication she wanted that, too. He might explode if she didn't. He grinned. He would explode if she did. Dynamite. Puuuure dynamite.

He threw himself onto the bed and began to plot the ways to lure her into it. He unbuttoned his pants. His cock, still semi-erect from his evening with Molly, sprang free. He slipped Molly's panties from his back pocket. He knew she'd been so flustered earlier it might take her a while to wonder where they were.

Right where they should be. Sliding silkily against his straining cock. Molly.

He imagined her with a barely there nightie riding up her thighs. She had that vibrator on, was holding it against her wet pussy. He knew it. He could feel it just as clearly as he felt her panties against him.

She was nervous. Wondering about the rest of the household. Wondering about him. But she was horny. Almost as horny and hot for him as he was for her. He cupped his balls, trying to stem the sudden hot surge of come.

Not yet. He wanted to imagine her tongue between her lips, trying to hold her cries back. Thinking about how next time she would take him, how he wouldn't hold back for her, how she'd swallow the jetting streams of—

He let himself moan this time as his fingers tightened around his cock. Not yet. God, not yet.

When the phone finally rang, she almost dropped the receiver in her haste. Lord, what if it wasn't—

"Molly, are you ready?"

"Jared, I can't believe I'm letting you—" She cleared her voice, afraid to speak, embarrassed by its husky yearning.

"You're gonna let me do more. You haven't touched yourself yet, have you?"

"N-no." She let her fingers stray up the sides of her thighs. Stop.

"But you wanted to." The voice caressed her, almost the way his hands and mouth had. She shivered.

"Yes." It was like he was looking at her. Staring at those hard nipples. Watching her fingers strum on her legs, close but not as close as she needed.

"Then lie back, darlin'. You've done what I said, and now you'll get your reward. Spread your legs out."

The cotton sheets suddenly felt cool to her hot body. She spread her legs, staring at the window, imagining him pressed at the other side, telling her how to move, what to do.

"You can touch the outside of your pussy now. Just the outside. With the tips of your fingers."

She sucked in her breath. She was already so wet.

"You're not wearing anything over that pussy, are you?"

"No."

"I like thinking of you playing with those short little curls, combing them through your fingernails. How does it feel?"

"It tickles. It feels—it feels like it's not enough, Jared." She kept the wail from her voice with an effort.

"Then touch yourself." He heard her little gasp, knew she was obeying.

He wanted to think of her hips jerking off the bed, unconfined for now. How she would throw her head from side to side, wildly. Knowing she didn't want that freedom. He knew she wanted to be restrained, forced to not move unless he told her—

She gasped again. He shifted at the sound, his erection growing almost uncomfortable. "Stop."

"Wh—what?" He loved the shock in her voice.

"Stop. Go on out and check on Hope. Make sure she's sleeping good and sound. Then you can come back."

"My Lord, Jared. I don't think I can sit up, much less walk."

"Molly." He heard her shift. Heard a thump as if she was holding onto something to stand. He shut his eyes, let himself breathe deeply. He could see her, fumbling for a robe, forcing her legs to stand. Forcing herself to stop wanting.

He walked with her all the way down the hall, imagined her touching Hope's back, stumbling back to the bed. To the phone. To him. Five minutes. Ten.

"You bastard. Hope's just fine." She sounded breathless when she came back. "But maybe I'm not in the mood now."

"Oh, Molly, you know you're dying for what's next. Tell me how bad you want me. How bad you need me to tell you what to do now."

"I—I...whatever you want, Jared. However you want it."

"That's good, baby. That's right. Now you take out your vibrator. Run it against your thighs first."

Tears were trickling down her face.

"Stop."

She couldn't bear to stop. Not again. How the hell did he know how close she could get before she came? Over and over. Pleasure, pain, pleasure. Aching want. She pulled the vibrator away. She knew he could hear her sobbing, just a little.

"I can't bear it, Jared. I caaan't. No more."

"Aw, baby. Don't. This will be worth it." She gulped, drinking in the comfort of his voice. "This time you're gonna come. It's gonna feel so good you'll be grateful I played with you, just a little. Don't you feel on fire?"

"Yes."

"Then put your fingers on your nipples. Pinch them. Just a little. I know they're sensitive. Make them red." She tweaked the tips, watched the color darken. Twisted the nipples. Pleasure. Pain. Hot and deep. "When you nursed, did you damn near come from having a mouth on you?"

How the hell did he know everything about her body? About her?

"Sometimes."

"Next time I'll suck those pretty nipples of yours. Bite them. You'll come for me."

Molly wet her lips, digging her nails into one palm. "Jared, when I come this time – are you coming with me?"

She could hear the strain in his voice. He had to be hard and ready, too. She wanted him needing her as much as she did him.

"Not this time, honey. This time is yours. Now touch your clit again, baby. Let loose."

He heard her scream, even though she turned, tried to muffle it in her pillow. He grinned, a fierce grimace, when he heard the receiver drop. Then he carefully hung up the phone. He put his head against the wall, took a deep breath.

This wasn't about him. Not about him coming anyhow. This was about self-control. He pushed away from the wall, looked at the clock. He paced, still taking steadying deep breaths. He folded those sheer panties, put them on the table. Made his fingers release them.

He imagined her, totally rumped, her hair tumbled over her face, relaxed in sleep. She'd come hard and noisy—he'd bet she'd be ready to sleep for a week afterward.

Ten minutes. He turned from the clock. He was able to wait. He was in charge here. In charge of Molly now that she knew what he was capable of. In charge of himself.

He could take things a mite further next time. He'd keep it gentle. He preferred mastery without fear. It was trickier. More exciting.

Fifteen minutes. Enough. He gripped his cock, knowing every nerve in his body was screaming for release. Had been for too long. God. He should wait longer.

He couldn't. He was still a man, after all. Molly was the promise of fast, intense sex. Slow, eager submission. Everything he wanted in sex. Everything he liked in a woman. Fantasy and reality. He needed relief from putting her through her paces, making her realize the possibilities. Next time she'd do what he wanted in person. A jumble of Molly images flashed before his eyes—of her begging, sucking, on her knees, legs apart, sweating... Jared pumped steadily, legs apart, riding the hot, hard, intense sensation that burned up from his balls, through his cock, pulsing fiercely.

His come pulsed out, spurting ferociously. *God*, that was good. Almost as good as it would be with her. Waves of pleasure shot through him, slowly, slowly easing. He gripped the table, wondering if his own legs could hold him.

The relief made him grunt. It felt like he hadn't come in months.

He looked down, let out a short bark of laughter. It wasn't enough. His cock was still hard, still wanting Molly's warmth. Jesus, it was going to be a while before he got himself to sleep that night. But that was all right. She'd come too, but he knew she'd still be craving him.

* * * * *

The man smiled as he listened to her CD. She sounded so beautiful. She always did. Her husband wasn't home right now. A woman and her husband should be together, but in this case he just couldn't be angry with her.

He began to write, still smiling.

YOU AREN'T WAITING FOR JUST YOUR HUSBAND. I'M WAITING FOR YOU NOW.

He frowned. She really shouldn't have gotten married. She should have waited for him.

That was all right. She needed guidance. He'd teach her better soon.

* * * * *

A horn blasted him awake the next morning. Considerably less cheerful than he had been last night, Jared took a minute or two to open his eyes. By then a fist was pounding on his door.

"After coming a couple hundred miles to see you, big brother, the least you can do is step to your door!"

Jared staggered to the door and opened it. Since he never slept in anything and hadn't had time to change that condition, he propped himself against the door and waited for comments with his arms folded.

"Trying to scare guests off, man?" Jason asked lightly after taking in his brother's lack of attire.

"I didn't expect you at three-thirty in the morning, bro."

"Thought I'd get an early start and see this damn mare you think so much about." Jason jerked his head toward the stables. "Thought you said she was ready. I didn't want to waste time."

"She is and I don't want to waste any, either. I was gonna get the ranch's stallion off the place this morning before Hellion showed up and either of them got the scent of Desiree." Jared began to pull on his jeans. "A mare in heat and two stallions nearby means nothing but trouble. You just blew my plans to hell."

"Nice to see you, too, Jared Listen, we'll keep Hellion in the trailer until the other one is gone."

Pleasantries over, the two of them briefly gave each other a clap on the shoulder. It suddenly hit Jared how long it had been since he last saw Jace. Three years at least. Funny. Jared felt like he'd aged ten years since then himself, but his brother didn't look any older.

"Looks like you've been keeping yourself all right," Jason told him at the same moment.

The two of them strolled toward the stables, past the ranch house, striding side by side in an easy rhythm they had learned from years of working together as kids. The two of them had been pretty close when they were boys, sticking together as they moved from one military post to another. Jared had almost forgotten how close they had been until now, when they seemed to effortlessly meld together again. Maybe it was just as well he had forgotten. He would've had to miss the guy.

"So what is it like working for this boss of yours?" Jason asked. "Does she leave you in charge or is she calling the shots? Or does she just think she is?"

"Well—" Jared hesitated, when the door to the ranch house opened.

"Jared?" Molly's voice sounded more awake than his, but surprised. "Isn't this a little early?"

He looked at her and stepped forward, almost involuntarily. She was already dressed for the day. She must have gotten some sleep last night. At any rate, she looked fine. "My brother Jason made it in early. Molly Turner, this is Jason Boyd."

"Pleasure to meet you, ma'am," Jason said, promptly. Jared didn't miss the speculation in his eyes.

"Got an emergency call to make?" Jared asked.

"No, I'm seeing Victor off." Molly waved her hand in a vaguely dismissing gesture. "He has an early flight out of Albuquerque. I'm driving him there."

"If you don't mind, boss, I figure we'll set up to breed Desiree and my grandfather's horse today."

"I hope the trip didn't upset him," Molly responded.

"Hellion is always upset. But it would take more than a trip to get Hellion's mind off a mare ready to be bred, ma'am." Jason smiled a little. "He can put on quite a show."

Molly's eyebrows rose as she smiled back. "I've heard a good deal about Hellion. I'll be back in time to help out. It's wise to have a vet around for this."

"I expect we won't be ready until this afternoon anyhow."

She moved back toward the house. "Listen, I'm going to start making coffee. I may not be able to cook, but I know coffee is a necessity around here. You two are welcome to stop in and have some in say, fifteen minutes."

"I'd appreciate that, boss."

Jason looked at his brother after Molly went inside. "A woman who looks like that—if she says she's the boss I figure she is the boss." He whistled admiringly.

"I figure so, too. We can get some of that coffee and Maria should be fixing us breakfast in another hour or so if you can wait to eat. Then you better get some sleep. I can handle the morning on my own."

"I guess I can wait if I don't have to eat your cooking." Jason began to follow Jared. "Let's hustle down to the stables and see what you have set up here. Then we can talk to the boss about it over some coffee."

"We can include her partner, too," Jared said. "That would be Victor Ruiz."

"And he stays up with her?" Jason raised an eyebrow. "You're slipping, old boy. You used to be able to move faster on a woman that looks like that."

"Ruiz is her partner and her brother-in-law. It's a close family. But Ruiz is nothing more than family."

And Jared was damned glad Ruiz was leaving today, family or not.

"Well, let's hurry up and look at the horses." Jason showed he was definitely a member of the Boyd family with that statement. "We don't have much time."

Chapter Six

Molly pulled into the driveway, bracing herself for a tough job. Jared never exaggerated. If he said Hellion lived up to his name, she knew she could expect all sorts of fireworks this afternoon. She hoped Desiree didn't get injured. It was always a possibility.

She could already hear the noise as she headed to the stables. When she got to the corral, she whistled. Jason was using his considerable muscle to rein in a snorting, sweating huge devil of a horse.

"Good Lord!" She looked at the glossy chestnut coat of the stallion. "Is it over already?"

"Hasn't started," Jason grunted. "He's plenty edgy just on a regular day but today Hellion can smell your mare."

There were exactly three adults to handle this and she, for one, didn't have the muscle to hold in the agitated stallion in front of her. "Do you think I should call some of the neighbors to help out?"

"I doubt we can keep Hellion contained much longer." Jason held on just a little tighter. "Don't worry. He just knows what he wants. It should be fine once we get them together."

"I hope so."

She stepped inside the breeding shed and saw Jared talking softly to Desiree. The mare's tail was wrapped, and her hind legs were hobbled to keep her from kicking the stallion. She was also fitted with a protective cover at her neck and shoulders in case the stallion bit her during mating. Desiree wasn't her usual placid self either. She let out a shrill whinny and Hellion responded.

Molly felt her own stomach clench. They both sounded frantic and—and sexual. “How is she holding up?”

“She’s anxious.” Jared patted the mare.

“Hellion makes *me* anxious.”

“I don’t think she’s anxious that way, honey.” Jared grinned at her. “I think she wants to get on with it. Glad you got here in time.”

“I doubt she knows what to expect. Desiree has only been bred once and that was to our Major. There weren’t any shenanigans like this then.”

“I think she’s ready to find out about shenanigans.” Jared sounded a lot more confident than Molly felt. Then again, the man probably had chatted with the mare ahead of time. He certainly acted like he knew the horse’s thoughts.

“Well then—” Molly pushed the door open a little further. “OK, lover-boy, come on in.”

“That’s fine, I’ll be right there. But I’m bringing Hellion, too, boss lady,” Jason called. Molly’s sputter turned into a laugh.

“Quit your jokes, you fool!” J.B. chuckled, despite his words. “Molly, she’ll be all right with you. Come here.”

Hellion entered, with Jason applying as much pressure as he could to keep the stallion from simply charging over to the mare. With a minimum of effort, the stallion mounted Desiree, and Jared ducked in close enough to ensure the stallion’s penis entered the mare correctly. Molly heard Desiree whinny with what seemed to be pleasure and swallowed again as the stallion plunged frantically. Was the mare struggling? She was hobbled. Desiree whinnied again, higher, more desperately.

Fear? Pleasure? Both? Oh, God.

She’d seen this happen many a time on many a ranch, but somehow this particular time was affecting her more. Maybe it was because Hellion was so

eager or maybe it was because she had been so close to doing the same thing with the man helping to control Hellion. Molly watched Jared's sweaty back, his muscles knotting with effort, and she clenched her hands to keep them from shaking too visibly. The sounds of the animals' completion made her want to sit down before she fell.

Molly wet her lips just as Jared swung around, holding onto the sweating, heaving stallion. Their eyes met. She saw the same look in his eyes she knew was in hers. If they hadn't had half a ton of temperamental horse to handle and at least one other human witness, she wondered if they would have immediately done their own reenactment of the scene. She already was aroused enough to fantasize trying.

She wet her lips and saw his eyes flicker down to her mouth for a split second before he jerked his attention back to the stallion. Molly blinked. Was she insane? This was no time to lose concentration.

Instead she helped soothe the trembling Desiree and watched as the men began to cool Hellion down. Surely so much effort must lead to something. Sometimes it took two or three tries. Could her heart take another mating scene like that?

Jason led the stallion off and Jared took Desiree to the corral. Molly couldn't stay and make small talk with the brothers. Not when all she wanted to do was sink into Jared and not surface for hours.

Instead, Molly forced herself to walk away from the stables, back toward the house. She paused. She couldn't go back and face her home either. Lord, she was breathing hard, as if she'd been running. She was aching. Needing.

"Molly?"

Jared stood there behind her, his voice a little huskier than usual. She turned, concentrating on not just throwing herself into his arms. She tried to focus on just his face. But she was aware of his body. Too aware. Oh, *yes*. She wanted to stare

at him, his clothes plastered wet against his chest and legs, to smell his sweat, to taste it on her tongue...

Unable to speak, Molly held out her hand. Without a word, he took it, moving closer to kiss her, hard and deep, his lips forcing hers open, his tongue moving inside her mouth. She whimpered.

He pulled back a little. "I wasn't fooling myself, was I? About what you felt—"

"My God, no." Molly swallowed. "I felt like a voyeur in a porn movie."

"Why don't we be participants instead?" He tried to laugh, but the amusement didn't quite ring true.

"Where can we go?" Molly asked, hopelessly. "Maria and Hope are in the ranch house and your brother—"

"Come on." He almost propelled her off her feet as he half-dragged her down the path.

She remembered saying he waited for others to do what he wanted. He wasn't willing to wait now. She'd pushed him to the end of his patience. Her heartbeat revved. She loved his calm but it was nice—more than nice—to think she could pull out more from him. This time she wanted everything.

She understood what he intended when they reached the tumbledown shed they called the garage. Jared slammed the door to the shed shut with his boot and, two strides later, slid onto the bed of the ranch truck, pulling her up with him.

She couldn't remember when she had felt this desperate for sex. The two of them had been titillating each other too long. She couldn't wait one second more. Molly leaned over, ripped his shirt open. Jared was even more direct. He shoved her jeans and his down in the time it took her to tear the shirt.

His nails bit into on her shoulders. "Molly, how long has it been since you did this?"

"I told you. I mean, not since I conceived Hope. Why? I haven't forgotten."

His laugh sounded a lot like a groan. She watched, with a certain detached fascination, while he struggled for self-control. His chest rose, fell. He moved slightly away from her, letting go his grip on her shoulders.

"Don't tease!" Molly couldn't keep calm. Couldn't even try. If he said no, now, she — she'd rape him.

"Oh, baby, no. Not that. I don't want to hurt you. It's been a while for me but it's been even longer for you." He lay down, pulling her on top of him. "Just this time, you do it, honey. However you want. Take whatever time you need."

She wondered how long his control would have lasted if she had slowed down, but she couldn't wait to test her theory. Now. She needed him now or even sooner. She straddled him, gasping as she felt his cock at the entrance to her wet pussy. Jared's concern made sense suddenly as she tried to force his cock inside. She hadn't expected she would be so tight, but tight didn't matter right now, except as a hindrance to what she wanted. She wiggled, desperate to fit herself onto him, desperate enough to ignore the twinges of pain.

"Gently, darling." His hands reached out, one to steady her and the other to first fondle her clit and then stretch out the folds of her labia.

She moaned and then, fiercely, forced herself down. They both moaned then. Hard, thick — she'd been so empty, waiting for this. He filled her, almost too much, and then — as she writhed again — perfectly.

"So good," she thought she heard him say. "Too good."

There was a roaring in her ears, in her throat, in her body. She slammed herself against him, ignoring his hand, the one trying to slow her and ease himself inside her. He arched up under her. For a minute her whole body seemed to clench and then release. Molly cried out in pleasure and

disappointment. Not yet. Not just one sharp little pang of pleasure. She wanted more. She wanted an orgasm that made her scream with joy, pass out from ecstasy. Molly slid forward a little, sobbing, feeling Jared still tight and hard inside her.

"You're gonna do this again," he said in her ear. "Damn it, more!"

With those words, Molly knew her turn to call the shots was over...not that she'd done all that well at it. She clutched at him to stay there with her, but Jared paid little attention to her silent protest as he slid away. A small tear ran down her face. Without his body inside her, she felt suddenly very alone.

Jared brushed her hair from her face. Molly relaxed slightly, waiting to find out what came next. She didn't understand completely what would happen. All she knew was that he wasn't leaving her. Not now. Not when he kissed her and stroked her back.

"Please." She didn't know what she wanted, but whatever it was, she wanted Jared to do it now. "Please."

Jared spread out a pile of old feed sacks he found in the corner of the truck bed. He turned, his arms cradling her as he placed her on all fours on the sacks.

"That'll be a tad softer for you," he whispered. He pushed her legs further apart with his hands, pushed her head down so her rear was elevated.

"It'll be deeper this way. I want it deeper," Jared muttered. "I want to fuck you as hard as you can handle. You're wet enough now. Wet and ready for me to fuck you the way we both want."

Molly shook with a brief, wild laugh as he slid his fingers against her clit. Jared, the Jared she knew too well, was back in command. He bit her shoulder and all laughter was forgotten. Hellion had done that to Desiree when he mounted her. Molly's need re-surfaced, hurting with the intensity, demanding still more.

Molly bucked like Desiree as Jared took her from behind. God, yes. She imagined herself hobbled as she was being fucked. Jared's breathing was harsh, puffing against her neck. His fingers flicked against her clit, sending a stabbing ache through her. *This* was what she'd wanted. Ruthless possession. Demanding mastery. With that realization, she could feel herself start climbing toward climax with his first rough thrust inside.

"Not yet." He snarled the words into her ear.

Not yet. She wet her lips, forcing herself to wait. Of course. It would be better if she waited. Her small orgasm before had taken away the first pangs of her sexual hunger. She could wait. She tried to concentrate on more than the ache rising inside. She let her senses focus on the man behind her, relishing the feel of Jared pumping into her, with that damned control of his gone. Rough, hard, powerful, he made her whimper with joy each time he slammed inside.

Perfect. Jared was perfect. He was strong, powerful, insatiable. For a wild moment, Molly wondered if they would be forever locked together this way, unable to do anything but fuck. She wouldn't mind, though her heart was hammering viciously. She was ready to fall apart all over again, but she gritted her teeth, fighting the pulls of her oncoming orgasm. Not this time. Not without Jared. It was no good without him. But he had to be near the end. She could feel him shaking as his thrusts grew wilder. Their bodies, slick with sweat, slid against each other. *Oh, please. Oh, please.* She wanted it to last. She couldn't wait, had to wait, couldn't wait—

She wasn't sure if she was disappointed or ecstatic when finally, she felt hot semen pooling inside her and heard his deep groan. She truly did want this to last forever—and she couldn't have endured another second. Pleasure pulled and tortured and overwhelmed her. Molly let her own climax go with a sob.

Jared collapsed on her just as she felt her own arms give way. At the last moment his hands reached under her to soften her fall, but, with his hands under

her, he couldn't seem to roll off. That was fine, too. She loved the weight of him on top. Molly shut her eyes and fell into a shallow doze.

She felt Jared shift from her at last and opened her eyes to see his face close to hers.

"That took maybe—you think fifteen minutes? Twenty at the most," he said, trying to laugh.

"The horses would be proud of us." Molly almost let her eyes shut again until what she said hit her. Oh, my God. They'd had no more thought to consequences than the horses had. "Jared! I didn't have any protection."

Damn Cecilia for being right yet again. Why hadn't she gotten something in Albuquerque? Because she had been so anxious to get back she hadn't even been thinking straight—

His arm held her as she was about to sit up. "Don't move. I can't just yet, but I want more. In a minute."

She struggled. "But Jared, didn't you hear me—"

His arms tightened on her until she couldn't move. "Don't worry about it. It's under control."

Molly wanted to ask or argue, but she also wanted what was beginning to stir above Jared's still half-shoved down jeans. She decided whenever Jared said things were under control, they were.

She reached out and tickled his balls with her fingers instead. "Aren't we a sight?"

She tried to laugh at their half-dressed state, but couldn't. The best Molly could do was finish removing the jeans that hung off one leg and help Jared get his boots and pants off before they started again.

"Are we going to kill each other?" Molly's breath sucked in when Jared's finger gently stroked her.

"I hope so. This would be my number one pick in choice of death. But maybe not right now. I'd like to try a little more first."

Sensitized, she shuddered as he continued, almost idly, to fondle her. She put her hands over his. "I have to ask, Jared. This is too important. Why is everything under control?"

"I can't have children, Molly."

"Are you sure?" She gaped at him.

"I paid a doctor a fair amount of money to make sure."

"But—but why?"

"It was back after that hostage situation went wrong. I knew I was being damn careless about a lot of things in my life then but I didn't want to be careless enough to have a child. I never wanted to be responsible for one of my own. Too many things can go wrong." His face, which had been amused and satiated just a moment before, shut down.

That gets you crazy, doesn't it? That you could fail and hurt a child. Molly's heart ached at the thought.

"I don't have any diseases either. Like I said, there was a time when I was careless, but I was lucky. I don't trust to luck any more and, well, there haven't been many women in the last few months." Jared paused, briefly. "Hell, in the last lot of months. Nothing really caught my eye for a long time until you. I'm about as safe a partner as you can get, honey."

Molly knew she would think hard about what he had said later, but right then all she really wanted was to see other, warmer emotions back on his face. She moved forward and rubbed her fingers against his lower lip, taking the remote look from him. "Then I guess I can just use you for pleasure, huh?"

His slow half-smile returned. "I'd appreciate it. Use me all you want. As much as you want."

She stroked his body. She hadn't had a chance to see it completely naked before. Suddenly she was possessive, wanting to look over her property. She traced the smooth muscles and a jagged scar he had on one arm. There wasn't much hair on his body to conceal either the perfections or the blemishes. The scar was one of the few imperfections she saw.

"Can I ask a question, Jared?"

"Mmm."

"How did you get hurt?" She traced the scar again.

"My stupidity. I jumped a little too slow."

"Jumped on what?"

"A knife."

Her fingers hesitated. His hands took over and began to trace her breasts, playing under her half-opened, torn shirt. "I have a question now, Molly."

"Yes?"

"Where did you get those nightgowns? I know a gentleman shouldn't have looked, much less asked. But I choked when I saw your red one and I damn near died when I helped you put on that black one."

"Oh." Molly began to laugh. "It's sort of a joke between Cecilia and me. We complain about each other's taste in clothes. I—I tend to wear things that are more practical. So she started sending me lingerie for my birthday."

"Tell me your birthday is coming up soon." He rested his mouth against her breasts. "Please. I'll go insane, but I'll be a happy, happy maniac."

"Not for another month or two."

"I'm not sure I can wait that long to try you out in one of those things." He almost sounded serious. "I may have to start giving you lingerie."

"I have a lot more. Cecilia sometimes gives them to me for Christmas, too. And she buys me other things that I'm sort of ashamed to wear. Like garter belts and – and panties – and some special bras –"

"Bless you both. You aren't playing with me, are you? It wouldn't be fair if you were lying to me." He moved against her, slowly. His words were teasing, but the look on his face made the words seem much more serious.

"Jaaar – ed!"

"You're sexy anyhow. I love your breasts and your legs and your ass. But those nighties make them look real extra special. Last time I saw you in them I couldn't touch and it was torture. Tell you what, I'll forgive you after I come, balls-deep, in your mouth, with one of those nighties pulled up to your waist." He whispered the last sentence, low and coaxingly to her, his words tickling her ears.

She shivered at the touch and the words themselves. How did he know how much she wanted him to do just that?

"Jaaar – ed!"

Jared knew it would be too much to hope that his brother wouldn't see him come back. They had managed to tidy Molly up some, since neither of them liked the idea of having Maria knowing precisely what had been going on for a good bit of the afternoon. But there wasn't much that could be done with his ripped shirt. Jared finally decided to leave it on, since there were nail and bite marks on his back and chest. There wasn't much he could do about covering the bite on his neck, either.

He'd liked the look on Molly's face when she came to and realized how she had clawed and bit at him. He'd liked the look on her face when she had done the clawing and biting, too. He'd taken a good long time before he let her come.

Jason looked up as Jared walked in the door. Jared waited while his baby brother looked him up and down. He realized Jason was getting some good practice in for when his children turned teenagers. Jason appeared to be a natural at withering looks. Jared had to resist the urge to shuffle his feet.

"Jesus, Jared, I haven't seen you drag yourself in looking like that since high school graduation night." Jason snorted. "Who was that girl back then? Dorothy Ann, wasn't it? She gave you a real workout that night, but you aren't getting any younger. A man could have a heart attack at your age, trying to act like a teenage —"

"Shut up, will you, Jace?" Jared said, almost pleasantly. "I don't need any smart remarks. Understand?"

"Understood."

Jason shut up. He might tower over his brother by about six inches, but the last time Jason remembered Jared directing a look like that at anyone his older brother had taken a board to the fellow and it had taken about two men to get Jared off. And that was when Jared had been about sixteen and the other man was full grown.

Jared placed his body against the wall and shut his eyes. He was proud of his legs for getting him here without falling, but right now all he wanted to do was to sink down onto the floor. For the first time since he'd seen Molly, he felt tired but peaceful. Sated.

"She's a fine-looking woman," Jason ventured. "Smart, too. But she has a kid and a ranch to run. Looks like a situation that calls for serious thought if you're going to get into it."

"Never been more serious in my life, Jace. But this has just started — Oh, hell, this is the first time I've been with her, bro. It's a little early to know how it's gonna end up."

Jason smiled. "And I get to stay here with you all night. I always had good timing."

"You always had lousy timing," his older brother retorted. "However, Molly has invited me up to the house this evening. I just stopped by to change and get a shower."

Jason knew better than to say anything, but he could hardly wait to get Jared out the door so he could call his wife. He'd let Laura break the news to Hamilton that his oldest grandson most likely wouldn't be willing to come back to West Texas as a trainer any time soon.

Jason smiled as his brother headed for the bathroom, still looking a little like he had been dropped on the head. He didn't recall ever seeing his brother look quite that dazed—or have quite as big a grin on his face. He suspected this might be a permanent move on Jared's part, whether his older brother knew it yet or not. Damn. Laura might even have to let his sisters know, so they could start thinking about wedding plans.

Chapter Seven

Molly smiled at the man standing at the front door, his hair still wet and slicked back from his shower. He had cleaned up—she sniffed at the aftershave that faintly clung to him—shaved and changed clothes. Once again he had cleaned up very nicely.

She had showered and changed, too. Parts of her body were still throbbing—only some from faint bruises she had gotten during their lovemaking bout on the truck bed. The other parts were hurting because they wanted to continue making love.

Silently Jared handed her some wildflowers and she deliberately let her hand linger as she took them. He smiled at her—not leeringly, as he might have done, not even triumphantly, but very gently.

“May I come in?” he asked, formally.

She realized she was blocking the front doorway, just looking at him, and hastily stepped back. “Please do. Hope and I are waiting for you. Supper’s almost ready.”

He sniffed. “Something smells good.” When she would have stepped aside, he suddenly turned and kissed her thoroughly, rubbing himself against her. “You smell good, too.”

She opened her mouth and felt herself trembling, just a little, as he prolonged the kiss, licking her bruised lips.

“I was too rough, wasn’t I?” he murmured. “I tried not to be but—baby, you can make me forget to be careful.”

Not really. Just enough. Aloud, she said, “You were just right. I bruise easily.”

"I'll try to remember that." Jared frowned as he pulled away. "Let's see how much of a gentleman I can be tonight. I don't want to cause any more bruises."

"It was worth it."

"Mmm, don't say that. Not tonight," Jared warned. "We're gonna do this right. I'm not gonna lose control. No more bruises. I'll be nothing but smooth and very, very gentle. Got it?"

"Yes, sir. You call the shots as always." Molly led him into the dining room where Hope sat in her high chair, waving a spoon.

Poppy stiffly made her way to him with the dog's usual welcome—a mix of fierce barking and cheerful wagging.

"That is one useless dog," Jared remarked as he knelt to scratch behind Poppy's ears.

"Poppy doesn't need to be a cow dog. I got her just to love." She almost laughed at the doubtful look on Jared's face. Poppy was a mix of hound and terrier and who knew what. She was a comical-looking dog, but very much loved in spite of her looks.

"I didn't say you couldn't love her." Jared's face got a swipe of the excited dog's tongue. "Just said she was useless."

"I rescued Poppy from the side of the road a few months after my parents were killed. She had been in a car accident too. I couldn't do anything about Mom and Dad, but I was able to save Poppy. It made me feel better."

"Then I guess she has some use." Jared's tone was dry, but he gave Poppy one last, gentle pat before he stood up.

"Do you want to have some coffee while I serve the food?"

"I'd kill for some coffee right now. For some reason I feel a little tired."

They smiled at each other. He tilted up the coffee mug she brought him and drained it rapidly.

"I made it myself. Like I told you before, I can't cook but I can make a mean cup of coffee."

"You make good coffee and great love." Jared smiled just a little. "I can live without the rest. You've got the top two qualities a woman needs."

Molly laughed and moved hastily into the kitchen. Maria had done a wonderful job with the chicken and rice tonight. Or maybe there were other reasons Molly was hungry. Dinner was surprisingly comfortable, although it passed in a blur for her. Before she could blink the meal was over.

Jared got up and began clearing the dishes.

"And you call yourself a cowboy?" Molly teased. "That's women's work where you come from, isn't it?"

"Well, it's work I know needs to get done." Jared stacked the dishes carefully. "I figure you can get Hope ready for bed, I can finish this up and then we'll have that much more of the evening to be together. That is, if you want. I swear I'm not trying to call the shots this evening. Not right now, anyhow."

"I guess you're a smart cowboy." Molly blew him a kiss as she picked Hope up out of her high chair.

"I'm not a cowboy at all." Jared drawled his voice out a little more than usual. "I work with horses."

Hope thought that blowing kisses was funny and she, too, insisted on sending some toward Jared as Molly hauled her away. She also objected a bit to being separated from Jared, even though he had never been there for dinner before—or perhaps because he was a novelty. Molly finally got her changed and soothed and put into her crib. As Hope blinked drowsily at her nightlight, Molly smoothed her hair down and walked back into the living room.

"Nice night." Jared turned from his contemplation of the window. Pulled close the drapes. "It's starting to look like better and better all the time."

"I'm just praying I don't get an emergency call tonight." Molly walked into his arms.

"I have a big emergency I hope you'll take care of before the night is over." Jared nuzzled his face against her hair.

"Yes, Mr. Slick. Now that was very smooth."

He covered her mouth to start his long, sweet, delightful kisses. Molly dimly remembered that was how he had started out before on their first and only date. Then she couldn't remember anything except how the last kiss had felt and how she wanted more.

She heard him swallow and then gently move away from her. She wanted to follow him and continue, but she forced herself to stay still.

"Molly, I need to talk to you," he said, finally.

"Yes?"

"I—I figure this isn't a one-sided thing but I need you to know that—uh—I'm getting the feeling that what we're heading for is something serious." He certainly sounded serious enough. "I can't seem to keep away from you. I don't think I want to, even if I could. Still and all, this isn't something you should drift into without thinking. It's different for me. I've got nobody to worry about except myself and I know you aren't out to hurt me. I'm not out to hurt you either but—uh—damn, I don't know how to put this."

He took a step or two back and put his thumbs in his pockets, just the way he had before when they were on the porch. It seemed like years ago.

Molly took a deep breath. She wondered just what Jared thought he could tell her that would make her change her mind about him.

"I love making love to you, Molly. But there are all kinds of ways I want to fuck you. I promised you gentle tonight. Can I show you...different ways? It can still be gentle. I swear."

"Like what?"

"Are you ready for more, darling?" He played with the buttons on her shirt, almost but not quite unbuttoning her. "Remember what I told you earlier. The only thing you have to do is tell me when you don't want more."

Don't want more? He was a master at making her yearn for more, promising her release, then withholding his promise...until she was dying to do whatever he wanted.

He reached behind and pulled something out of his back pocket. Scarves. Molly thought for a minute or two, until she realized what he meant. Her eyes widened.

"Well, Molly?"

"You think that will make me take off and never come back?" Molly stared at the pieces of cloth. Should it?

He brushed one scarf against her wrist, his face unsmiling. "Thought it might. Hope it won't."

"No. No, it doesn't scare me. I want to go on."

"That's your choice?"

"If it's yours."

"Then—" He didn't smile. He didn't say anything more. He just pulled her forward and held her tightly for a long while. Then she turned her face toward him and he kissed her.

That was good, but not quite good enough. She tilted her chin up and he kissed the pulse points at her neck. She slid her hands up to frame his face and then kissed him. She laid her cheek against his and sighed.

She wasn't in the sexual frenzy she had felt before. He felt more comforting than anything else. That was nice, too.

Then his fingers began to trace a line from her neck, then down between her breasts. Her breath caught, just a little. Now his touch wasn't so comforting and reassuring. Jared finally unbuttoned her shirt and slipped his hand inside. He toyed with the tops of her breasts and the edge of her bra cups.

"Black lace," he muttered. "I like it."

"I wore it for you." Molly tried to laugh.

"I appreciate it. How about you unwear it for me, too?" His fingers flicked the clasp open and then stroked inside, just grazing the nipples.

She forced the air in and out, and her hands suddenly dug into his shoulders to steady herself. It looked like she was going to be expertly seduced yet again. It felt wonderful. It felt right.

It was a slow, tender seduction. Jared never hurried but he never completely stopped, either. He gently removed their clothing and just as gently covered her with himself.

She reached for him and they kissed. In fact, they couldn't seem to stop kissing, exploring each other's tongue and mouth, warm and comfortable against each other.

"Are you ready for what's next, Molly?"

"Whatever's next, Jared." He was going to be gentle. He was going to protect her. He was going to make her scream and die with want. She knew all that. However he wanted to go about it would be fine. She was sure of it. Sure of him.

He picked her up, just like in a romance novel, and walked to the bedroom.

Had he ever seen a prettier woman? One with lips that were full and pouting from his kisses? With taut, pink nipples that demanded his touch? Who made

little gasping breaths that pleaded with him to keep going, to overwhelm her? Jared slid his finger, lingeringly, under the scarves that bound her wrists.

Her legs were spread apart, trussed up so temptingly. He let his hand slide over her thigh, teasing the little curls of her pubic hair. Moist. Mmm. She was already wet. The tight little sob in her throat tempted him to end things there. His erection was already full and beating out demands from his cock all the way to the base of his skull.

But he wanted to savor this. Molly, his own personal dessert. Luscious, delightful, wanting Molly. His. Anything he wanted. She was there, helpless but ready. Unafraid and submissive. Needing him.

"Can—can I take you in my mouth?" Her husky whisper almost made him come right then. Jared clawed back the fiery hot desire that almost overwhelmed him with her question. He was master here—master of himself as well as Molly.

"You disobeyed me last time. You're gonna have to earn that right."

She smiled a little. Parted her lips. Wet them with the tip of her tongue. "Please. Let me earn it."

God. His groin tightened. He thought he could feel his blood pressure spike.

"We'll see. I might bind your mouth tonight, too. If I think that's right." He wondered if either of them would be able to get through the long night he had planned. He could barely wait to find out.

He didn't have to wait. Jared bent his head and began to trace a path across Molly's outstretched thighs, toward her pussy. Her cry made him stop, even while he could feel sweat begin to trickle down his back.

"Jared!"

He loved hearing her voice, aroused, calling for him. He wanted to hear her say it over and over again. She squirmed below him. He started again, even slower, inching his way up her leg, lapping and nipping at her pretty white skin.

Teasing at her labia with his teeth and tongue. Molly squirmed again, whimpering a little.

“You’re killing me... Jared...”

He wanted her to die with pleasure like this. Over and over. Moaning and whimpering and gushing out cream. He wanted her to know he could do this to her as often as they could both stand it. His tongue plunged hard, hot, into the center of her, scraping a little against her swollen little clit. She screamed then.

Jared turned his head, lazily, let his cheek rest against her mons, feeling his heart beating hard in his chest. “God, baby. I can’t bind your mouth. I like hearing you too much.”

“Jared, more. You said I could always have more. Please, Jared. Fuck me.”

He frowned. “You’re sore, Molly. I know you are.”

“Not too sore. I swear.”

“I told you no bruises. Going down on you won’t hurt.”

“Right now I want to hurt. I want to feel everything. I want you, Jared. I love this, but I want more.”

“Well, hell, I did promise, didn’t I? Hmmm. No bruises, but more. And maybe just a little hurt. Only a little. If you do exactly what I tell you.” He grinned. Damn. He hadn’t planned on doing this quite so soon, but if she wanted more, he could give her more. “I have just the thing for tonight. I’m gonna turn you over, Molly. Relax for now but do what I say.”

She trembled underneath his hands as she nodded and he felt his cock jump in response.

“Now. Bear down.”

She couldn’t. When she’d begged Jared, she hadn’t meant —

"I'm afraid—" she whimpered, no longer sure if she was whimpering with need or fear.

"Would I hurt you, Molly?"

"No." Of course he wouldn't.

"Bear down." The pressure in her anus increased. Molly felt Jared's cock, slick and hard, burning against her hole.

For an instant she pushed against her restraints, suddenly needing to be free. She'd gotten over the first, panicked need to pull herself free when he'd bound her. The fear rebounded back now, worse than before. She'd escape, she'd—The cock head entered virgin territory and she shivered.

This was different. The fear receded yet again as new emotions began to flood her body, as slick desire began to fill her. Jared pushed, she could feel herself resist for a moment, and then he slid further inside. This was...exciting. Jared was claiming her, somewhere no one else had. She wouldn't have let anyone else close.

His hand touched her clitoris and she jumped. She was burning...a good burn now. A warmth that sped through her from back to front. Small fires spread throughout her body.

"Next time we do this, I want you to use your vibrator," he whispered against her neck. "And mirrors. I want you to see how good you look."

Molly shuddered. He began a slow, controlled slide out again.

"Yes," she whispered back. "Whatever you say."

He knew. He knew everything. He knew what her body wanted even when her mind said no. He knew how to make all her nerves jump with excitement. Molly stared at her wrists, still bound and restrained against the bedposts. Two weeks ago...even two hours ago...she would never had dreamed she wanted

this. Maybe in her darkest fantasies, her half-forgotten dreams, she'd wanted this, but never awake, with lights on, in her own living room.

Jared's cock slid back in further, deeper inside her. His fingers pulled more firmly at her clitoris, slid up higher inside her wet channel. Molly choked, her ability to scream lost in the sensation of rough power.

He could bind her mouth. Her eyes. He could make her use her vibrator and come for his own watching eyes until she couldn't walk. Anything. Anything he wanted.

"Let go, Molly." He knew. He knew.

Right now, anything he wanted, she'd have to give. She imagined him keeping her bound for hours...telling her he'd leave her that way for others to see...fucking her in front of someone for real...

"Molly—" his voice was dangerous, commanding. His cock, hot and swollen, slid in and out again. Her whole body throbbed. "I told you. *Come!*"

For just a moment she tried to disobey, tried to hold on to the edgy, overwhelming need he'd given her. He pinched her nipple, just hard enough to give her a hot shock of delight.

"Oh, *God!*" She let go. Again. For Jared. For herself. Her climax was fierce, and simply inevitable, rolling through her even as his cock pushed once, twice, three times more. She kept on, through his own shuddering orgasm, letting herself feel every last nuance of rough pleasure he'd given.

"You...see?" he panted in her ear. "You just...need to do what I say."

"I see." She mouthed the words, more than said them. God, did she see.

She curled up against Jared in front of the small fireplace in her bedroom. They hadn't been able to move from the room, but that was still good. It was all good.

"I feel sort of—reborn." Molly buried her face into Jared's chest. She wasn't quite sure she'd wanted to be untied, though touching him was nice. Very nice. She was still dazed, drugged with sex. Pleased with sex. All she'd had to do was orgasm. Jared had done everything else, from making her scream to cleaning them up afterward. "Does that sound stupid?"

"No. I feel a little bit like I've managed redemption myself." Jared sounded as serious as she did. "Since I was raised by a God-fearing Baptist mama, I hope I'm right."

"I like this." Molly stretched, lazily. "I like you. It's good being with you and it feels like we have all the time in the world to get to know each other. That feels good, too."

"Yeah. This is different than anything I've ever—this is different, Molly." Jared reached out to touch her lips and trace them. "I want to take my time with you and see everything gets done the way it should."

"You're doing okay so far, mister."

"I'll try to work my way up to doing a little better than that," he said, a little too humbly to be believed, and then he bent down to use his mouth on her body again.

* * * * *

"Hello, Jason." Molly tried to tuck back her smile when she saw him.

He had a big smile, though. Jared's tended to be a half-smile or looked as if he was laughing at his own joke. Jason's was always broad and genuine. He made a person want to smile, too.

"Hello, boss lady. Come to visit?"

"Sort of." Molly hesitated.

Jared obviously wasn't here. Jason was busily packing.

"Thought you might want to see old Jared." Jason sounded impossibly innocent. "He doesn't stay around here much right now."

"I know." They both smiled again.

"He seems real pleased about that, too." Jason was a touch more serious now. "It's good to see him looking happy."

"You two are good brothers," Molly responded just as seriously. "Closer than I thought possible. Jared doesn't usually get too close, does he?"

"Jared learned that if you get too close, you're liable to get a punch to the head. That's one real good reason why I stick with him. He was the oldest and he took a fair amount of punches for me when we were kids."

"He told me a little bit about his family." Molly was cautious. "Mostly about you and his grandfather."

"Our father was mean. Naw. Honey, mean doesn't cover it." Jason snorted once but he wasn't amused. "Folks from West Texas are used to mean. My old man went from mean to evil. That was why my mama shipped us off to visit my grandfather every vacation whenever she could. When we were at school we were out of harm's way, mostly. She didn't want us with my father any longer than we had to be."

"He *abused* you?"

"I don't think he hit my mama. She was tough and he loved her. He wasn't as bad when she was watching him. He saw us kids as pure nuisances, though. When she wasn't around, there was plenty of hell to pay. Jared had the hardest time because he was the first-born and we all got to depend on him for things. He felt like he had to take on the old man, even when there was no way he could win. I guess he felt like it was him or no one to protect us. Most of the time he was right."

"Your father would —"

"Daddy started with a belt buckle and, as he got older and drank more, he'd end with fists or whatever came to hand." Jason was matter-of-fact. "The girls stayed out of his way when they could. I tried to and I was close to man-sized by the time he got really bad. But Jared would feel like he had to step in. He was about a head shorter than the old man, even when he was full-grown. My father used to taunt him about being a runt. Didn't seem like a fair match most of the time except that Jared was smarter and quicker and sober."

Molly swallowed.

"Mama took us away when things got too bad," Jason went on. "When Dad finally came back to live with us, he was pretty much broken down. He died not soon after. No loss there. Jared had long since taken off and I'd just gotten married. The old man didn't mean anything more to us by then."

"I'm sorry."

"He meant plenty to us when we were younger. Plenty of trouble. Jared learned to keep cool and do what he needed to do really early. If he lost his temper or got scared, Dad had the upper hand. You never wanted the old man to get the upper hand."

"I see."

"I hope so." Jason looked hard at her. "I don't expect that is something Jared would tell you—at least not right off. In fact, you might have to wait a decade or two for him to tell you how he got his arm broken twice in a month. But I can tell you mean something to him and I figured maybe you ought to know. Jared's a good man. He was a good man by the time he was twelve—hell, maybe before then. But he isn't an easy man. He's loyal to his family and those he calls friends. He doesn't care much about anyone or anything else unless you count the horses. He cares about you, so I figure you must be something special."

"I don't know if I am." Molly was as direct as Jason. "But I know he is."

"That's all right then." Jason's smile flashed out again. "I'll be gone soon, but it's been a real pleasure and privilege to meet you, boss lady."

"Likewise, Jace."

"By the way, if it ever should come up, I never said a thing to you about anything. I don't want my big brother after me."

"Not a word," Molly agreed.

She hesitated and then gave him a hug. He stiffened in surprise for a half second—maybe there was more than one Boyd who wasn't used to being close—before he hugged her back and ruffled her already ruffled hair.

"I expect we'll see each other again," he said, cheerfully, and went back to his packing.

Chapter Eight

"Don't know how I managed to get elected both babysitter and dogsitter," Jared growled to the wide-eyed Hope and half-asleep Poppy. "Someone is supposed to be working this ranch, you know. I realize that a birthday is an important event in a young lady's life, but on a ranch there are still chores to be done."

The dog wagged its tail half-heartedly. Hope murmured something that sounded like words but made no sense. Jared ran his hand through the girl's baby-fine hair and smiled.

"Just kidding, baby girl. Well, shall we take a look at the stables? We've got the place full up now. Desiree's gonna have a new baby in a year. Maybe on your birthday, sweet thing, if she's a little late. Her mama and daddy are a good mix, I know it. With any luck we'll combine the best of the two temperaments and have a spirited young horse that might listen to reason now and then."

He perched the little girl on one of the feeding troughs as he began to scoop grain out.

"Think that foal will take after its mama or its dad, little girl?" he asked.

Hope hesitated and then said, distinctly, "Dad."

Jared blinked. Molly had said Hope was saying a few words but he hadn't heard any before. Hope probably didn't know what the word meant. The child looked at him and stretched out her arms. "Dad."

He hesitated, reached out for her, too. She put her arms around him and giggled.

"Dad."

He'd spent a long time running from any kid saying that to him. He thought he had taken care of the problem years ago. But when this one said it to him, he had a sudden curious desire to cry.

"Baby girl, I'm not your dad, but I guess I'm the closest thing you've got right now." His voice was soft.

He thought about her calling someone else Dad and scowled. He'd been going slow and careful with Molly—trying to, anyhow. He had gone up to the ranch house every night after dinner to talk business and managed to stay every night. Jared figured he might just ease his way from Molly's bed into something a little more permanent in a while, once she got used to the idea. Maybe he needed to get used to the idea, too.

"Shit," he said. "Sorry, little girl. Didn't mean to say that. But I don't know what I'm thinking of. Your mama would be crazy to take me on, you know that? What she ought to tell me is I'm good enough for a tumble now and then, but she doesn't need some alcoholic drifter for a husband or for a—well, for anything. Someone ought to be taking a shotgun and ordering me off the place. Hell, I'd do it if someone like me had showed up and started sniffing around your mama."

Where the hell was Kevin to beat some sense into his head?

In response, Hope squeezed her arms around his neck tight enough to choke him. Aw, hell. Jared patted Hope's shoulder as he gently moved her arms away from his windpipe. This wasn't just about him. It was about Molly and Hope. "Aw, *shit*. Sorry, baby. Damn. No, that's not what I meant to say, either. Honey, stop loving me. You're making me...sentimental."

Molly put yet another paper streamer up in the dining room. Streamers and balloons would be enough for Hope. It was Hope's mother who wanted more—more presents, more excitement. She wanted to celebrate joy after much sorrow.

"Maria, can you believe my baby is this old?"

Molly gestured to the mound of presents the family had sent to Hope for her first birthday. The little girl would probably be more interested in playing with the big boxes than anything else.

"It has been a long year," the older woman said. "I hope that next year will be better."

"It can't be much worse," Molly sighed. "But things are looking up around here."

Jared had a lot to do with her outlook, Molly knew. They'd become lovers — not for very long, but long enough for her to feel comfort as well as excitement when he was nearby. She wished he was around for breakfast. She enjoyed seeing him smile at her without words when they woke up together. Sometimes they managed some quick morning sex, sometimes not. It didn't matter which happened, she hated when he pushed himself out of bed to take off before anyone else could see them.

She felt like part of a couple, a real couple, for the first time in her life. She wished everyone knew it. She wanted Jared to show her off, to claim her publicly. She knew it was a little early, maybe way too early, but she felt settled. Secure. Well, almost.

Jared wouldn't leave now, would he?

She thought back to a conversation they'd had a few nights ago. Maria had left. Jared was reading the newspaper on the couch, half an eye on the little girl, when Molly had come back in from the emergency call she had received after dinner.

She dropped on the couch next to Jared and curled against him. His arm came out, both steadying and comforting.

"Things not go so well?" he said.

"I had to put Luther's horse down. He was in agony. Why they let it go so long before calling me —"

She stopped and sighed. There was nothing she could do about that now. Instead she burrowed closer against Jared and listened to Hope making her sweet baby sounds on the rug. It felt good. It felt right. Jared began to massage the tense muscles of her back. His horses must be grateful after their workouts, she thought, drowsily. He gave wonderful rubdowns.

She was more surprised than Jared by what came out of her mouth next.

"It just kills me to think you won't have a child of your own, Jared."

He looked at her for a moment. His hands slipped off of her back. One arm stayed around her, but she could feel him retreating.

"That doesn't have to be any concern of yours." His voice was very calm but very definite. "You can have as many children as you want. With someone else."

"I have a child. Another one or two would be nice, but I already accepted Hope would be an only child. Endometriosis runs in our family, and that causes infertility. But I was talking about you. You'd be a wonderful father."

"I'm not sure about that." Jared looked down. "The idea scares the hell out of me. I'm not talking about your baby. Seeing as there is a child already in the picture here and she's yours..."

"I'm glad you care about her because she needs as much love as she can get."

"You don't have to worry that I don't care about her."

She captured Daniel's heart and now yours. Hope has a knack I don't.

"Next to you, she's the most important thing on this place. I'm not promising, and I'm not asking, but she's got me thinking about whether I would mind being her father."

Molly settled her head against his chest. She'd love to just savor the possibilities in his words. But apparently her mouth wasn't done yet.

"Jared, you're only the second man in my life." She was honest. "You know, only the second one I've ever made love with."

There. Now he knew what the rest of the county didn't.

"How do I stack up?" Jared asked, calmly. "If there have only been two, a man has to know he is gonna get compared."

"Compared to Ken? Oh, please! I can barely remember him."

"How about the only man you ever loved? How do I compare to him?"

Daniel. Oh, Daniel.

"I can't compare you." Molly dismissed the idea. "I mean, you both worked with horses and you both have wonderfully strong hands but—Daniel was gentle. I've heard stories about what his temper was like when he was younger but I wasn't there. As far as I know Daniel couldn't hurt anyone. Unless you count himself."

Molly thought about the endless smoking but, even more, the guilt he'd felt from not being able to give her what she wanted, yet not being able to turn her away. Maybe she had given him more hurt than pleasure.

"I've been gentle."

"I know. But you—you're gentle but you're not. It's—it's exciting. You're exciting. I never know what you'll want to do to me next."

His hand moved under her shirt and briefly touched her nipple. Both of them knew Hope was there and the touch was discreet, but Molly let a sigh out.

"Yes, like that."

"You know I'm not always gentle," Jared said, very quietly, in her ear. "Maybe, like Daniel, after twenty more years or so I'll have worked out all the hurt I want to deal others. But I swear I never want to hurt you. And I swear I do want you. When Hope goes to bed, I'll be happy to show you."

No, he wouldn't leave after that. She was almost sure.

As if her thoughts about Jared made him appear, the door opened.

"Here is the birthday girl." Jared walked in with Hope clinging to him. "I took her down to see the horses."

"Where else?" Molly said. "You'll get that girl horse-crazy before she can even talk."

"Nothing wrong with that." Jared sniffed. "Is that chocolate cake?"

Molly pulled Hope into her arms and, for the briefest of moments, allowed herself to stroke Jared's shoulder as she did it. He smiled at her. He knew she'd done it on purpose.

Hope saw the candle on the cake and let out a happy yell. Jared hastily tightened his grip on the little girl he had been transferring over before Hope lurched forward into the cake. "Hey, whoa! You're supposed to eat that cake, sugar, not jump into it. It works better that way."

Molly leaned forward to give her daughter a kiss as Jared held Hope steadily and securely.

"Happy birthday, sweetie," Molly murmured.

Molly liked the idea of all three of them being here together to celebrate Hope's birthday. She liked that both Hope and Jared were smiling at her. She liked that the three of them were holding each other. She just liked everything about what was going on between all three of them today.

* * * * *

As he stopped the rental car, he smiled to himself. He'd sent his last letter to her. This next time she would have to come to him. He knew just how it was going to be done.

He cut across Esperanza land. It was a big place—bigger than he'd thought it would be when he had started looking it over. That was fine. It made it all the easier to hide. His tent was in the car. He wasn't going to check into some motel in this backwater place. He wasn't stupid. People would find out for sure.

He felt inside his denim jacket. His fingers curled around the revolver. Yeah, he was ready to rock now. He'd done his research. He knew all about her family and where they were.

New Mexico was far away but that was all right. She'd come to him now, even if it was far away. She'd come to him.

* * * * *

"Happy end of birthday." Molly put Hope in for her nap. "Turning one just tired you out, didn't it?"

Hope, her face red from the exhausted crying she had done by the end of the party, sniffled and then curled up to sleep.

"I kept her up past her naptime, that's why she fussed so much." Molly turned to Jared, who stood at the doorway. "She didn't even want to try the cake."

"Don't worry about it. I know babies fuss. Mostly she's a real good kid. Molly – can we talk outside for a minute? I don't want to wake her up and I don't want to wait to ask you this."

"Why, sure."

He looked at Hope's bedroom wall and saw the photograph hanging there.

"You put the picture of Daniel up here," he said.

Molly nodded. She knew that she didn't want it in her bedroom any more, not when Jared was there. She couldn't hide it or store it away, though. Daniel was too important. "He loved her."

"Hope will appreciate that when she gets bigger." He put his arm on her shoulder to lead her out.

"Maria, I'll be back in just a minute if the Alvarezes call about that calf," Molly sang out to the woman cleaning up in the kitchen.

Jared's arm kept up a steady pressure to keep her moving. He opened the door and let her go first. She stepped out to the front porch and looked at her lover questioningly.

He stepped in through the half-open window of the bedroom. Sometimes people just made it too easy. Of course they weren't expecting him. He stifled a chuckle. He couldn't laugh just now. He could hear the old woman in the kitchen and had spied the younger woman and her cowboy on the front porch, talking.

He looked at the little girl, sleeping in the crib. So easy. He scooped the kid up, ready to put his hand over mouth, but she was so out she didn't even stir. He didn't even have to put her under. He'd do it later, then, when he needed to.

He carefully smoothed the note on the blanket.

Holding the kid against his shoulder to muffle any sound in case she did let out a scream, he ducked back out again and began to circle his way back to his newly discovered hiding spot. Now all he had to do was wait. He could do that. He'd been waiting for a long time now. Finally, though, he knew the time to wait was just about over.

"Molly, I had a little talk with your girl down by the corral." Jared finally took his hand from her shoulder.

"Did you?" Molly smiled at him as he covered her hands with his. She liked his touch. He must like touching her, too, since he did it so much.

In the distance she could hear Poppy barking hysterically then abruptly stop.

"Yeah. We came to some conclusions."

"I bet you two did."

"Hush. Let me get this out. I didn't mean to talk about this so soon and I haven't really worked on how to say it to you just the way I ought, but all of a

sudden it hit me that it was right—we were right—and waiting wasn't gonna do anything to change that. While we wait, we're all missing out."

"I'm not following you." Molly felt her stomach clench anyhow.

"That's because I'm not leading very well." Jared was about as ruffled as Molly had ever seen him outside of bed. No, including in bed. "Listen, I don't have the fancy ring or the right romantic surroundings here, but I don't know as you need that. Molly, I want to marry you."

"Oh."

Molly abruptly sat down on the porch bench, her hands dropping away from his.

"Listen, I've never done this before and I don't want to do it again." He scowled and pushed his hair back from his eyes. "We're good together, like I said. I think you make me about the best I'll ever be. I promise I'll be there for you and for your little girl and—and I'll love you and Hope for the rest of my life."

"I don't know what to say." She didn't. Molly could feel her heart thudding hard and didn't know if she was delighted, stunned, or afraid. She'd imagined this but reality...reality was terrifying. To yearn for something again, to believe she might actually get what she yearned for—did she want to go through that all over again?

"You could say yes or you could say no. I'd understand about the no." Jared scowled even more. "I know you could do better. I'm thirty-one years old, I've gone through about three careers now and a lot of money and booze. I've changed, but I can understand if you aren't sure I've changed. Maybe other men can do more for you, make your life easier. All I can say is no other man could love you more or try harder for you."

He looked at her and waited. Molly bit her lip. She knew he would keep waiting until she answered. He was good at waiting until he got what he wanted. Maybe it was what she wanted, too.

“Jared –”

Maria screamed.

Molly leaped off the bench as abruptly as she had sunk down onto it. The two of them tore into the house and saw Maria running out of Hope’s bedroom, screaming and wailing.

“What is it?” Molly gripped Maria’s shoulders as Jared brushed by to look in the room.

“She is gone, she is gone! There is a note. He is evil, he has taken her! Dios, merciful Dios!”

Molly shuddered. Jared stepped out of Hope’s room and she shuddered again. Any thought she had that Maria was mistaken left when she looked into Jared’s eyes. They were cold, cold enough to leave her even more chilled than before.

“I left the note where it was, though I suppose Maria handled it.” His twang was harsher than ever. “Call the sheriff, boss. He has your girl and says the only one he is gonna talk with is your sister, Cecilia. You better talk to her, too. Find out what she knows about this and how quickly she’s coming out.”

Chapter Nine

He watched her retreat into the emotionless woman he had seen at the funeral and knew he couldn't do a thing about it. He didn't have time, even if he had the ability. He could feel himself retreating too, back into what he had been at the end of his military career, back when he was part of the SWAT team. His emotions were gone, except for the faint feeling of icy rage.

The bastard had messed with his kid.

He spoke to the sheriff on the phone and asked about what sort of rifles the man had for long range sniping. He had given the work up, given the weapons up. That didn't mean he had forgotten what to do or how to do it.

He saw Molly begin to cry silently after speaking to her sister on the telephone. When she hung up, though, her eyes were dry and emotionless again, emotionless as her voice when she said, "She's making arrangements to take a private plane out here. She said the kidnapper will know when she arrives. He watches what she does. He knows her schedule."

"She knew about this guy?" He thought his tone was neutral, too, but Molly winced at his words.

"She didn't know this would happen."

He sat back and prepared to wait. The sheriff came. He seemed competent enough, but both he and the sheriff knew this was out of the man's league. It wasn't out of Jared's.

Jared looked over the weapons the sheriff had. When he had explained his background, the sheriff seemed happy enough to deputize him. Jared figured if the man wanted to believe he would do everything legally, the sheriff was welcome to believe it.

The two men looked outside the bedroom window. That was where Jared found the cowering, still whimpering Poppy. The damn fool dog had peed all over herself in fear. Damn fool? Hell, the worthless old mutt had been more alert to the danger than Jared had.

"What now?" Sheriff Blakemore said at last, deferring to Jared.

"If the man is watching for Cecilia to show up then he's nearby. We'll wait some more." Jared jerked his head toward the rifles the sheriff had brought along. "I have things to do."

He needed to check out accuracy. He was almost ready to try firing out in the open, in front of the kidnapper's watching eyes and lose the element of surprise. If the bastard was watching, he didn't give a damn. Let him sweat before he died. If he wasn't watching, all the better. He would die a surprised man. Either way, he was a dead man.

Molly watched Cecilia and Victor come to the door, faster than she dreamed it would be possible for her sister to get there. It had still been almost seven hours since they'd found out Hope had been taken. Six hours, forty-seven minutes. It was still dark outside.

Molly walked to the door, very steadily, and opened it without shaking. She was surprised about that, too. Well, she would have been surprised if she was capable of feeling anything at all except the freezing cold inside her. For now she made sure that nothing mattered. It was like when Daniel had first died, but she had been prepared for that. There was no preparation for this.

Cecilia reached out and held Molly very tightly. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"I know." Molly had the detached, calm voice she had discovered after her baby had been taken. "It isn't your fault."

"He's crazy. Sometimes entertainers get nuts interested in them but I happen to be lucky enough to have one who makes threats to me and, lately, to my

family,” Cecilia said. “I kept away from Vic and the kids as much as I could, since he seems to want to follow me. I thought that would keep the family safe. But when he talked about making my family sorry, I never thought he meant my sister’s family.”

Molly had to say it. “You should have told us. You shouldn’t have tried to stop this by yourself. For heaven’s sake, you should certainly have told Victor. I wasn’t kidding when I told you he was going crazy, thinking all sorts of things about why you were being so evasive.”

Victor took Cecilia’s hand and Molly realized that they were together again. That much was all right.

“I kept thinking it was a joke, and then I thought about what Vic might try to do if he knew and then—finally—I realized I couldn’t manage it alone. There was too much danger. I tried to keep quiet, not to encourage what was going on. Then I got smart. I realized that the more people who were aware of the problem and were looking out for that man, the better. I did tell the police at home and I told Victor last week. We hired protection for Vicky and Danny. But it never occurred to me he would come here. I should have known he would come up with an angle. He always has so far.”

“Where is Boyd?” Victor asked, abruptly.

“Outside,” Molly said, vaguely. “He’s keeping watch, I think.”

She saw Victor go out the back door and she sat down in a chair again.

Cecilia sat next to Molly. “How are you, Sis?”

“All right. If I let myself think about it, I’d get hysterical. So I won’t. Except...it’s getting cold out at night. Hope doesn’t have a sweater or food or... What will he do to her if she starts to cry?”

Cecilia held her very tightly again. But Molly didn’t want to be held. She broke away and looked around for something to do.

Molly began to methodically take down the streamers from Hope's birthday party. She hadn't been able to move before this but now she had to do something. Then she cleaned the table. She was in the midst of packing up the wrapping paper and gifts when, finally, the telephone rang. Molly dropped the present she'd been holding...the little stuffed pony Jared had given Hope. She picked it back up and squeezed it hard.

The sheriff, standing in the kitchen, nodded while Cecilia picked up telephone. They had put a tap on it.

"Yes?" Cecilia asked. She listened and hung up all too soon. "He wouldn't stay on the line. He said he wouldn't be traced. He'll meet me at the family graveyard. I'll bet he knows about it because he saw those photos taken when Daniel died. The ones the tabloids printed."

Victor came in the back door with Jared at his heels. Molly blinked. Jared was ready for his work. For some reason the sight of Jared dressed in black, wearing a bulletproof vest, his face dark with camouflage greasepaint, came closer to disturbing her unnatural calm than anything else so far. He was so alien. He didn't look at her while he listened to what had gone on so far. He didn't say anything. He hadn't said anything to her for hours even when he had been near her.

"I'm ready." Jared just turned on his heel and walked outside again.

"Cecilia, drive up there as close as he'll let you," the sheriff explained. "When you get out, leave the door open a crack. I'm going to be crouched down in the passenger's side."

"What if he sees you?" Cecilia asked. "He'll be angry."

"We'll deal with it then." Although the sheriff's voice was matter of fact, his expression was grim.

"What about us?" Molly tried to control her panic. "That's my baby—"

"And my wife," Victor finished.

"The fewer people the better." The sheriff was curt. "One man hiding in a truck might not be detected. Any more will be."

"We're supposed to wait?" Molly's voice grew shrill. "Just wait?"

The sheriff gestured to the three other deputies in the kitchen. "They have to wait, too. But they're trained and they have rifles. I'll have a two-way radio in the car. If things look like they're blowing up, my men will be up there as fast as they can."

But that will be too late! Molly wanted to scream. She swallowed the words and gripped her hands together. Jared was out there, too. He would take care of it somehow.

Victor and Cecilia exchanged a long look. He walked to her and kissed her once, twice, very deliberately. She held him tightly.

"I'm trusting you to be real smart, *querida*," Victor said, softly. "I'm trusting you, period. I love you."

Cecilia's mouth quivered. Then she released him, turned and walked outside, the sheriff behind her. They heard the truck start up.

"God, I hope Boyd is out there and he's as good as Kevin has been telling us he is." Victor stared out the window, watching the truck's lights lurch up to the graveyard. "Cecilia will hold up her end."

"It destroys you to just wait, doesn't it?" Molly's voice broke. "It's destroying me."

Victor turned and put an arm around her. She almost yelped from the fierce grip but then decided she needed it just that tight.

"Yeah."

They both looked at the radio. Would it be worse or better to hear and not be able to do anything?

* * * * *

"Cecilia," he crooned as she stepped out of the truck. "It's you. *Finally.*"

He eyed her. She wasn't dressed as revealingly as she was sometimes on the stage. He was pleased with that. She had taken his advice to heart. Sometimes he had wondered if she had listened.

"Hello." She spoke in that husky voice he heard over and over in his head. Now it was real. Here. "It's taken us a long time to meet."

"Too long." He tried to keep the triumph and impatience out of his voice. She was his now, but he didn't want her to be scared.

"Oh yes." Cecilia nodded. "I think we've seen each other before, but you know, I don't even know your name —"

"Tom."

"Tom," she repeated and smiled at him.

"You've seen me. I work in the studio where you record. Sometimes. I'm a student so I'm not there all the time. Just when I want to be. I want to be there when you are—" He stopped. Maybe that sounded too eager. He was in control here, not her.

"Yes, I remember you," Cecilia said.

She almost did. She had a dim memory of someone who hid behind the equipment, playing with the sound. No one had introduced them. She wouldn't have remembered his name if anyone had. He must know about computers and electronics. That would have helped him do the tracking. And the studio would have known her schedule.

He moved closer to her, put his hands on her shoulders. "That's because we're connected, you and me. It just took so long for you to realize that. You

were so involved with your singing and your family. That was wrong, Cecilia. You were meant for me, you were supposed to sing for me. Just me."

Almost without thinking, he unbuttoned the neck of her shirt. Her pulse beat fast in her throat and he let his fingers touch and caress her neck. Such a slender, pretty neck. It would be easy to snap it.

"I didn't realize, Tom." Her voice was soft, her tone conciliatory.

"Now you do."

"You explained it to me before but I didn't understand, Tom. Sometimes I need people to explain things to me. I bet you could do that, right?"

He touched her neck and pulse again. She was so humble now. She was so obedient. Yes, that was it. Humble and obedient and wanting to please.

"I can," he said. "I can tell you exactly what to do."

He squinted through the night scope. The bastard had Hope's head resting against his shoulder and she was bound up in some kind of webbing against his chest. Jared saw the bunching of the man's clothing and was willing to bet was wearing Kevlar around his chest. That meant a headshot. But a headshot would be damn, *damn* tricky. He could wait until Hope moved a little and try, but she was as unmoving as someone drugged—or dead.

Jared took a long breath. She was drugged. She couldn't be dead.

Sweat beaded his forehead. He blinked it out of his eyes. His hands were beginning to sweat, too. This was like some of the nightmares he'd had. Although he held the rifle rock-steady, he started to wonder if he could make the shot, even if Hope gave him the room.

He imagined what Molly would say, how she would look if he messed this one up. Oh hell. That was just what he had never allowed himself to think. This

was his nightmare come true. This time his fear of becoming paralyzed with indecision were real.

He couldn't make the shot. Not the way he felt now. There were too many potential victims too close to the target.

Stupid, clumsy fool. You never do anything right. I can't believe I'm your father.

He forced himself to breathe in and out quietly. Even at his worst he hadn't remembered his father's tirades this clearly. Sometimes the real screaming had gone on for hours. He would have preferred having the beating sooner than the screaming that went on before the beating. Shit. What a time to have the old man's words echoing in his head.

Concentrate. He had to concentrate.

He saw the bastard move closer to Cecilia and put his hands on her shoulders. Great. Now he had another person to try to avoid when he made the shot. Cecilia didn't flinch away. If anything, she moved closer to him.

Abruptly, Jared made his decision. He tucked the rifle away. Distance wouldn't get the job done this time. And he was someone who planned to get this job done. He loosened the knife in his scabbard and moved out. This way might be a little more likely to get either him or the bastard hurt before Jared killed him, but it would work. Someone usually could be stopped at close range.

It wouldn't be him.

"You should have paid attention to my notes, Cecilia," the voice said over the radio. "I warned you."

"I'm sorry, Tom."

Victor was breathing hard, his hands balled into fists. Molly gripped his arm hard.

"She's doing a good job of acting, Vic."

"Hell, I know that. I might be jealous, but I'm not stupid." Victor's voice was harsh. "If I wasn't so damned scared for her I would be laughing. She sounds so submissive."

"I told you and told you." The man's voice started to rise.

Molly's own hands clenched. She was afraid to look at Victor's face because it would increase her own tension and terror.

"Please don't be angry, Tom. I just want to do what you say."

"What's going on?" The startled scream caused everyone listening in the living room to jump. Victor's chair fell over with a crash as he leaped up. *"You tricked me!"*

"Get the hell out!" It was Jared's voice. "Grab Hope and run—"

There was a split-second of silence, and then Jared's voice again, almost pleased, "And now, you little pissant—"

There was a gunshot and thudding. The deputies took off at a run, Molly and Victor not far behind them. The last thing Molly heard on the radio before they left was a shrill scream that was abruptly cut off. It didn't sound human. She had no idea to whom it belonged.

She began to pray to herself, a jumbled, confused prayer that bargained with God over who had been screaming and who had not. Her baby, her sister, and her lover were all there and any of all of them could be dead or in pain. She didn't have time to formulate a more coherent prayer. She had to get there.

He heard them coming and, even with the confusion, he knew when she arrived. Jared managed to open his eyes again. He looked at Molly as best he could through the blood dripping down over his eye. He leaned against the grave marker, feeling the wetness soaking through his thigh from the bullet. He

knew there must be a lot of blood flowing all over the place. He was floating a little from the lack of blood and the last dregs of the adrenaline.

"Get the damn doctor!" the sheriff snapped, leaning over him, holding him down.

Jared struggled a moment. No one was going to hold him.

"Jared?" That was Molly.

Jared looked past him. He tried to smile at Molly, knowing he must look like a character in a horror movie. Thank God someone had covered the other man's face with a blanket. He didn't care, but he figured Molly and Cecilia didn't need to see a body with its throat slit.

"He's fighting me."

"Step back. I'll take care of him." Molly's voice broke through the rumble of male voices. Molly's strong fingers gripped him, holding back the flow of blood. He thought he heard her asking about Hope. He heard the little girl crying fretfully in the background as the drugs in her system started to wear off.

"Sorry, boss, but I think I'm gonna get good and drunk now." The words dragged out a little. "That's what I always do after a job."

"You're going to the hospital," Molly said. "No alcohol there. Lie down on the ground. You'll lose less blood. I hope."

"Later—" He wanted to argue about the hospital but knew he was close to blacking out.

Molly pushed him down flat to the ground easily. Molly had medical training. She probably knew what she was doing. Still, it was too bad he wasn't a horse.

"Later I intend to distract you with sex. No time for alcohol while we're having sex."

He felt her other hand taking his pulse. He hoped he still had one. He almost doubted it at the moment, the way he was fading in and out. But her words ought to give his heart some kind of kickstart. "That could work. Promise—an orgy? Something real kinky?"

"Hurry! Where's the ambulance? I think this nicked an artery. He's lost a lot of blood already." She yelled to someone in the distance and then, more seductively to him, "I promise. As soon as you're strong enough."

He slipped into blackness at her words, but he smiled as he did.

The smile didn't last long. He could feel an arm and his legs being immobilized and a bandage blinding him. Part of him knew they were bandages being wrapped around his wounds on his head and leg and he was getting some kind of I.V. in an arm.

The other part of him knew it was a trap that he had to get out of. He needed his arms and legs and his eyes. How the hell could he protect Molly otherwise? He tried to struggle, just like when someone else had tried to hold him down before. Sheriff. Didn't matter who. They weren't going to do a damn thing to him.

No. He forced himself not to struggle. It was all right. Molly was holding him. There were other hands, too, but he knew Molly was there. She was saying something to him he couldn't hear, but it was soothing. Was this how the horses felt when they were getting a bridle for the first time? It was just her voice keeping him from going crazy, from trying to escape.

The blackness got larger. The pain and fear receded—or maybe he was leaving the pain and fear. He was dying, but it didn't seem worth fighting over.

"You have to stay." A man's voice echoed in his head.

He wanted to ask why.

"Molly needs you. I couldn't stay, but you can. You must."

He knew, though he had never heard his voice, it had to be Daniel Aguilar.

The floating, light feeling shifted back toward the heavy pain he'd tried to escape. For a moment he struggled against it. But he could hear the mumble of voices again.

"Jared, don't go." Molly. That was Molly. "Hope and I need you. Don't leave me!"

With a sigh, he accepted that he wasn't going anywhere. For a second he felt the strength—or was it someone else who helped him?—to flex the fingers of his free hand over Molly's and hold on.

Molly looked up, staring at the faces of her sister and brother-in-law. They stood in front of her, forcing her to wake up from her exhausted nap by their combined will. She glanced sleepily over at the crib near the wall of the living room. Hope seemed to be recovering from her ordeal beautifully, if you didn't count a severe diaper rash from not being changed in hours, but she still objected to being put in a room by herself to sleep. Molly couldn't blame her. She didn't want Hope to be put there alone, either.

Right now Hope breathed easily in and out. Molly relaxed a bit. "Yes, Cee Cee?"

Victor and Cecilia linked hands. That was good. The two of them were definitely still together. The last crisis hadn't changed anything for them.

Cecilia took a deep breath and abruptly began, "Molly, I'm twenty-nine years old. That's not old, but for a singer who trades on her sex appeal, it means I need to rethink some things. These last few days have made me rethink things, too. At any rate, Victor and I have a proposition for you."

What were they talking about? Molly tried to force herself into thinking again. "You want to move out here?"

"Sort of. Victor has talked about taking a teaching job at one of the local universities back in D.C. —"

"The thrill of photojournalism lost its appeal once I got smart enough to realize I couldn't combine going around the world and risking my life with having a family," Victor said. "I've never really enjoyed working locally. If I teach I can drop some of the photojournalism. Be a little more creative. When I take on other jobs, I can pick my subjects."

"He'd have his summers free —" Cecilia began again.

"You want to be here for the summer?" Molly asked.

"And help you run the ranch during the summer," Cecilia told her in a burst of energy.

"*You* run a ranch?"

"Well, in my own special way. Just for those months in the summer. I can entertain, we'll find someone to cook. We'll wine and dine people with money who are interested in horses. I can tell good gourmet cooking, even if I don't have time or expertise to cook for a crowd night after night. Victor can take photographs while he's here and help with the stables. I'd like to do it."

"I know of someone who we might get to cook —" Molly thought of her night out with Jared and his friend, Tommy. Then she shook her head. "What people with money? This is an investment of major amounts of money we might never get back. I know I don't have the money and I'm not sure I'm literally ready to bet the ranch on this. We're just branching into working more with horses. We have one potential foal to sell next year. Now this?"

"C'mon. You know Jared has the expertise with horses along with the savvy and connections to make the horse training and breeding work. I'll be recording more during the winter and I'll have more money to invest," Cecilia said. "I want

to take the risk. It would be a way to publicize the horses. Guests would be very interested in buying horses after riding them for a few days. After talking to Jared.”

Molly rubbed her forehead. Once again it seemed people were taking over, using the ranch to do things she had no control over.

“I’m willing to sink all my savings into this. Molly, I want Cecilia and I to work together, rather than separately. We’re tired of juggling our lives and family.” Victor briefly touched his wife’s hair.

“I just didn’t realize how much—how difficult it is for Victor when I’m gone,” Cecilia began in a low voice. “I told him he was being possessive and macho and—then I realized it really hurts him. I suppose you could say it’s because of his mother or because of Jen and the accident—”

“Stop. No more pop psychology, please.” Victor looked very uncomfortable. “It’s just—I get the feeling you aren’t going to be coming back when you leave. I always feel that way, but this last little stunt just about finished me off.”

“I can’t believe you thought I was having an affair. My poor manager had seen one of the notes and was sweating bullets trying to shield me and keep the police informed. I suppose I should have realized how trying to hide anything would hurt all of us, especially while I kept staying away.”

“Yes.” Vic almost growled the word out.

“Well, you know how selfish I can be. I’ve discovered just how much all this separation hurts me. It’s gotten to the point that it hurts more now to leave than to stay and not sing.” Cecilia turned to look beseechingly at her sister. “But in the summer, I can do the two things I want to do the most. If you agree, Molly.”

Molly looked at them. How was she supposed to give them good, rational reasons not to jump into this after they both were willing to say what they did in front of her? Rational reasons weren’t going to work. Besides, they looked happy. She wanted them to stay looking that way.

For just a moment Molly wondered how much Victor had told Cecilia about that one stupid move she had made. Then she realized she was never going to ask and she hoped Cecilia never knew. She knew now how Cecilia had suffered when Jen and Victor had been together and truly in love. It wasn't worth hurting Cecilia over something that had meant nothing to either her or Victor.

"Vic, you're a partner here, too," Molly said, at last. "If you and Cecilia are willing to invest the time and money, how can I refuse—but I need to talk to Jared about it."

"Do you?" Cecilia suddenly looked knowing. "Why is that? After all, isn't he just an employee?"

"I need to." Molly tried to stare her sister down. "He's not just an employee. He's the lynchpin to this plan of yours. Besides, he—he asked me to marry him. Before all this happened."

"Molly—" Cecilia started but Molly pushed on, suddenly feeling more in control. She could help decide this, too.

"If Jared says yes, I can make a contribution. Well, I guess Daniel will be making it. It's time for me to clean out his studio. I'm going to put some of his work in Hope's room and give you what you want, Vic. Maybe I'll put some up all over the house. It doesn't make me feel bad any more to look at it. I can think about him now without hurting. Then we'll sell the rest of his sculptures. He was getting some good prices for his art before he died. That ought to help finance our expansion. And we can make the studio a darkroom for you, Victor, when you come out in the summer."

Cecilia crouched down in front of her and took both of Molly's hands. "Honey, I know you're exhausted and these last two days have been hellish. But before Jared comes back to the ranch and you make all these decisions—especially one like marrying Jared—I want you to know what happened out there. Did anyone tell you?"

"No, Victor and I dashed up in time to see you holding Hope, Jared sprawled against that gravestone—Daniel's gravestone—the kidnapper dead and police crawling all over. I was too busy trying to cope with Hope and Jared to ask more."

"I don't know if you realize just what kind of man you're dealing with," Cecilia told her. "He snuck up on us so quietly I didn't even realize he was there until he cut Hope away from where she was bound to Tom Morris. He deliberately made sure Hope was free before moving onto anything else, even though Morris pulled his revolver and aimed at Jared. I swear Jared deliberately drew his attention to make sure Hope and I could get clear. He waited until the last possible second and deflected Morris' shot—but not quite enough to keep from getting hurt. I thought I was going to faint when I saw him bleeding and then still get up close enough to grapple with Morris. It was as if he wasn't hurt at all. Morris smashed him once on the head and then, when he saw I was being covered by the sheriff's rifle, Jared just stepped closer, blood dripping all over him, and—and—cut Tom Morris' throat."

There was a silence.

"Bless him," Vic said, at last. "He did exactly what I wanted to do, but probably much more efficiently. Boyd isn't the only man in the world who has killed. But in this case, he did it to protect you. I can't blame him. Hell, I wanted him to do it."

"I know that. I—part of me could fall in love with him myself, because he literally killed to keep Hope and me safe. I know he'd die for you and your little girl, Molly. He showed he was willing to do that." Cecilia had never sounded more sincere.

"I already knew that."

"But, Molly, the protective part of him is intertwined with the absolutely ruthless part of him. I don't think he killed Morris just to protect anyone. At least

that wasn't the only reason. He meant to from the start. I don't know if he could have stopped things any other way, but I'm sure he had no intention of doing anything else. Can you live with that?"

"I can live with that." Molly was sure. She wasn't even surprised at what Cecilia had said. "I'm not sure Jared can, though. He's so gentle with the horses, with Hope, with me. I think the ruthless side of him has come close to eating him alive. He's tried to destroy it—destroy himself. Not with suicide but—well, never mind. But that's just my guess. Maybe I'm wrong about why it bothers him so much. I really don't know him as well as I think I do. I just...I just love him."

Victor made a faint, embarrassed protest and murmured something about psychology. Cecilia made a face at him and gestured for Molly to go on.

"My other guess is that maybe he doesn't mind the killing, but he's afraid he won't live up to what is expected of him. Maybe it's both things. Maybe it's something else. Whatever it is that bothers him, it doesn't bother me. He needs me more than I do him. I'm not sure if he can live with those contradictions inside him without me around."

"If you understand and accept it, and you sound as though you do, then I'm happy for you both," Cecilia said. "I just wanted to be sure my baby sister knew what she was taking on."

"I didn't say I was marrying him." Molly stood up.

"What?" Cecilia gaped at her, as startled as Molly had ever seen her. Cecilia didn't startle easily. "You love him, he needs you, the ranch needs him—but you're not going to marry him?"

"I didn't say that."

"So you are marrying him?"

"I don't know." She might choke. She felt as scared as she had when Jared first wrapped his silken restraints on her. Hell. She was starting to feel again.

This was almost as bad as when she let go over Daniel. "I—I didn't answer him when he asked. Now I'm not sure what to say."

"Molly? What's wrong?"

"He almost died!" She'd felt so safe with him. But Jared wasn't safe. She wasn't safe. He'd almost made her believe he could handle anything, even though she knew better. "Everyone I loves dies. First Mom and Dad. Then Daniel. I can't depend on people. I'm afraid to depend on them."

"Oh, baby." Cecilia moved toward her. Molly stepped back.

"You don't have to tell me I'm being stupid." She ignored the faint protest inside.

"Do you think you're being stupid?" She hated the big sister tone in Cecilia's voice.

Yes. No.

"Losing Daniel was hard. I never married him, never really belonged to him, and it was still hard. What if I lose Jared? Maybe I'd rather do without marrying him. I can manage without having a husband."

"Would it hurt any less if you lost him and didn't marry him?"

"I told you I was being stupid." Molly hated this. Hated the war inside her. Hated the need for Jared. Hated the wash of fear.

I have to see him. Explain everything. He'll understand. He knows me inside and out.

"I think it's time we all made a visit to Jared. I'll bet he's fretting—not that he'll let anyone see that."

Chapter Ten

"Dad." Hope smiled at him from where Molly held her and stretched out her arms.

"Hey, little girl." Jared smiled back. "Sorry, baby. I can't hold you real well right now. See, my one arm has this tube in it."

He looked her over and knew Hope was doing fine. That was what he wanted. He had told himself that was all he wanted. But he'd been lying. Now that he'd gotten his wish, he wanted more.

As if she heard his thoughts, Molly laid her face against his, her eyes untroubled and smiling at him. She kissed his cheek. She didn't seem to be bothered that his head was swelling up like a pumpkin. She wanted to kiss him. He wanted that, too.

The ugly voice in his head clamoring for him to get out, get drunk, get away stopped its insistence for a moment. He'd been lying in the bed thinking dark thoughts and how a drink would get rid of those thoughts. But Molly knew what had happened. She had to know by now. She was here and she'd brought Hope. That must mean things were all right with her.

Jared looked over at Cecilia and Victor. They'd come too. That must mean her family didn't mind, either. The voice inside him died down to almost a whisper.

"We all came to thank you, Jared," Molly told him. "I pray you never have to do that again, but I'm truly grateful you knew how to do it."

"Victor and I will be gone before you're released," Cecilia said. "The telephone is already ringing with reporters on the other end. We figured you'd be grateful for some quiet. But I wanted to thank you personally."

"You kept me sane, Boyd." Victor held out his hand, looked up directly at Jared as they shook. "I figured between you and my wife, things could get handled, but it damn near destroyed me to wait it out. For a while there all I could do was remember that you knew what you were doing."

"I'm not sure what to tell you," Jared said, slowly. "I did what I knew how to do. I'm glad no one else got hurt. I'm just sorry I couldn't have ended it quicker than I did."

"You did all right, cowboy." Cecilia smiled at him. "You may not be so glad I'm alive once Molly tells you what I have in mind for the ranch. But thanks."

She gave him a quick peck on the other cheek and Jared could feel the inner voice ease away entirely, at least for now.

Hope walked up to him last and, with her mother's help, climbed up on the hospital bed, Molly keeping a watchful eye on her to see she didn't jostle anything. Then Hope laid her head on his chest and hugged him hard.

"Aw, shit. You're gonna get me crying in a minute and then my reputation will truly be shot to hell. Uh. Sorry, Hope."

Molly watched him softly stroking Hope's hair, looking like the gentlest, most besotted father on earth. Suddenly Molly laughed and swung the little girl down.

"You go with Aunt Cee Cee and Uncle Vic," she told her daughter. "Jared and I have some talking to do in private."

"Have a good talk." Cecilia winked at them both before she firmly shut the hospital door.

Molly scowled. Cecilia acted as if she knew what Molly was going to do. That made one of them.

Oh God, she loved him. She didn't know what to do, but she loved him.

The tension came back with a rush as everyone else left the room. He stared at her, willing his face to be impassive, waiting for whatever she had in mind. She was skittish, ready to bolt. Why was she here? Why had she made him think things were all right when they weren't?

"I don't know if we have enough time," Molly said, thoughtfully.

"Yeah?"

"Before the nurses show up," Molly explained. "It might be safer if we waited until we got you home, but I feel like living dangerously. Besides, you're too weak to stop me right now."

Her hands were on his pajama bottoms. He'd been grateful when she had bought some for him at the hospital gift shop, even though he'd never worn pajamas in his life. They were better than what the hospital had available for him. But now he was beyond grateful that she was taking the pajamas away, stroking him, putting her head down—

"Sweet Lord, Molly," he gasped.

She lapped him up as if he was a special treat. Her pretty hair brushed against his thighs as her head moved, her tongue tasting, leaving a wet trail on his cock.

"I told you how much I wanted to do this, didn't I?" she murmured, against his thickening shaft. "I've missed you so much."

She didn't say any more. Instead she opened her mouth and took him in as deep as she could. He grunted and moaned. The woman had caught him totally off guard.

He had wanted to say something about her not needing to show her gratitude or—he almost swallowed his tongue instead. He'd never get enough of the feel and the sight of Molly crouched over him, her head bobbing up and

down, sucking. Jared clutched his fists into the sheets. He didn't want to spoil things—to slam his cock into her mouth the way his body was clamoring to do. Within seconds he found he didn't need to. Her mouth was too cleverly busy and, embarrassingly soon afterwards, he climaxed.

As he surfaced from that dark, deep pleasure, he realized she wasn't done. He didn't think he could go beyond that first shuddering surge into her but she used her hands to cup and stroke him and her tongue to tease and milk him. Jared felt himself dragged back into the undertow of hot pleasure all over again. Again and again. His climax would never end. She was killing him with sweet endless torture. Torture he craved. Piercing pleasure shot through him as he went on and on, as she very carefully, thoroughly, and lovingly drained him dry.

She finally looked up, soft and satisfied. She ran her tongue over her lips and smiled. "Yes. Yes, I'll marry you. Whatever happens, you're worth it."

Weak as he was, Jared wanted her all over again. She knew it, too. Her smile widened when his damn fool cock started to struggle up yet again. Jared took a deep breath, trying to steady himself. What his cock wanted didn't matter. Not right now. He had to warn her, even though he was still gasping and lying exhausted on the hospital bed. He had to let her go easy, if that's what she wanted. It just took him a moment or two to untangle his tongue.

"This may not be the best time—" He managed to get the words out at last, with a wry smile at himself. "But, honey, you need to think about this—about what you're taking on with me."

"Think about what?"

"You've seen me after a drunk, but I've been worse. I've been pissing-in-my-pants, puking, falling down drunk. I don't want to do that again, but I might. You've seen what I can do to a man when I get mad. I don't want to do that again, either, but I'm not sorry about this last time. I'm not sorry about most of

the times I've taken out a target. Molly, don't get confused about what I am with feeling grateful –"

"I'm grateful, of course," Molly interrupted. "But I don't do the things I do with you from gratitude. And not because I'm sorry you got hurt, either. In fact, I'd just as soon never have a man of mine in the hospital again for any reason. You may not believe it, but I know I'm the one who is right about how special you are and how lucky I am."

"How do you know?" he challenged.

She smiled at him, unfazed.

"I'll tell you. First, no brother of mine would ever let me alone with anyone but a man he trusted." She held up one finger. "Vic trusts you, too." She held up a second finger. "Those are two of the most important men in my life and I trust their judgment. Most importantly, I trust my own." She held up a third finger. "You've never hurt me or mine and I'm sure you never will. Jared, there isn't a living thing on my ranch from my daughter to my horses that doesn't depend on you for something. You've never failed them. But you know, even if you do, it will be all right. We all know you do your best. We've seen you do it time and time again."

"Honey, I'm human. I can't promise I never will fail you. I wish I could promise it." Jared paused and asked, almost reluctantly, "Molly, what would you have done if I hadn't taken care of the situation? What if Hope had been killed?"

Molly's breath sucked in. "I don't want to think about that. Just like Victor, knowing you were there kept me sane."

"Molly, I was scared as hell I might not be able to," Jared told her, honestly. "I get scared sometimes, you know."

Scared. That was what he'd sensed in her. She was spooked, but he could feel the fear easing with each word.

"You're a human being, Jared. You're allowed. But if you couldn't manage to save her I know no one could. I don't expect miracles from you, but with your training and with how much you love Hope, you were the best for the job. I wouldn't have blamed you if—if the worst happened, if that's what you're asking. I couldn't do that. I know you would have done everything you could. You *did* do everything you could."

The knots in his stomach slowly loosened. She meant it.

"Jared, I want you to remember something important."

"Yes, honey?"

"Most times, it will be all right if you don't take care of everything."

"Except in bed."

"Except in bed. But I'm a grown woman. It isn't always going to be up to just you, you understand? You took on Morris but then I took over afterward, to take care of you when you couldn't. If you can't do everything, that'll be all right. I can do it. Or we'll do it."

"So you're sure about all this?" Jared asked.

"Oh, very." Her breath caught for a moment.

"Then I'll have to be sure, too."

"Jared, aren't we supposed to taking this one day at a time? Isn't that what they say? We'll worry about the rest as it comes along."

Jared gave her a reluctant smile. He wasn't the most faithful practitioner of that philosophy. Obviously his wife-to-be had gotten the idea better than he did.

Oh, hell. He wasn't sure. He could really mess up marriage and parenthood. Still, if Molly could carry him sometimes and he did the best he could, it might work. He had to try because the alternative was getting the hell out.

He didn't deserve this but he would try. That had to be worth something.

"All right then, woman. I've given you my last warning. We're getting married." He felt the tension in her again, even though she nodded.

"Of course we are, Jared. I'm glad you've decided to stop wasting your breath. You used to only talk when it was important."

It was important to talk. But had he soothed her into something she didn't want? She'd gotten tense all over again when he mentioned marriage. Was that the problem? She wasn't scared of him, but of marriage?

"Wait 'til I'm well and see what you say." *Fool woman. As if being married would make you any less mine.*

"I'm hoping I won't have to say a thing, Jared." Her breath was soft on his cheek as he fell asleep again.

They linked their hands, rather the way Cecilia and Victor had, Molly thought to herself, and they hung on. Peace gradually seeped into the room. Molly watched as Jared's face relaxed.

He needed her to agree to marry him. She could do it. She could be strong enough to risk being his wife.

She sighed and let her eyes drift shut. When he was well she could explain that there was no need to rush into marriage. They had all the time in the world. Enough time to get her heart and head in agreement. Enough time to stop being afraid of what the future might hold.

And, for now, she had Jared. She felt his hand on hers as she fell into sleep.

* * * * *

"It's good to be back." Jared's eyes were half shut against the morning light as they sat together on the porch. "Who took care of the horses this past week?"

"Some of the neighbors helped me out," Molly said. "I can't say we do as good a job as you do, and I'm sure the training is going to pieces, but then none of us are trainers."

Jared opened his mouth then shut it as a pickup truck sped down the driveway of the ranch. It didn't pause at the parking spot but went right on up to the porch. A large, familiar figure hopped out.

"Hey, boss lady." Jason Boyd grinned at her from the bottom of the porch steps. "Heard my big brother tripped over his own feet and got messed up some. Figured we'd take on his chores. I'm used to it. The family is used to it. He always came up with some reason to skip work."

"Jace?" Jared felt the grin start on his face. He tried to get to his feet and Molly firmly held him down. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Jason's face twitched, just once, when he saw his older brother bandaged up and pale, his face swollen, sitting on the porch. Then he stepped forward and hit Jared lightly on the shoulder.

"You don't look much worse than usual. Don't see what we got so worked up over. But since we did and we're here, we thought we might stay a while. If you don't mind, boss lady."

"Of course not." Molly blinked back tears.

"Who is we?" Jared asked, suspiciously.

Jason jerked his thumb toward the truck. "Just Ma and my eldest, Kit, and Hamilton himself." He nodded at Molly. "Thanks for the phone call, Molly."

"I'm sorry it took a few days. Jared didn't let me contact you until yesterday."

"I figured you would just get all riled up. I was right." Jared ignored his brother's glare.

"The rest were yapping to come up but we figured that was enough for now. Any more would be a hindrance."

"That's more than enough. Ma and Grandpa both here?" Jared shut his eyes. "I'll have a relapse for sure."

"In a few days we'll send up Julia's fiancé to stay. You did keep in touch enough to know your youngest sister is engaged, didn't you? Anyhow, for some reason he thinks he can't work with Hamilton and me. You always felt that way, too. Strange, huh? He's a fair horseman and we could use him on the ranch but, hell, you need him more."

As Jason spoke, Molly saw a short, stocky woman with gray eyes like her sons' come out of the pickup and head straight for Jared. She took his chin in her hands and looked him over.

"Are you minding what the doctor tells you, boy?"

"Molly makes me mind what they say," he answered. "It's good to see you, Ma."

For just a minute the woman held him tightly before she stepped back. A roar sounded forth from the pickup.

"Your grandfather was determined to come too," Mrs. Boyd murmured.

"I want to see what made my grandson change his mind and do what he was supposed to do years ago!" Jared Hamilton's voice hadn't weakened with age. Molly blinked at the tall, white-haired man who emerged from the truck, bounded up the stairs and glared at his grandson.

"Hello, Grandpa," Jared said.

"Hello yourself, you young scoundrel." He scowled. "Why'd you go and scare your mother that way? I thought you knew better than to get in the way of bullets."

"Messed up, I guess."

Molly looked at him. "Jared, you've been sitting up enough. Time to go back in and rest a little."

He opened his mouth, looked at his mother and grandfather and shut it again. "Yes, boss."

Jared Hamilton turned his gaze onto Molly and she almost stepped back. If he was going to be part of her family, she realized it was better not to show fear. She stepped forward instead and held out her hand. The man's glare softened.

"I've heard so much about you and your family," she told the older man. "I'm sorry we had to meet this way, but I'm truly pleased to meet you."

The man ignored her hand and gave her a bone-crunching hug. "Now I know why the boy stayed. He finally got a rush of sense to the brain."

While Jared's male relatives clattered off to the stables, his mother helped Molly steady him and get him into the bedroom. Once there, Mrs. Boyd smiled.

"I think you can handle it from here, Molly," she said. "I'll start fixing something for the men to eat. Once they're done inspecting the stables they'll be back and hungry."

"I'm glad you're here, too, Mrs. Boyd. I know it means a lot to Jared."

"Jared can still speak for himself." He eased his way into the bed. "But I am glad, Ma. Even if you'll all drive me crazy within the week."

"Mind your manners, boy," his mother said, mildly, and turned to Molly. "I'd like you to call me Leah."

When she left, Molly knelt down to ease off Jared's boots. He held her shoulders for a minute and smiled. "She likes you. She doesn't allow anyone to call her Leah except her closest friends."

"I like her, too." Molly tugged the first boot off.

He put his fingers to her lips and she looked up at him. His smile was still there, but the intent look in his eyes made her pause. Though she didn't know why, her heart began to thud faster.

"This isn't quite the way it's supposed to work, you down on your knees and me weak as a kitten but what the hell, I figure I might as well ask now."

"Yes?"

"Seeing as how your family and mine are all here, why don't we get married? Soon as we can get a license and a minister to do it. You know, in a church and all. I don't think my mama would believe we were married if it wasn't in a church."

"Running to a church because it's convenient? That doesn't sound romantic," Molly tried to tease.

It sounded perfect. It sounded terrifying. Time. She was supposed to have more time.

"It's practical. Getting myself shot for you and your kid was romantic. Stupid, maybe, but romantic. Besides, what's the problem? You know I love you, Molly. I'm sure as hell convinced you love me by now. The doctor says I'll recover so you don't have to worry about being a widow again anytime soon. If we don't drink ourselves to death, folks in our family live a long, long time. I haven't cracked or started drinking, even after wasting that bastard. I was sure would happen if I ever did kill someone." He paused briefly. "I can take care of you and Hope. At least I know I want to do it. I want to get married. Now."

Molly almost said something stupid like, *it hasn't been a year yet*. She thought about Daniel. Then she looked at Jared. Her Jared. For him. She could do this for him, couldn't she? She loved him. She wanted to do what he wanted. "All right. We could do something quiet—"

"No."

"No?"

"I want to get *married*. I mean a wedding with everything. I've got a tux. I used to have to wear one back when I worked on security with some fancy partygoers. I look pretty good in it, if I do say so myself. I want you to have a veil and a fancy dress—"

"You sound like a first-time bride." Her stomach was churning.

"Well, hell, it's my first time. Yours, too."

"All of us Turners seem to be in too much of a hurry to do fancy weddings." Molly rubbed her hand over her mouth. She wouldn't be sick. She wouldn't be scared.

"Well this Turner wedding is gonna be different. You're marrying me."

"Jared, you can hardly stand up, much less go through—"

"I'll stand up. If I fall over during the ceremony, Jace can catch me. I'll stand up for the honeymoon, too, baby." He grinned at her, looking a little evil. "Especially if you put some of your fancy lingerie on under that wedding gown."

"Ahh, now I begin to understand why you want to do this." Molly laughed. "This is just an excuse to get me to wear sexy underwear."

"Please?" He had his best coaxing voice, the one the horses always listened to.

His wife-to-be realized—yet again—that she did too. He was seducing her into obeying him again. She wasn't going to let him know her stupid fears. Cecilia was right. Marriage or not, whatever happened, she couldn't protect herself from loving Jared. "I'll see what Cecilia can dream up for me. She's the one with the nasty mind. You just guess what I have on under my dress while we take our vows."

"Hot *damn*."

Chapter Eleven

Molly laughed when she saw Cecilia's shower present. She wasn't absolutely sure she wanted to hold up the very sheer bra and panties for everyone to look at. It was, however, the present that everyone was straining to see. "Thank you. Jared thanks you, too. I promised him something special and I think this ought to do it."

"Wow," Jen said. "Oh wow. You never gave me anything like that when I got married, Cecilia."

"Jack never saved my life," Cecilia informed her. "He bailed me out of jail, but that isn't quite the same thing. I owe Jared. This is just the shower present, Molly. Wait until you see the wedding gift. I think both you and Jared will thank me all over again."

"How did you know Jared has an underwear fetish? A fetish for my underwear anyhow." Molly looked over at Jared's mother and blushed.

"I'm glad to hear Jared is feeling healthier." His mother was calm. "I expect underwear like that might raise the dead."

Julia, Jared's youngest sister, snorted with laughter. "I'll have to get my hands on something like that for my honeymoon." She looked over at her mother. "Or is that fine for Jared's wife and not for your daughter?"

"Once you're married, you'll be your husband's problem," her mother replied smartly. "I don't intend to be looking under your clothes."

"Speaking of looking under your clothes, what do the boys have planned for Jared's big night before the wedding?" Cecilia asked. "Whatever it is, the men around here look entirely too pleased about it."

"I don't care what they're doing as long as Jared doesn't get drunk and they don't make him sick again." Molly carefully put the bra and panties away in the box.

* * * * *

Jared figured poker wasn't a bad way to celebrate his last bachelor's night out. Having naked women show up in front of Molly and her brothers-in-law – or his grandfather – wouldn't have been smart, even if he had been inclined to do it. Jared had pulled out cards the minute Jason came up with the idea of celebrating.

He didn't mind watching the others drinking beer – he hadn't really been in the mood for any since Molly had taken his mind off drinking in the hospital. There was a good supply of coffee handy and Jared decided he was probably the most alert player in the group right now. He wouldn't have minded a cigar, too, but he wasn't sure he was up to a stroll to the porch where some of the others were smoking their stogies. His leg was starting to throb a little. He wasn't going to risk hurting it when he planned a strenuous day and even more strenuous evening tomorrow.

Besides he was winning. He had started strong and hadn't stopped all evening.

"I thought it was supposed to be lucky at love, unlucky at cards," Kevin complained at last. "Though it took you long enough to get Molly. I did my best when I told you I'd whip your butt if you tried anything." He grinned. "You always did like a challenge. But I thought you'd never get the idea."

Jared decided not to think about whether or not Kevin had manipulated him, because if he had, it had worked. Very well. "Listen, boy, I'm lucky at everything." Jared bared his teeth in a smile. "And when I'm not lucky, I'm just plain good."

"I think Kevin is talking about himself. Of course until he brought his latest woman out for the wedding, I would have said he was unlucky with women *and* cards." Victor stared at his cards.

"She's not my woman," Kevin said automatically, scowling. "I invited Annie out here on an impulse. I was surprised when she said she would come."

"It was a *good* impulse." Jason grinned at Kevin.

Jared thought about the tall, willowy woman who had arrived with Kevin. He'd never had an English teacher that looked like that. He might have taken more English classes if he had.

Yeah, he agreed with Jason, but figured it would be smarter to keep his mouth shut. He probably could still kick Kevin's butt if Kevin started swinging, but it would be prudent not to try. Molly might not like it.

"Must be pure blind luck then. Maybe she hasn't really looked at your face yet." Jack Logan put down his hand. "I fold."

Jared eyed the man over the table. Just as he'd had to admit a grudging liking for Vic, he was coming to the conclusion that Jack had potential. There was more to the man than a nice suit. In fact, he looked completely natural in the jeans and shirt he was wearing now—just as he had looked at ease in the expensive suit Jared had seen him in before at the funeral.

"Typical politician," Vic grunted. "Leaves when things get tough."

"Typical *smart* politician," Jack returned. "Listen, you put up a hoop and you know I can whip your sorry ass at basketball tomorrow before the wedding, Ruiz. We'll see who leaves first at that game. Anyone else interested?"

"I don't think I can join you," Jared said, calmly. "I can't vouch for Jason, here. Football was more his game back in high school."

“Jack and Vic played pretty well in high school. The trouble is they still like to think they can play basketball.” Kevin gave his best sneer. “Too bad they’re getting a little old and short of wind—”

He was cut off abruptly when the other two men, pivoting neatly, moved as one to pin Kevin’s arms back and then tip him out of his chair. Jared’s little sister’s fiancé, Rafe Murphy, laughed. Rafe hadn’t said much since he and Julia arrived this morning, but he seemed to fit into the group without any trouble and, more importantly, Jared had had a chance to see him with the horses. Murphy knew his way around them. It looked like his baby sister had picked herself someone who would be helpful on the Esperanza, even if that might not have been her original plan when she agreed to take Rafe on.

Unexpectedly, the sharp longing hit. Jared looked at the other men, laughing a little, buzzed just a little, and knew he was kidding himself again. He wasn’t OK with drinking coffee. He wanted to knock back a few beers, a few whiskey and sodas like the rest of them. He swallowed. He could taste it, almost. He could feel how it would go down...

Whoa. Whoa.

What a smart move that would be the night before he got married. Wouldn’t Molly and her family—his, too—be real proud to see that? He had to get out of here and get a grip.

He looked at his pretty cards. King, queen, jack, ten and nine. Spades. A straight flush. A killer hand. He’d already raised twice. If he left, he’d be giving up a healthy sum of money. Still, a man had to know when it was time to move on. Keeping sober and keeping Molly had to beat a straight flush.

“I’d say the game is over for me, gentlemen.” Jared hastily took what was left of his former winnings and shifted away before Kevin’s struggles knocked the table over—or hit his leg. “Besides, fun as it has been cleaning you boys out, I have kind of a busy day coming up.”

* * * * *

Molly's future mother-in-law came up to her after everyone else had gone. They sorted presents and threw away wrapping paper in a companionable silence. Molly waited. She had the feeling Leah Boyd didn't do anything by chance, not even tidy up.

"I think you're going to do right by my boy," Leah told her at last. "And I'm real glad about it. I didn't do right by him."

"I know a little bit about how Jared grew up. I don't know if I can make up for that, but I would like to." She didn't want to hurt the older woman, but Molly saw Leah stiffen a little.

"I tried but—I took our wedding vows seriously. I still know it was wrong for me not to have got the children away sooner. It was the worst for Jared." Leah kept her eyes steadily on Molly's face as she spoke. "I hope you and he will forgive me for it."

Jared must have gotten his honesty from his mother.

"You did what you thought right. I'm sure of that. Jared loves you a great deal. He knows you did your best. I think I might come to love you very much, too," Molly looked steadily back. "I don't have a living mother. I hope you can be mine."

She was gaining more than Jared with her marriage. She was gaining a whole new family. Oh God. More to love. More to fear losing.

Leah's eyes shifted away. She was as uncomfortable with emotion as her son could be. "We'll see. I hope so, Molly. Daughter."

* * * * *

Despite what he said about needing sleep, Jared wasn't quite ready to head for bed yet. He found himself limping down to the stables and letting Dash out

on the longe line. He chirped softly to the horse, who fought for a moment and then circled steadily around, seeming to listen for Jared's calls.

At last Jared let him free, patting his rump for a moment.

"What are you doing out here?" Molly asked, coming up behind him. "Past midnight seems like a strange time to be training horses."

At first I had thought about calling for help, but I knew this would work as well as talking. Maybe better this time.

"I'm checking on how Dash is doing, seeing as I haven't been training him lately. Jason said his boy could try riding him if I thought the horse was ready. Kit's light enough and pretty good with horses, but I don't want anyone getting hurt."

"Is that all you're here for?" Molly asked.

"I'm enjoying the quiet after all this fuss."

They watched, in the stillness of the night, as Dash pranced and cavorted his way around the corral. Jared slipped his arms around Molly's waist. Her body rested easily against his. There was no need to talk in the peaceful silence. He watched Dash and dreamed of riding him. Right now he couldn't throw his leg across anything, but he was going to savor the next horseback ride he took. He missed riding already.

The throbbing in his leg was down to a dull ache now and the rest of him was purely contented. In some ways, it was like they had already been married for years and knew each other inside and out.

"Why did you decide we should have all this fuss anyhow?" Molly asked, her head against his shoulder. "It doesn't seem like you, Jared."

"You decided me."

"What?"

"I guess I figured I can't make everything perfect but, by God, I want to start our marriage the right way. You deserve a wedding like this. Besides, I'm looking forward to seeing you in your dress, walking down the aisle. I heard the women talking. It'll be worth it, if what they say is true."

I want you to know you're married. To feel it down to your bones. I want whatever it is still troubling you to be gone.

"I hope I can live up to the talk." Molly sounded faintly concerned.

Jared felt the faint resistance in her, the holding back she'd been doing for the past week or so. Damn it, she wasn't going to be allowed to hold back. Not from him.

"Of course you can. Like you told me—just do your best. I figure that should be enough to make me damn near faint when I see you first."

"You scare me, Jared."

"Do I?" His grip tightened and the easy peace that had seeped into her was replaced with a chill. "Is that what you're afraid of, honey?"

"I'm not afraid." She swallowed. "I never said I was."

"You didn't have to say. I can tell you are. You're doing a good job, Molly, but I know you." He bent, pushed her shirt aside, nuzzled the hollow of her shoulder. "Didn't I tell you I'd take care of you?"

"That's not a promise you can make, Jared."

"What the hell? Haven't I? Don't I make good on my promises?"

"I'm not saying you don't. It's—oh my God, Jared, that feels good." He had already managed to unbutton her to the waist. The night air brushed against her as softly as Jared's mouth. "Suck me, please."

The pressure of his mouth stopped. "You aren't giving the orders, Molly."

His fingers replaced his mouth, moved to her nipples. Pinched hard. She sighed, already feeling the twang of lust that streaked from her breasts downward. She pushed her hips up, unfastened her jeans, wanting to be naked and open to Jared and the night.

"Jared, I do love you." She sighed it into his open mouth.

He pulled back. "Then what's wrong?"

"I don't want to lose you. I don't want to love you this much and have you gone."

He licked the tears that began to pool at the corners of her eyes. "I'm not going anywhere, Molly."

By now she was unclothed, watching Jared spread her legs against the stable wall, letting him place her where he wanted. She was relaxed, almost limp, sensation humming just underneath the surface.

"I can almost believe you're indestructible tonight, Jared." His cock was warm and strong and slid home easily. She reached out, rested her hand on his arm. Felt the old scar.

"My love for you is," he whispered against her hair.

Hard cock. Soft words. With a moan, Molly gave in. She'd always love him. No matter what.

"I do want to marry you, Jared."

His cock thrust harder, pressing her tight against the roughness of the barn. She twined her legs against him, mindful of his hurts. His chest was tight against her, his heart hammering against hers.

"Damn straight you do." He hit her sweet spot with his next thrust, making her gasp again.

Her legs trembled. Her heart did, too.

"I give in, Jared." She moaned as he moved inside her again. "I want to be your wife. I do. I don't care what happens next. Whatever happens, I can stand it—I want you."

His thumb rasped against her clitoris as he thrust again. Inside the barn, she heard horses move restlessly. Thrust, rough touch. She tensed, relaxed.

"We're scaring the animal—" She moaned again as he teased at her swollen clit. Her back smacked into the wall with a rattle. A horse nickered, loudly, as if in sympathy—or protest.

His mouth was hot on hers, his tongue pressing into her almost as deeply as his cock was inside her sheath. His body held her so tightly she could barely writhe, no matter how much she wanted to.

Jared was taking over—her mind, her body, everything she had. Need swallowed her. He held her arms up over her head, almost as if she were manacled. Her inner walls tightened at the thought, holding his cock deep inside her.

He groaned, as if she were killing him, shuddering against her. With a sigh, she tumbled into the warmth of completion, letting her arms fall back down to his shoulders. Jared's breath was harsh against her ear, his hands holding her steady. *Home*.

Slowly their breathing quieted, became more regular. He slipped, slowly, out of her body. She slipped, slowly, back down to the ground.

"You didn't tell me to ease up, Molly." His eyes, so searching, stared into hers.

"I don't think I ever will. I don't think I ever could."

About the author:

When she isn't writing or tending to her children, husband and dog (not necessarily in that order), Treva Harte works full-time as a government attorney in a city with many other government attorneys. In a previous lifetime Treva got her Master's in English Lit and had once planned to be an English professor. She is an active member of both the Romance Writers of America (RWA) and Washington (D.C.) Romance Writers (WRW).

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