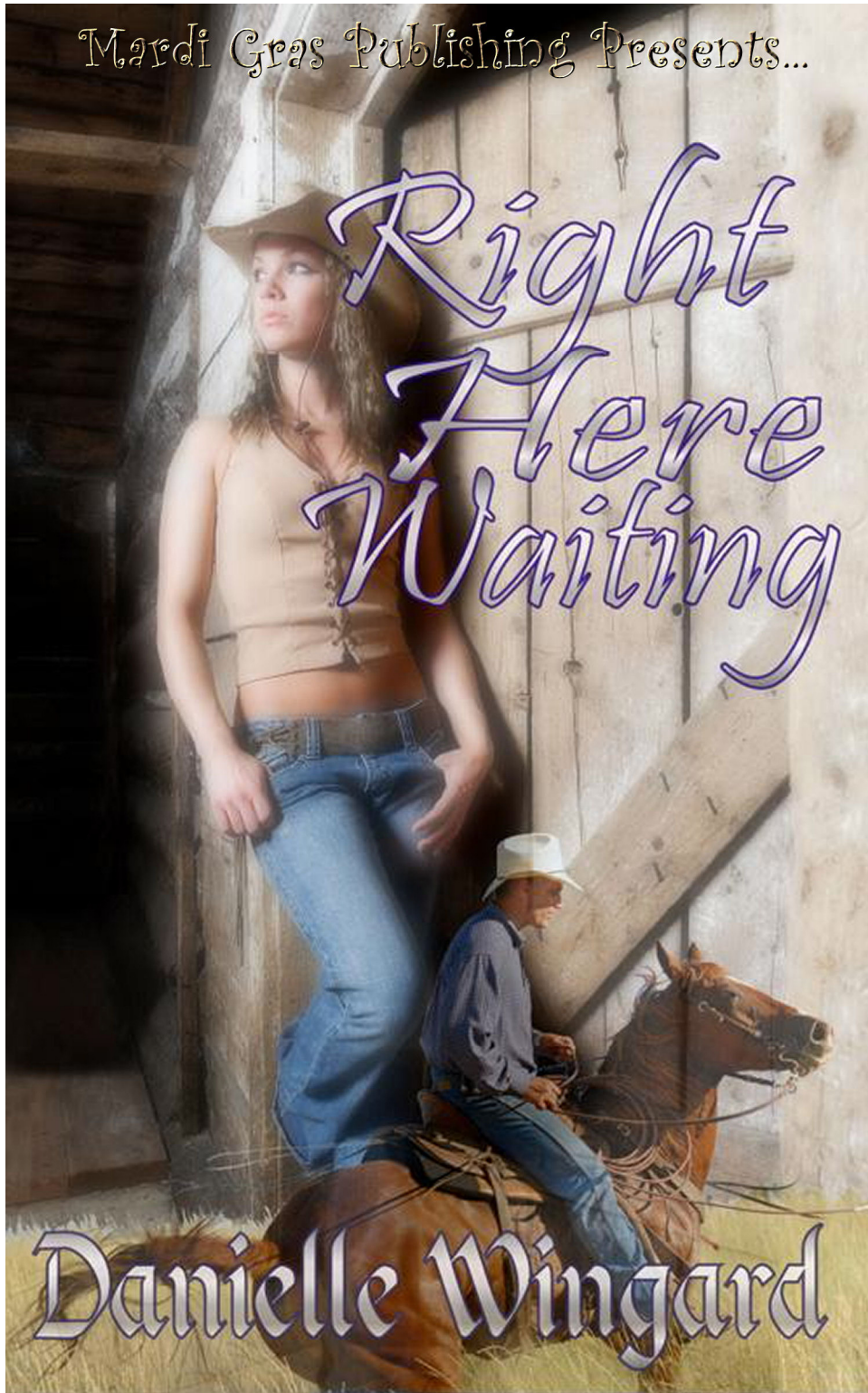


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# Right Here Waiting

Danielle Wingard



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RIGHT HERE WAITING

BY

DANIELLE WINGARD



## Chapter One

She stood, looking out the same parlor window she spent many of her childhood days peering out. She daydreamed about how her life would be once she was able to escape this town, this ranch she once called home. She vowed she would never return. But here she was, right back where she started. The news of the death of her parents left her no choice but to return, no matter how badly she wished she could turn and run in the opposite direction.

A voice from the open doorway startled her out of her thoughts. "Megan Marie Nelson? Is it really you? I can't believe my eyes!"

She turned from the window to see the housekeeper, Martha, an indispensable member of the staff who had been with the family since she was small. Martha was always the first one awake in the morning and the last one asleep at night. If she was tired, it never showed in the perfect way she managed to keep the large ranch house in spotless condition or the way she always kept the family and the ranch hands fed with her amazing cooking. Of all the memories Megan had of this place, Martha was the best. She knew she should try to be happy, even though Martha was sure to understand if she was anything less.

"In the flesh," she said, trying to manage a smile.

"Well welcome home girl. Now come over here and let me get a good look at you. Oh my, you have grown since the last time I saw you."

She walked over to Martha and embraced her. "It sure is nice to see you again, Martha. I just wish it could have been under better circumstances than these."

"Me too, child, but there's nothing we can do to change things. What's done is done. Now let me get a good look at you."

Martha held her at arm's length, her brown eyes wide with delight. "You sure have blossomed into a beautiful young lady. Your mother and father would have been proud of you, I'm sure."

"I just wish I could have seen them again before they died. Why did I have to just up and leave the way I did?"

"Come child, don't fret. I've just finished baking up a batch of peanut butter cookies. Why don't we go into the kitchen and get you some with a tall glass of milk? I remember how much you loved them as a child."

She was trying to go low carb for the millionth time, but how could she say no to Martha's homemade cookies? In addition, she could not think of a better reason to gain a couple of pounds.

Other children had their grandmothers to spoil them while growing up. She had Martha, and she could not have asked for better.

"You know I can't resist an offer like that," she said as she followed the older woman into the kitchen.

As she entered, she noticed Martha's hair, which had only a few touches of gray when she left home five years ago, was now completely gray, though it was still pulled up tightly in a bun on her head. The only other changes she could see was Martha put on a few extra pounds and she acquired more wrinkles. Other than those minor alterations to her appearance, Martha was still the dear sweet woman she remembered from her childhood.

The smell of the fresh baked peanut butter cookies overpowered her senses as they entered the kitchen. Memories from the past came flooding back to her of the first time a boy asked her out for a date. She'd been so overcome with a mixture of fear and excitement, all rolled into one jumble of emotions, and she'd needed to talk to someone. Like most girls, her first thought was to tell her mother. She'd felt a sting of disappointment when she remembered how her mother was out of town at the time,

nursing an ailing aunt. The only other person she trusted enough with her deepest emotions was Martha.

On that day long ago, she and Martha sat at this very kitchen table with a plate of freshly baked peanut butter cookies between them and tall glasses of milk. By the time she had finished telling Martha about the boy, the date, and all the emotions she was feeling, she felt much better. Martha's kind and very wise advice settled her nerves and put her at ease with the situation. In some ways, telling Martha was the best decision she could have made.

"Did you have a nice trip here?" Martha asked, startling her out of her thoughts and back to the present.

"It wasn't too bad," she said as she sank down onto a chair at the kitchen table. "There were a couple of times on the way here my car started giving me fits and I wasn't too sure I was going to make it."

"I'll have one of the guys take a look at your car. If they can't fix it, I'm sure one of them can take it into Boise to be fixed by a mechanic." Martha set a plate of cookies in front of her, followed by a large glass of milk.

But she didn't hear Martha, nor did she notice the spread before her. Peanut butter cookies or not, her full attention was fixed on the man who suddenly filled the doorway to the kitchen, cowboy hat in hand. The man responsible for her hasty exit from Hidden Oaks, Idaho, all those years ago.

Blade Thorn was the first man she'd ever had a crush on. He was also the first man to break her heart. As she reached those teenage years, she followed Blade around the ranch, pretending to be interested in learning everything she could about ranching, just to spend as much time with him as possible.

Her daydreams were filled with Blade. He would notice her. He would fall in love with her. In those endless daydreams, she thought about the day she would become Mrs. Blade Thorn. She would often wonder how it would feel to have him sweep her up in his arms and hold her in a passion filled embrace while his lips sought and claimed her own in a hungry, needy kiss.

That was until the day when she was seventeen and Blade's harsh, cold words put an end to all those foolish, adolescent fantasies. She'd been in the barn that morning watching him milk their cow, Millicent, before breakfast. He turned to her, anger flashing in his steel gray eyes. "Why do you follow me around all the time? I have work to do and the last thing I need is to be babysitting you. You're nothing more than a child, so scram!" His words echoed in her mind as loud as they did back then.

Without a word, she fled to her room in tears. She vowed to leave and get away from Idaho as soon as she possibly could. Three months later on her eighteenth birthday, she packed her bags and moved to New York City, eager to put those childish daydreams of Blade, and the words that broke her heart, behind. Her family tried to talk her out of it, but there was nothing they could have said or done to stop her. Her mind was made up.

Now, five years later as she watched him standing in the doorway, the words he shouted long ago rang in her ears. Tears began to form in her eyes, but she fought them off. The last thing she wanted to do was let Blade know how much his words hurt her. She was stronger now, a grown woman. He wasn't going to affect her anymore.

"Mmmm, cookies," Blade said as he sauntered over to the table and reached out a hand to take one.

"Where are your manners?" Martha admonished as she slapped his hand away from the plate. "You haven't even said hello to Megan before you tried to steal one of her cookies."

Blade looked at her as if seeing her for the first time.

"Well I'll be..." He looked her up and down appreciatively, those steel gray eyes giving her a scrutiny designed to melt any woman into a puddle at his feet. "You sure have grown into quite a woman."

She turned her head, looking away before he saw the blush on her cheeks. She tried to gain her composure. There was a time when Blade's words would have made her swoon, but not now. His words came too little, too late.



"Have you gotten shy with age, Megan? The young girl I remember was outgoing and so full of energy."

Something that felt like a mixture of anger and annoyance crept over her. She turned to look at him, anger encompassing her to the point she couldn't hold back any longer. "As you recall, the Megan you knew was just a little child, someone you couldn't be bothered with."

Blade gave a loud whoop. "Now there's the girl I remember. Can I have a cookie?"

It was nice to see some things stayed as they were. He was still the same arrogant man she had known when she left home. He hadn't aged much either. He still possessed the muscular build she remembered. At the age of forty-one, there was a little gray on the sides, but the rest of his hair was still a shade of dark brown, almost black. She could see why she had developed such an attraction to him in her teenage years. He should have been balding and overweight by now. If he was, maybe she wouldn't be feeling a hint of attraction to him now. Feelings like those were precisely why she needed to get done what she'd come here to do and then get back to New York City.

She would contact a realtor in Boise first thing in the morning. The sooner the place was on the market, the sooner she could go back home, get on with her life, and go back to forgetting Blade ever existed.

She looked at him and was treated to a smug expression. Oh, how she'd love to wipe it off his face.

"How much longer do you plan to keep living here?" By the way his expression changed so quickly, she knew she'd caught him off guard. Good. Score one for her.

"W-what?" he stammered. "I have no plans of ever leaving this ranch."

She eyed him coldly. "We'll see when this place is sold. The new owners may not want you around."

"You can't really mean it," Martha said coming up behind her, placing one hand on her shoulder. "This is your home. Why would you want to sell it?"

"Don't worry," Blade said, reaching for a file folder on the counter and waving it

in her direction. "I picked this up from the lawyer's office earlier this afternoon. She can't sell the ranch, at least not for another year."

Now it was her turn to be caught off guard. Now the score was tied. "What do you mean I can't sell it? I'm an only child. Now that my parents have passed on, it's rightfully mine to do what I want. I want to sell it."

"You're right, the ranch is yours, but you can't sell it."

"Why not?"

He pulled several sheets of paper out of the folder. "Because I hold here, in my hands, your parents' will. There's a clause in it. That's why you can't sell it."

"What sort of clause?"

"You and I have to run this ranch together for at least a year before you can decide to sell it or do anything else with it."

"I don't believe you," she said, her voice raising an octave. Her parents would not be this cruel to her, would they? She hoped this was some sort joke. It had to be.

"Read it for yourself," he said handing the papers to her. "It's the section highlighted in yellow."

Her heart sank as she read the words for herself. It was all true. How was she going to explain this to her boss? Would he even allow her to take a year off from her work at the ad agency to fulfill her parents' will? Her boss understood, but she didn't think he'd be *that* understanding.

"If for any reason you can't fulfill the clause in the document, there's always the alternative."

"What is it?"

"If for any reason you can't fulfill your end of the deal, the ranch will automatically be turned over to me."

That was it. Her mind was made up. There was no way she would allow this place to be turned over to this arrogant man. She would fulfill her end of the will and tough it out on the ranch for a whole year, even if it meant losing her job.

After the year was up, she would sell the place and be done with it. No more

ranch. No more Blade Thorn, and definitely, no more memories of his harsh words or the way they still affected her. She'd be through with this place, and she could always go back to New York and find another job. She was a hard working, intelligent, successful young woman, and she would thrive. For her own sake, she needed to. This year would come and go so quickly, it would be over before she knew it.

"Not on your life. I'm staying."

"Will you be staying in your parents' old bedroom or one of the empty guest cabins?"

"Cabins?" There were no cabins five years ago.

"Yes, cabins. We have about twenty guests staying with us currently. You'll need to come up with a list of activities to keep them entertained in the days to come."

"Activities?" What did she get herself into? She didn't know the first thing about running a ranch. Let alone a guest ranch.

"Unless you don't feel up to the task," he taunted.

"Did I say that?"

"I just thought..."

"Well you thought wrong." She snapped.

The screen door opened and then slammed shut as a man entered the house. She nearly fell off her chair and quickly braced herself. The man was the spitting image of Blade, minus the gray in his hair.

"Megan, I'd like you to meet my cousin, Rex Thorn. He works here on the ranch. He can take over my duties this evening while I help you get settled in and teach you some of the ropes of ranching."

It's going to be a long year after all, she thought as his words sank in. How was she ever going to survive it? With a Blade look alike running around on top of the original, she needed to put all of her personal feelings aside and focus on the ranch. She needed to survive this. It was all there was to it.

Rex eyed her with open interest. "I think *I'd* rather help Megan get settled in. I'd hate to take you away from your duties."

"If anyone helps her get settled in, it will be me," Blade snapped at Rex, startling everyone in the room. "Do you understand?"

She jumped in before Rex could reply. "If there's a problem, I can get myself situated."

"It won't be a problem," Blade said, lowering his voice. There was a hint of something in his voice. Something new she just could not quite place. "In fact it would be a pleasure."

## Chapter Two

It was finally agreed, Blade would help her get settled in after supper. It was decided since Martha was living in one of the cabins and no one slept in the ranch house anymore except for Blade, she would be sleeping in one of the empty guest cabins.

She was happy to learn the cabin she would be living in for the next year was not only equipped with a phone, but all the other modern amenities such as a bathroom with working plumbing and Internet access.

Blade placed his cowboy hat back on his head. She followed his cousin Rex out of the house, but not before both men grabbed a handful of cookies from the tray Martha placed on the counter.

"I do believe it is impossible to keep those men well fed and satisfied," Martha declared as she pulled up a chair at the table across from her and sat down. "At mealtimes I make enough food to feed a small army and they still come back demanding food between meals."

"Why do you do it?" She was just now realizing that once the ranch was sold, Martha would have to leave. What would Martha do? Would she ever see Martha again? "Was there ever anything else you wanted to do with your life, besides work for this ranch?"

"I do it because I love it. Besides, who else would be able to keep Blade and the rest of these men in line?"

Martha made a point she couldn't argue with. She witnessed on many occasions as

a teen how Martha had Blade practically eating out of her hand. She knew it wasn't an easy feat. "So there's really nothing else you'd rather be doing with your life?"

"Of course not. You, Blade, and the rest of these men on this ranch are the only family I've got. I'm happy right here. I don't think I'd be happy living anywhere else. I can't even imagine doing anything with my life other than what I'm doing now."

She could relate. She thought of Martha as family. Heck, she even thought of Blade as family to a certain extent. Especially now since her parents died.

She couldn't believe both her parents wanted to be cremated. There would be no funeral. Only a small memorial service for them on the day after tomorrow at the Good Shepard Baptist Church, a few miles away from the ranch they called home since the day they'd gotten married over twenty years ago.

"What's with the sad expression?" Martha asked. Her concerned voice brought back more memories from her youth.

"I was just thinking. It's nothing important. Why don't you have a cookie or two with me? It'll be like old times."

"No thank you. I'm on a diet to rid myself of a few extra pounds I've been packing around for the past couple of years or so."

"I sure do wish I had your willpower," she said as she pulled the plate of cookies back in front of her. "I've been trying to lose fifteen pounds or so myself, but I just can't stick to a diet long enough to lose them."

As if to prove her point, she picked up a peanut butter cookie and took a bite out of it.

"Why on God's green earth would you want to lose any weight? You have a body most women would die for, including me."

"I'm fat."

"Says who? You saw how Blade and Rex were eyeing you. They both liked what they saw." Martha smiled.

She blushed. The truth was, her last lover, Anton Charbonneau said she was fat. Every time they made love, he made it a point to tell her exactly where she could loose

a pound or two. She couldn't tell Martha about Anton's comments.

She changed the subject. "So what other changes have been made around here?"

"There's more staff working here than there was the day you left."

"Really? Rex wasn't the only new person to be hired on?"

"When your parents decided to turn this ranch into a guest ranch, they needed to hire on extra workers, including an assistant cook to assist me, and even a whole office team."

"Office team? Do you mean there are offices here at the ranch now?"

"I'm sure you noticed the red brick building when you first entered the gates and started up the drive."

She noticed it. She also noticed the sign, which hung above the gates when she entered, it read, 'Happy Meadow Ranch'. "What possessed my parents to turn this into a guest ranch?"

"With the economic hardships the nation has faced, your parents were forced to either close the ranch and sell it, or turn it into a guest ranch. Lucky for all of us who work here, they chose the latter."

In the last few letters she received from home, not once did her parents mention to her about converting the place into a guest ranch. She could see why her parents made the choice they did though.

Her parents put their all into this ranch. They worked hard to get it built up to what it was today. "They hired on all these extra staff members, but not an activities director?"

"Oh, they hired one."

"Where is the activities director at right now?"

"She quit and walked off the job two days ago."

"Why did she quit?"

"She claimed she couldn't work with a man like Blade."

Her heart went out to the girl. She didn't know how *she* was going to work with a man like Blade. She only knew she needed to. "Isn't anything being done to find a new

one?"

"The office staff has an ad running in the Boise newspaper, but so far nothing has come of it."

So now, she was stuck with the job. She could only hope for a miracle. She might be able to pull together a couple of activities, but no more. As much as she hated to admit it, she would probably have to have Blade's help just to pull it off.

\* \* \* \*

Dinner on the ranch was served at precisely seven in the evening. Blade would be eating in the ranch house with her and Martha. The other workers and staff ate their dinner in the dining hall with the guests. She now understood why Martha needed an assistant cook.

She saw Blade come in about forty minutes ago. He'd gone upstairs to shower and change into some clean clothes which he kept in the bedroom he slept in. He would always be like a member of the family. She couldn't explain why, but when she saw Blade, her heart beat a little faster, almost as if she were happy to see him.

*Don't be a fool*, she scolded herself. He already hurt her once, but now she was older, she would not allow herself to be entertained with childish fantasies. He would not be interested in her anymore today than he was back then. He probably still viewed her as just a child.

Supper consisted of roast beef, baby potatoes, green beans, and a salad. Over all it was delicious. She couldn't recall the last time she'd eaten a home cooked meal.

It would have to have been before she left the ranch. Her life in New York City was so rushed there was no time to cook. Her meals centered around take out from the deli around the corner and food delivered in, rather it be her penthouse apartment or her spacious office at work.

"This is delicious, Martha," she commented.

Blade only nodded his agreement. He hadn't said one word to her since he sat



down at the supper table. She wondered if he still planned to help her get settled into her cabin, which would be her home for the next year of her life.

The thought made her shudder. As much as she loved being here and seeing Martha again, she longed to be back in her apartment in the city that never sleeps.

It took some time to adjust to city life, but before she knew it, she was making friends and hanging out with the locals.

Of course, she made a lot of mistakes in the beginning, but she learned from them quickly. Being alone in New York City at such a young age helped her grow and mature into the woman she was today. She was a successful, career oriented woman.

"Thank you dear, for your kind words," Martha said, folding her napkin in her lap. "But as you know I cannot take all of the credit. At least half of it, if not more, goes to Allison."

Allison was Martha's assistant cook. She met Allison when the young girl came up to the main house to help Martha prepare supper. Allison seemed like a very nice girl and appeared to be shy.

When Martha brought out the decadent chocolate cake for desert, she knew she needed to show some willpower, especially after eating all those peanut butter cookies earlier. She declined desert, apologizing as she patted her stomach, and asked to be excused from the table.

Blade looked up at her. The way he was looking at her, it was as if he could see into her very soul. She froze, not knowing what to say. Was something wrong?

"Meet me in the living room in twenty minutes so we can get started," he said after a long, awkward moment of silence.

She breathed a sigh of relief. After assuring him she would, she escaped to the comfort and safety of her childhood bedroom. It was converted into her mother's sewing room after she left home. How was she ever going to be able to work comfortably along side this man, especially when she learned to despise him so much over the years?

She glanced in the mirror. Her hair was a mess, but it would have to wait until she

could find her hairbrush. A shopping trip is in order, she thought as she dug through the only suitcase she brought with her. It was filled with designer clothing, none of which was suitable for ranch work. At last, she found her hairbrush at the very bottom.

She pulled out the pins holding her hair up, which had begun to slip throughout the course of the day, leaving her hair in disarray. Her long, honey colored hair spilled down across her shoulders.

She began piling her hair up on top of her head into a French twist as she had styled it that morning before leaving the hotel she had spent the night in, but she changed her mind and let it fall back down. She fished out a hair band from her suitcase and when she found it, pulled her hair back into a ponytail instead as she always did as a teenager. Much more suitable for ranch life, she thought as she looked at her reflection in the mirror. If only she could say the same for her clothes.

She wore a light gray designer business skirt, matching jacket, and a white silk button up blouse. What looked good on her back in New York City, now looked out of place here in Idaho. But what could she do? She would have to wait until she could go shopping for more suitable ranch attire.

Twenty minutes later as she told Blade she would be, she stood downstairs in the living room with her suitcase waiting. Before she turned to look, she knew he entered the room. She could feel his powerful presence all around her.

"I'll take it for you," he said reaching for her suitcase.

"You don't have to, I can carry it myself." She hated the idea of him helping her with anything. She wanted to prove to him and everyone else around here she was still capable of pulling her own weight. Living in the big city all these years hadn't turned her into some helpless woman who couldn't take care of herself.

"I insist." He smiled and made another attempt to take it from her.

Reluctantly she handed it over to him. When she did, he asked, "Is this all you brought with you?" He arched one eyebrow, seeming genuinely surprised.

"I thought it was all I was going to need. I had planned on staying only long

enough to sell this place and to put the past behind me."

"Oh yeah--you didn't realize you'd be stuck here on the ranch for a whole year." The way he said it made her feel sort of guilty.

"No I didn't," she swallowed the lump that suddenly formed in her throat. "I need to drive into Boise tomorrow to buy some more clothes. Clothing that will be much more comfortable and suitable for life here in Hidden Oaks."

"Not in your car, you won't be," he stated matter of factually.

What did he mean? Did he think her parents' will gave him the right to boss her around? She'd drive her car anywhere she felt like it and whenever she pleased whether he liked it or not. "Excuse me. Who do you think you are to tell me I can't drive my own car tomorrow? You're not my boss and you sure as hell aren't my father, so don't be trying to take his place now that he is gone. I may be stuck here, as you so elegantly put it, but you're not and never will be my keeper."

"I took a look at it before dinner," he said calmly. "Your transmission is going out in it and it needs to be replaced before you can drive it anywhere. I think we can spare one of the men for a couple hours in the morning while he drives your car into Boise to the shop to be fixed. I can take you there in my truck so you can do some shopping and he can ride back home with us."

Anger boiled up inside her. She took a couple of deep breaths before she spoke, but it didn't do much good. She still felt her temper flaring up. Blade affected her this way whenever she was around him, ever since that day in the barn. "Did I ask you to take a look at my car?" How was she ever going to survive this year on the ranch? To make matters worse, as mad as she was at Blade, she still felt the strongest desire stirring from within her to kiss him. She shoved her hands into the pockets of her jacket.

"No you didn't. Martha did. She must have thought she was doing you a favor that you would appreciate. She still cares about you as much as she always has. She devoted her entire life to caring for you. She never married. Never had a family of her own. You were all she ever wanted. She has always thought the world of you, even

after you ran off to get away from all of us and your life here on the ranch."

"Oh." She didn't know what else to say. She knew he was right and it didn't make her feel any better. In fact, she felt worse than she already did. How could she make it up to Martha? Martha not once complained about her leaving and she had never thought about how her departure affected the older woman, but apparently it caused the woman strife.

"Follow me," he said curtly when she remained silent. He began walking towards the door. She normally didn't take orders from anyone, especially from a man as arrogant as Blade, but she followed him anyway.

As they stepped outside, she inhaled deeply, filling her lungs with the cool evening air. She was assaulted with a strong scent of hay and straw. It smelled better than all the exhaust fumes she breathed in on a daily basis back home.

They walked along the stone path, which wasn't there before she left. A melancholy feeling washed over her. Her parents were gone, and nothing of her childhood home looked the same.

"The old saying, you can never go home again must be true," she said in a soft voice, breaking the silence between them.

Blade stopped walking and turned to face her. He set her suitcase down beside him. "What do you mean? You're here now, and if I had my way, you would stay here forever."

"You're right, but nothing looks familiar to me. It doesn't feel the same." What had she been expecting? She should have known things would be different, but in her mind's eye, she saw the ranch as it always was when she was younger. The reality of the situation with all the changes overwhelmed her.

"Why did you leave?" he asked, startling her out of her thoughts.

She was at a loss for words. It was one question she hoped she'd never have to answer, especially to him. Should she tell him how much he hurt her in the past? Deep in thought again, she bit her lip, nearly drawing blood. What should she say?

"Well..." he prompted her for an answer. He wasn't letting her off the hook. He

never did.

She cleared her throat. "I think we both know why I left. There's no need for me to elaborate." Why was it so hard for her to tell him the truth?

"No, you're wrong. I don't know why you felt the need to leave the only home you ever knew. Please tell me? Help me to understand why you left."

He was going to make her tell him. She felt trapped. She breathed in deeply before she spoke. "Do you remember the day in the barn when you yelled at me?"

"Yes." He winced and she knew he remembered the day as clearly as she did. The day had played over and over in her head since the moment it happened. "Why did you have to bring it up?" He sounded as if he regretted his actions in the past, but did he really?

"Because your rejection and your words cut deeper than you'll ever know." She turned and looked away from him so he wouldn't see the tears now running down her cheeks.

"Look at me," he demanded as he took her by the shoulders and forced her to turn around and face him. "Do you think I purposely set out to hurt you?"

"I don't know, you tell me. If so, you did one hell of a damn job of it." She studied the expression on his face, searching for a clue that would tell her if he was being honest with her or not at this moment, but found none.

"Why don't I just show you what I wanted to do to you back then, but couldn't?"

"What do you mean?"

Her words were cut off as his lips came down hard and claimed hers. Every nerve in her body came to life and the all time and space seemed to come to a stand still. It was just her and Blade. Was she dreaming? No, this was real and she was fully awake. This should not be happening her mind shouted through the foggy state she was in, but it was. She knew she should stop it, but she lingered in the sensations coursing through her veins. She was like a drug addict. The longer the kiss lasted, the more of Blade she craved. As her senses took over her actions once again, she pushed and fought free from him.

"Why in the hell did you kiss me?" she demanded. She felt anger rare up from within her, but it wasn't entirely at him. She was upset with herself. She wasn't quite sure why. All she knew was she felt like lashing out at someone. It might as well be Blade.

"Because I wanted to. Don't bother telling me you didn't want me to kiss you because I won't believe it. You wanted it just as much as I did. I felt how your body responded as I held you in my arms and kissed you."

"You're so full of yourself and so arrogant," she shouted, stomping the ground in frustration.

"Why can't you just admit you feel the same way I do?" He challenged.

"It would be a lie. I hate you. Besides, all you feel for me is lust." As she said the words, she knew they weren't true, but she couldn't help herself. She allowed herself to look at him and instantly she regretted it.

Anger flashed in his eyes, just as it did a long time ago on that day in the barn. She braced herself for the blow she could feel coming, but to her surprise it never did. Instead, he turned, picked up her suitcase and started walking again.

In the distance ahead she could see the cabins dotting the east pasture. As soon as they reached the first row of cabins, a door flew open.

A blond headed woman came running out and latched herself onto Blade. "I missed you today," she cooed in his ear as she traced a red painted fingernail back and forth along his jaw line. "When are you planning to take me out again?" A part of her wished he would have shouted or something. She hated the silence between them. It was worse than if he did explode with anger.

"I'm sure it will be soon," was Blade's response.

So, that was how it was. He kissed her while he had this other woman under his spell. She wondered how many other women were on his list of conquests. If he thought he could add her to the list of women he had already added, he was sadly mistaken.

She waited until the blond girl went back inside her cabin before she spoke.

“Would you please show me to my new home? I’m very tired.

Without answering her question, he started walking again. When he reached the cabin she would be calling home for the next year or so, he fished in his pocket for the key. When he got the door open, he carried her suitcase inside, and set it down. With a tip of his cowboy hat in way of parting, he was gone.

She looked around the quaint little cabin. She could fit the entire cabin inside her penthouse apartment back in New York and still have plenty of living space left over. The cabin was rustic with a homey feel to it.

She let out a long sigh and was getting ready to pick up her suitcase when she heard a knock at the door. She hoped whoever was there would go away soon. She was not in the mood for any visitors.

By the time she reached what she thought was the bedroom door, the knock grew louder and more persistent. Whoever was on the other side was determined for her to open it for them.

Maybe it was one of the guests, she thought. Maybe someone witnessed her arrival and had come to welcome her to the ranch. I can always fake a headache, she thought with a small smile as she made her way over to the door and opened it.

## Chapter Three

The person on the other side of the door turned out to be Blade. He was the last person she wanted to see. After an awkward moment of silence, he finally spoke. "I'm not going to apologize for the kiss we shared tonight, but I do promise to try not to lay a finger on you if you let me help you get settled in."

She backed away in a silent invitation for him to come inside. He took it without saying a word. When he was inside the cabin and the door closed behind him, she began to wonder if she made the right decision inviting him in like this.

The cabin seemed much smaller with him in it. Every nerve in her body began to tingle with awareness of his presence. Her throat suddenly felt very dry, as if she'd been walking through the Sahara with a mouthful of cotton. She did her best to find her voice, but it didn't seem to want to come. Finally, after clearing her throat, she said, "You really don't have to help me if you don't want to. I can manage the task on my own."

"No, it's alright. I want to help you." His voice came out sounding huskier than usual. She wondered if he knew it. She certainly picked up on it.

She felt a strong desire to pull him into her arms, and not just to kiss him, but to have her way with him as well. She fought it. The last thing she wanted was to end up one of the women on his list, and later discarded when he grew tired of her.

She walked over and picked up her suitcase. She walked over and laced her hand on what she thought was the doorknob leading to the bedroom.

"That's just a closet, the bedroom is this way," he said as he walked toward a door



on the other side of the cabin. She followed him with her suitcase. When she entered the bedroom behind him and spotted the large queen sized bed, she knew she must be crazy. She would have to be to even go within five feet of a bed with him.

Just as well, she walked over to the bed, hoisted her suitcase up on the bed and opened it. "Turn around and look the other way," she ordered.

"What for?" He sounded irritated and put off by her request.

"Just do it." She felt a little embarrassed.

When she was completely certain his back was to her, she quickly unpacked her bras, panties, and tampons. She stored them neatly away in the top drawer of the dresser. "You can look now," she said as soon as the task was done.

"What was such a big secret I couldn't look?" He had a grin on his face that made her feel uncomfortable.

"What do you think?" She wasn't about to give him a direct answer.

He took a peek inside her suitcase. "Your bras and panties?" Dammit! Why did he have to be so nosey?

"Yes, if you must know," she said flushing. She didn't like him or any other man knowing her personal business.

"You don't think I've seen bras and panties in my lifetime?" He had a devilish gleam in his eyes. She could tell he was really enjoying himself. Too bad it was at her expense.

"I'm sure you've seen plenty of them, but I know for a fact you haven't seen mine and that's the way it's going to stay." She hoped he didn't go snooping in the drawer now.

"I wouldn't be so sure." He acted so sure of himself and he now wore a smug expression on his face.

"What do you mean? I think invasion of privacy is a little beneath you, Blade." She knew she shouldn't be taunting him, but she couldn't help herself.

"Don't push me or I'll be forced to demonstrate." Was he serious? She prayed he was kidding.

"Push you? Heaven knows, Blade, it's the very last thing I'd want to do." She knew she was getting herself into some hot water, but she was enjoying herself too much to stop now.

"Alright, you asked for it." In one swift move, he had her suitcase and clothes off the bed and scattered across the floor. Before she knew it, Blade was on top of her. What had she just gotten herself into?

He was kissing her with a fever she never experience before. It was as if he were branding her as his own with every flame he ignited in her. She knew it was ridiculous, but he was definitely leaving his own imprint. Would she ever be able to allow another man to touch her in this way after Blade? She doubted it.

She kissed him back, matching his hunger and desire. His hands began to explore her body, slowly moving upward until his hands were roaming expertly over the slopes of her breasts. Panic began to set in. Did she really want him to quit? Part of her wanted him to go on forever, but she knew she had to do something.

She needed to stop him before things went too far, before she found herself to be just one of the many women on his list to him and the rest of the world. She shoved him hard. "Stop it! With behavior like this, it's no wonder the activities director quit." That got his attention. She felt a loss so powerful she wanted to cry as soon as he pulled away.

The passion and desire in his eyes flickered before turning to anger. He got up and began picking her clothes up off the floor. "You think what I just did with you, I did with her too?" She began to tremble with a mixture of emotions.

She could hear the anger in his voice. "Her and every other woman you meet." She knew she was taking things too far now, but she wasn't in the right state of mind to stop herself. His kisses did that to her.

He whirled around to face her. "Why do you think the worst of me? What you and I just experienced on your bed just now doesn't happen every day and not with just anyone either. Stop trying to cheapen what is happening between us." There was no denying the anger in his eyes.

"You really expect me to believe you? I bet you say the same thing to all your women. I saw how that other woman was hanging all over you tonight." Was this what jealousy felt like?

"Did you also see me loose all control with her the way you and I just did?" She hated knowing that she wanted a repeat performance of what had just happened between them. She wouldn't admit it to anyone though.

"No, but it could only be because I was there and you didn't want an audience." Would he have really gone further with the woman if she hadn't been there to witness the whole scene?

"You really don't know me," he spat at her. His words stung. He tossed the clothes he just picked up off the floor onto the bed before he stormed out of the cabin for the second time, slamming the door closed behind him.

She sat up and straightened her skirt and blouse before she began picking up the rest of her clothes and adding them to the pile Blade started before storming out.

When a knock came to the door again for the second time that evening, she rolled her eyes in frustration. He'd never learn. She walked to the door and flung it open. "Don't you ever give up?" she shouted. She realized her blunder too late.

It wasn't Blade at her door. It was Rex. "I'm sorry," she apologized quickly. She felt her cheeks flame up in embarrassment. "I thought you were someone else.

"Apparently so," he said, looking past her and into the cabin. "Where's Blade?" She couldn't get over how much he looked like Blade had the day she left here for New York.

"He needed to leave." She hoped he wouldn't question her further, but he did.

"Is he coming back?" Not if she could help it.

She smiled as she fought to get her emotions under control. "I doubt it," she said, running her fingers through her hair. "Not if he knows what's best for him, he won't." She managed a small laugh.

"What could have been more important than helping a sweet girl like you out?" *His libido*, she thought to herself.

"I'm not sure," she said, and she remembered her manners. "Why don't you come in while I finish unpacking and putting my clothes away?" She could have kicked herself for not inviting him in sooner and leaving him standing outside. That's what she got for getting herself too wrapped up in her own problems.

"Sure, but I can only stay for a few minutes. I really do need to find my hotheaded cousin." What if Rex found his cousin and Blade told him everything? She hoped Blade wouldn't mention what happened earlier between them to anyone.

Rex removed his cowboy hat before entering the cabin and followed her into the bedroom. This was a first, she thought. Two men in her room in one night. It was a first for getting kissed by Blade too. She pushed the thought to the back of her mind. It was the last thing she should be thinking about. He eyed the empty suitcase on the floor in the middle of the room and the few clothes still scattered across the room. He walked over and placed his cowboy hat on the bed before he asked, "What happened here?" She blushed, which she seemed to be doing a lot of since she arrived on the ranch.

"Just clumsy me." There was no way she could tell Rex or anyone else what really happened. She also would never admit to anyone Blade's kiss was everything she imagined as a teenager and more.

Rex picked up the last few articles of clothing from the floor and added them to the growing pile on the bed. "Are you sure that's all it was?" Didn't he believe her? She would just have to do her best to convince him.

"I'm a complete klutz at times. The suitcase was on the bed one minute, on the floor the next." This part was true. She only left out the part where Blade had knocked everything flying.

"You'll probably think this is silly of me, but I thought my cousin threw your suitcase on the floor." If he only knew how right on target he was.

She could feel the heat rising in her cheeks. "Why would you think such a thing?" Did everyone on the ranch know about the tension between her and Blade? Was it really that obvious?

"I'm not sure if you noticed, but he seemed to be in a really foul mood this afternoon. When I asked him if anything was wrong, he told me to mind my own business."

She did notice the way he was acting. She knew her return to the ranch was the main reason he was in a foul mood, but how could she tell Rex? She couldn't. This was between her and Blade. "I didn't notice," she told him instead. This whole situation was too complicated.

She took several articles of clothing and walked over to the closet with them. To her relief, there were plenty of hangers to place them on. She began hanging them up. Rex followed suit. It wasn't long until the task was completed.

By the time they finished, she was thirsty. She noticed a small kitchen area when she first entered the cabin. Maybe the least she could do was offer Rex a cold drink of water.

When they entered the kitchen, she opened the refrigerator out of habit. To her surprise, she found a carton of orange juice, milk, a loaf of bread, some lunch meats, and a coconut cake sitting inside. Her mouth watered for a slice, but did she dare consume the calories.

She turned to Rex. "Do you think this stuff was left here by the last tenants?" How else would this food have gotten there?

"No ma'am. I personally cleaned this cabin out myself. All the units are cleaned and prepared as soon as the tenants leave to get them ready for the next occupants."

"Do all the cabins get supplied with food like this?" she asked, peering inside the refrigerator.

"No, I'd say someone brought you this food as a welcome gift. I was with Blade today when he stopped off at the grocery store on the way home from seeing the lawyer in Boise. He bought a cake just like this one. It sure does look good."

Could this food really be from Blade? Why would he go to such trouble? She was almost certain he was the one who put it in here. She made a mental note to thank him when she saw him again. She took another look at the cake. How could she resist.

Coconut cake had always been her favorite. "Would you like a piece?"

"If it's not too much trouble, I'd be much obliged."

She cut a big slice for Rex and a sliver of a slice for herself. As an afterthought, she poured them each a glass of milk. She knew she would pay later when the delicious treat decided to make itself at home on her hips or some other spot, which would be just as unpleasant.

When they finished eating, Rex excused himself and left to go out in search of his cousin. She was extremely tired from her long trip. She decided to turn in early. Besides, there was nothing else to do and she could feel a headache coming on.

When she entered the bedroom, she found Rex's cowboy hat on the bed where he'd forgotten it. She picked it up and placed it on the dresser. She resisted the urge to pick it up again and place it on her head.

She knew Rex would be back for it, she just hoped it wouldn't be tonight because she was so tired and needed to get some sleep. The last thing she needed was another interruption tonight.

She stripped down to her bra and panties before climbing into bed. She was too tired to bother with putting on a nightgown or a pair of pajamas. It wasn't long before she drifted off to sleep and began to dream about Blade. In her dream, he was exploring every inch of her body with his hands, entering her, and connecting them, mind, body, and soul. A little later, she woke up from the dream drenched in sweat. Oh how she wished it were real.

She got up long enough to get a drink of water before she went back to bed. With her body aching to be touched by Blade, she struggled to get back to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Blade looked up and saw Rex walking towards him. There was something odd about him he couldn't put his finger on. As he drew nearer, Blade suddenly realized what it was. Rex wasn't wearing his cowboy hat. In all the time Rex worked on the ranch, he never saw him without it. He rarely took it off. What was going on?

When Rex was standing just inches from him, Blade asked, "Where's your cowboy

hat?" Had he lost it? "It isn't like you not to wear it."

Rex reached up and ran his fingers through his hair, the nervous expression he wore wrinkling his brow. "I must have walked out and left it on Megan's bed. It's where I remember having it last." He said it with such casualty. Was he even thinking straight? Or maybe he just didn't care about anyone else's feelings.

Anger and jealousy boiled up inside of him. It settled in the pit of his stomach like a burning ball of fire. She wouldn't allow him to make love to her and show her how he really felt about her, but she allowed his younger cousin to take her to bed? A man she didn't even know until she met him a little less than six hours ago? It appeared little Megan changed in more ways than just physical appearance. He knew it had been a mistake to let her run off the way she had. A city as large as New York City was no place for her.

"I've been looking all over for you so I could tell you..." Blade cut him off before he could continue.

"I don't want to hear it. Just get out of my face. I can't stand to look at you right now." He knew he was being harsh, but he couldn't help it.

"But..." his cousin began to protest, but Blade stopped him again.

"You heard me, now go." He needed to be alone with his thoughts.

He went into the barn and began stacking large bales of hay into a corner of the barn. There was nothing like hard physical labor to take the edge off the anger he was feeling. Maybe a brisk horseback ride before it got too much darker would do him some good. He went off to saddle up one of the horses.

\* \* \* \*

She slept later then she planned on the next morning. She just finished showering and getting dressed when she heard a knock at the door. She opened it to find Blade standing there. She wasn't sure after the way things ended between them the night before if he was going to show up or not this morning to take her into Boise, but she was glad he did.

"Are you coming or not? We don't have all day, especially if you still plan to take

our guests out on the nature walk this afternoon that you mentioned to Martha right before dinner last night." She wasn't even aware he had heard her conversation with Martha.

She hoped he'd be in a better mood today than he'd been in the night before, but apparently he wasn't. "Just let me grab my purse and I'll be right out."

She meant for him to stay outside, but he didn't. As soon as she turned her back to him, he followed her inside, closing the door behind him." He closed the distance between them, making her nervous.

He grabbed her and forcefully pushed her against the wall. Not hard enough to do any damage, but he made it clear he meant business. He pinned her with his strong hands, his body mashed against hers, the closeness stirring the heat within the center of her.

"Let me go, Blade." She fought him, trying to push him away, but it was no use. "You're hurting me," she said through gritted teeth. She tried to read his expression for a clue as to what his problem could be, but it was hard to tell.

He loosened his grip on her, but not entirely. "Not until you give me some answers and I want the honest truth." She frowned. What was he talking about?

"What do you want to know?" She was more annoyed with his behavior than anything else.

His breath was ragged and his tone of voice sounded harsh as he spoke. "Why wouldn't you allow me to make love to you last night, but as soon as I was gone, you let my cousin into your cabin and into your bed?" Had he gotten into the liquor? Whatever it was, it had turned him into a mad man.

"I did no such thing. Is that what he told you?" What little she knew about Rex, he didn't seem like the type of man who would spread stories. She had credited herself as being a pretty good judge of character.

"He didn't need to. As soon as he told me he left his cowboy hat on your bed, I put two and two together." Was he serious?

"Yeah, and you're coming up with five. If you'd just stop yelling long enough, I



can explain.” His accusations were hurtful and cut to the bone.

“Explain what? How you allowed my cousin to touch you in places on your body I have only dreamed of exploring with my own hands and mouth? A man you just met? Is that how people do things back in New York City? Is it what you have been learning there the past five years?” Were the white coats right around the corner?

“Go take your Meds, Blade. You're delusional. For your information, I never had sex with your cousin or anyone else last night. Not that it's any of your business, because who I allow into my bed is none of your concern.”

He didn't say a word. Instead he leaned in closer and her whole body tensed as she realized what he was about to do. It was too late to stop him. His mouth came down on hers. There was nothing tender, nor passionate about the kiss. It was demanding. Suddenly he pushed away from her. She felt rejected.

“Let's go.” He began walking towards the door. She followed him out, although the tension between them was awkward.

Did he believe her? Was that what the kiss was about? Or was it something much deeper? Whatever the kiss was about, she was still feeling pretty shook up by the time she climbed into the truck and took her seat next to Blade.

He handed her a bag of Martha's freshly baked glazed donuts and a thermos of strong black coffee, which instantly wiped away any fatigue she may have been feeling with one sip.

It didn't however, relax her. She was still feeling pretty shook up over the kiss by the time they reached the shopping center in Boise.

Blade went off to buy some supplies for the ranch, leaving her on her own to shop for clothes. It was just as well. She needed time to think and she couldn't form a clear and rational thought with him around.

Were the feelings between them just lust as she believed, or was there something much deeper, like Blade believed? Could it be possible that these feelings she felt for Blade were genuine love?

There was only one-way to find out, but was she willing to take the chance and

explore these feelings between them? Would Blade be willing to explore deeper into this after believing she seduced his cousin? Did Blade really have a string of girlfriends like the blond who was renting one of the cabins? She felt a strong ache in her heart.

They apparently dated at some point in the not so distant past and Blade himself told her they'd go out again soon. She didn't want to come between them if they were a couple.

A million different questions ran through her head. She had no answers for any of them. She wasn't the type to indulge in one night stands with any man. It was all or nothing at all. It hurt her knowing Blade thought she'd done so with his cousin and it was possible he could still believe it.

She was looking at a rack of jeans in the first store she entered when she heard someone calling out her name. "Megan, is it really you?" She jumped at the sound of her name.

Releasing her hold from the pair of jeans she had been examining, she turned to see a woman who looked familiar standing behind her, but she couldn't recall who it was. She tried her best to be polite regardless. "Yes it is." She allowed a small smile to make itself at home on her lips.

"I thought so. How are you holding up? I know your parents' death must have been hard on you." Okay. So, this woman knew her parents. It didn't narrow it down a whole lot. Her parents made many friends over the years.

"Thank you for your kind concern. I miss my parents dearly." It was the honest truth. She felt a strong ache in her heart and hoped she didn't start bawling like a baby in front of this woman. It would be the talk of the town.

"Why didn't you ever come back home to visit them after you went away?" She winced.

There it was. The question she hoped no one would ask her. It was what she asked herself over and over again in her mind since she received the news about her parents' automobile accident, which eventually led to their deaths. Her mouth went dry. She

really didn't know what to say. There was no answer.

She saw Blade approaching them. "Hi, Mrs. Dunaway. It's nice to see you again. It's been awhile since you been out to the ranch. How have you been?"

Why didn't she recognize Edith Dunaway to begin with? Edith was her mother's best friend. She knew the woman her whole life. Edith even bought Megan some cute little outfits when she was a little girl.

"I'm doing well." She turned her attention back to Megan. "You are staying out at the ranch, aren't you?"

"Yes as a matter of fact I am. I'm staying in one of the guest cabins." She managed to maintain her smile.

"How wonderful. Now I know you're there, I'll be making visits to the ranch more often. How long will you be staying? I do hope you won't be returning back to New York City right away." It would be nice to have the Edith around, even if the older woman reminded her a lot of her mother.

"Don't worry, she assured her, trying to hide her distaste for the idea. "I won't be returning home to the city for another year. I have some unfinished business here to attend to first."

"Oh yes, the will." She knew about the twist in the will?

She felt strongly now that the stipulation in her parents' will was Edith's idea, but she didn't have any solid proof. She couldn't just come right out and ask Edith either. It would be rude.

Edith excused herself, saying she needed to run more errands before she could go home. Megan hugged the woman before she watched her walk away.

Blade turned to her, a flame of something—anger—desire--and said, "Don't get too hooked on the idea of going back to New York, because if I have my way, and you know I will because I don't take no for an answer, you won't be stepping foot back in New York City ever again." She'd show him, she decided.

## Chapter Four

She stared at Blade in shock. She was in disbelief. Who did this man think he was? If he thought he could stop her from going back to New York City when the year was up, he was wrong. Dead wrong. She would prove to him just how wrong he was.

"I don't know who you think you are, or what you think gives you the authority to tell me where I can or cannot live, but once this year is up, I'm gone. Not you. Not anyone else. Nobody will be able to stop me from going home." She smiled smugly. She had made her point pretty clear.

"This is your home." Would the guy ever give up?

"Not anymore it isn't. Idaho hasn't been my home since I left on my eighteenth birthday." Would he ever understand where she was coming from? Probably not. He had always been a very stubborn man(,) used to having his own way. Well, not this time.

"We'll just see," he said as he turned to walk out, but called over his shoulder, "Meet me at the truck at one so we can get back to the ranch." Yes, we will see, she thought to herself.

She had half a mind to catch up with Edith and hitch a ride back to the ranch with her. It would serve Blade right. But she didn't. Instead, she stayed and finished her shopping, satisfied with all of her clothing selections. She couldn't wait to get back to the ranch and change into a pair of her new jeans. She knew they wouldn't be as comfortable as the jeans she wore in her youth, but she would have these new ones

broke in, in no time flat.

At five minutes to one, she met Blade at the truck, a few minutes earlier than they had planned. He was already there waiting for her. He got out and loaded her purchases into the back, along with the supplies he picked up for the ranch. As he did so, he didn't say a word. Was he still upset about the little scene back in the store?

She stood, watching Blade; she heard a sound behind her, someone clearing his throat. She jumped, startled, and turned to see a vaguely familiar man standing behind her. She had seen a glimpse of him the day before when she first arrived. Blade introduced him as Fred Bishop; the ranch hand who had driven her car into town to be repaired. She politely thanked him, laughing at her behavior. Blade caused all of her senses to go into overload, and she was acting like some nervous kitten. It wasn't like her at all. She sighed, trying to relax.

Blade walked around to the passenger side of the truck and opened it, motioning for her to get in. "Fred first," she said, backing away. She wasn't in the mood to sit next to Blade. The last thing she needed was physical contact with him. She didn't know how much longer she would be able to resist him. Thinking about it scared her.

When they arrived back at the ranch, she received the miracle she'd been hoping for. An activities director was found and hired while they were in Boise. She would need to find something else to do around the ranch to make herself more useful and to fulfill her parents last wishes.

She was relieved to know she wouldn't have to plan anymore activities for the ranch. It really wasn't a job for an ad executive. No job on the ranch was a job for an ad executive, she realized, but what choice did she have? Maybe she could help with the marketing end of the ranch, she thought with a grin.

She was stuck here for a year and there was no getting around that. She would just have to make the best of it. Her career with the largest ad agency in New York City was probably as good as over. The thought depressed her. What had her parents been thinking?

She took the guests out on the nature walk later in the afternoon as promised. It

was a good way for her to get to know them all a little better as she answered all their questions about various landmarks on the property.

The whole time Blade was with the blond. It was only obvious they were involved in something much bigger than friendship. She noticed how the woman kept her arm linked with Blade's and the looks she kept casting her way as if to say, "Back off, he's mine." She didn't know why, but it felt like a knife through the heart. She felt a strong desire to fight for Blade, but she couldn't. Blade wasn't hers to start with. This woman had every right to claim him and from where she stood, it looked as though it was what Blade wanted. He wasn't protesting.

She tried to ignore it and she was relieved when the nature walk was over. She couldn't stand to see Blade with another woman. She needed to get out of here. She began walking back to the house when she felt a hand on her shoulder. She turned and found herself face to face with Blade. The blond was standing a few feet away, her arms crossed, and a scowl pinned directly on them. It was obvious she didn't want Blade associating with her.

Her mouth went dry, but she forced herself to speak anyway. "Don't you think you should get back to your girlfriend?" The last thing she wanted was to come between any couple. As much as she was fond of Blade, this was no exception.

"She's not my girlfriend," he said with a low growl. What would he call it then.

"Say whatever you will." She turned and began walking towards the house again. She needed to get away and fast.

In a matter of seconds, he was standing directly in front of her, halting her in her tracks, a hand on her shoulder. She tried to shrug away from him, but couldn't. He was too quick for her. "You'll eat supper up at the ranch house tonight." It wasn't so much a question as a demand. He was beginning to irritate her.

"What do you think...you are my boss?" she asked, letting him know with the tone of her voice how she felt about his actions.

"I said you'll have dinner up at the ranch house." The man never stopped for anything.

"And what if I don't want to?" she taunted him.

"You'll have dinner up at the ranch house, even if I have to come get you and carry you there myself." He finally released her and walked back to where the blond was impatiently waiting for him. Megan stood with her arms folded.

She was furious. The nerve of the man. She damned well would not be having dinner up at the ranch house. She would be eating tonight's meal in her own cabin just to spite him. He needed to learn he couldn't order her around.

\* \* \* \*

She'd just finished making herself a sandwich and was just getting ready to sit down and eat it when she heard a knock on the door. Knowing it was Blade, she wanted to ignore him in hopes he'd go away, but she knew him well enough to know he wouldn't until he got his own way.

"Damn it, Megan, open this door now," he yelled. "I know you're in there, so either you open this door, or I'm gonna bust it down." She knew he would too.

Damn him. Who did he think he was? She let out an exasperated sigh before walking to the door and opening it. He walked in without waiting to be invited inside. She glared at him. "What do you want? I was just getting ready to eat my supper, so if you'll please tell me what you want and be on your way."

"You know damn well why I'm here. I told you I wanted you to have dinner up at the ranch house with Martha and me." As irritating as he was being, she couldn't help but notice how cute he looked right now in a boyish sort of way. She fought to resist the urge to ruffle his hair.

"You can't order me around. I'm not a child anymore."

"What did I tell you I'd do?" She could see a fiery spark in his eyes and she knew he wasn't joking.

"You wouldn't dare!" she exclaimed as she began to back away.

"You wanna make a bet?" he said, stepping forward and closing the gap she had created between them. Without another word, he scooped her up in his arms and threw her over his shoulder. "You will be eating your dinner with Martha and me,

tonight and every night." What the hell did he think he was doing?

"Put me down this instant, Blade Thorn," she shouted as she began to pound on his back with both her fists. Ignoring her, he turned and walked out the door with her, leaving her cabin door wide open. Anyone could go in and steal her stuff.

She was still hollering and yelling as Blade entered the ranch house with her. He turned long enough to kick the door shut with the toe of his boot before entering the kitchen with her. "Put me down now," she hollered as loud as she could.

Martha's mouth dropped open and she placed her hands firmly on her hips. "What in heavens name is going on? You put that poor girl down this instant, Blade Thorn." Megan could tell the older woman meant what she said. She was relieved. She knew she could count on Martha to help her.

Blade did as he was told. She would have made a run for it, but he was blocking her path. She sank down onto a kitchen chair. "You'll pay for this," she muttered and turned away from him.

Martha looked at her sympathetically and turned her attention back to Blade. She planted her hands firmly on her hips. "You still haven't told me the meaning of this. You tell me now, or I will get it from Megan. Which is it going to be?"

She could sense Martha was mad. The woman wasn't one to cross, and there wasn't a person alive who could pull one over on her.

She glanced over at Blade. He removed his cowboy hat and shuffled his feet nervously like a child being scolded. "I warned her," he said at last, glancing in Megan's direction.

From the expression on Martha's face, Megan knew she was far from satisfied with his answer. "Warned her about what? What are you talking about?"

"Well, after the nature walk, I told her if she didn't join us for supper, I'd carry her here if I needed to. When she didn't show up, I went to her cabin. She refused to come here on her own, so I carried her here."

Martha's eyes were blazing with anger. "Of all the fool headed things to do, why did you have to go and do a thing like that?"



"I wanted her to eat her meal with me. What's so wrong with wanting her company?" He pulled up a kitchen chair and sank down on it. He sighed in frustration.

Martha turned to her. "Do you want to have supper with us?" Her voice softened as she spoke. "You know you're more than welcome to stay, but it has to be what you want?"

How could she let Martha down? She cast a dirty look in Blade's direction, letting him know she was still upset with him. "I'm here, so I might as well."

Martha got down a plate and took some eating utensils out of a drawer. She set an extra place at the table for her before she sat down and scooted herself up to the table.

Blade got up and set his chair next to hers before sitting back down. He was sitting so close to her their arms rubbed together when they moved.

She could feel the heat stir up between them. She thought about scooting her chair away, but thought better of it. There were enough problems stirred up for one evening. She didn't need to be the cause of anymore.

The back door opened. She looked up to see Rex enter the kitchen. Rex cleared his throat and removed his cowboy hat before he spoke. "I'm sorry to interrupt you folks while you're eating your supper. I just wanted to let Blade know the shipment of feed you ordered will be delivered sometime tomorrow afternoon." She had something to ask Rex, but she debated with herself if she should speak up or not.

"Thank you, Rex, we'll clear a space in the barn for it after dinner," Blade told him. "Is there anything else?"

"No. I'll let you folks get back to eating your supper now." He turned to go. She decided now was as good a time as any.

"Rex..." she called out before he could leave.

"Yes?" he said, coming to a stop.

He turned to her and she could see a flicker of hope in his eyes, though she saw it quickly die out. She could only imagine the look Blade must have given his cousin, but she wasn't about to turn around and check for herself, or else she might meet the same

gaze. "Do you think you could drive me into town sometime after the memorial service, if there is time, so I can do some grocery shopping?"

"Sure..." Rex began, but Blade cut him off."

"No, that won't be necessary," Blade nearly shouted. "If she insists on making this trip to the grocery store, I'll take her. Do I make myself clear?"

Rex shook his head in disgust, and without a word, he turned and walked out the door. She should have known Blade would react this way.

She turned to Blade, her dark blue eyes blazing with anger. She couldn't allow him to get away with this. If she did, he would continue to do it every time. "Who the hell do you think you are? What right do you have to decide what I can do, where I can go, and who with?"

"I think we should have this conversation in private," Blade said as he pushed himself away from the table. He began walking in the direction of the living room. She had no other choice but to excuse herself from the table and follow him, tossing a deep, but brief apology to Martha on her way out.

She found Blade pacing the living room like a caged tiger ready to pounce as soon as someone released him. Too bad for him. She wasn't about to let him off the hook. "Why are you behaving this way?" she demanded. "I do not appreciate being treated as if I'm a small child. I will not tolerate being treated as one from you or anyone else."

"Megan, I can't help how I get when I'm around you. I don't think I can control myself much longer. I need you." She nearly forgave him, but she knew she needed to be strong. She knew what he was after.

He just wanted her for sex. Well, he was out of luck. She wasn't the type of woman who would give herself to any man just for the sake of sex. It seemed as if it was all any man wanted now days, which was why she was still single.

"Go take a cold shower," she snapped, insulted he would play on her emotions to get what he wanted. She turned to walk back into the kitchen, but he caught her hand, forcing her to turn around and face him before pulling her into his embrace.

With a guttural groan, he lowered his lips to hers, drawing her into a world all of

their own. Heat flowed between them and drops of moisture pooled between her legs. She was too weak to stop him. He could take her right there on the living room floor, and she was too powerless to stop him. She melted into him, giving him all of her. There was no denying it. She wanted him bad and she wanted him now.

She jumped when she heard Martha clear her throat. Blade must have heard her too because they pulled away from one another at the same time.

"I'm sorry I interrupted you both. I'll go back to the kitchen and the two of you can forget I was even here." Martha turned to go.

Megan's cheeks burned a bright shade of crimson red. "This isn't what you think," she blurted out, feeling the need to explain. She'd never felt more embarrassed in her life.

"It's alright, Megan dear. I always suspected you had a crush on Blade when you were younger. You're a grown woman now. If you and Blade want to start something up now, it's none of my business."

"I don't want to start anything up with Blade," she tried to explain, but Martha had already left the room. Now what?

She turned to Blade. "Are you happy now?" she snapped at him. The last thing she needed was for anyone to get the wrong impression about her and Blade.

He laughed. "Have I ever told you how attractive you are when you're angry?" She felt anger boil up within herself.

\* \* \* \*

Megan groaned in frustration. Were things never going to get better?

She threw one of her pillows across the room. It ricocheted off the wall and hit the dresser before landing on the floor. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't sleep. All she could think about was Blade Thorn. It angered her how much she wanted to be with him.

Whenever she closed her eyes, she could see an image of Blade. His muscular frame seemed to fill his clothes out quite nicely. She kept imagining what it would be like to run her hands over his rock solid chest. She loved how he looked in jeans. She

could still remember the long nights as a teenager when she laid awake in bed, daydreaming about him. Her thoughts of him back in those days were hot and steamy, just as they were now.

She chided herself before kicking her blankets off. What she needed was a cold shower to calm her overactive hormones. But it would mean another trip back up to the ranch house, and a possible run in with Blade. Would it be so bad? Of course it would be. It was hard enough being around him during the day. Could she trust herself to be alone with him at night? No. It seemed too intimate.

There was no use trying to sleep. She got out of bed and walked into the kitchen to get a cold drink of water. It was the next best thing to a cold shower. She drank the water quickly, sat the glass down in the sink, and walked into the living room.

She went directly to the small bookcase filled with books. She scanned the titles until a mystery novel caught her attention. As she pulled it out, dust filtered into the air, causing her to cough. She turned her head until the dust settled. Apparently, no one had read the books since the day they were placed in the cabin.

She brushed it off before she walked over to the sofa and sank down on it, curling her legs up under her. Soon she was lost in a world of murder and mayhem, trying to figure out who'd done it. It was a toss up between the mailman and the paperboy, but she never did figure it out. Fifteen pages to go until the murderer was revealed and she fell sound asleep.

## Chapter Five

The next morning she met Martha and Blade out in front of the ranch house, dressed in the only church going dress she packed. They were quiet on the ride to the little white church several miles up the road from the ranch house. It was the same church she attended with her parents in her youth. Despite the somber mood she was in, she did her best to smile. The church held some of her favorite memories of her parents.

Blade pulled up in front of the church and parked. It all seemed so real now. She fought to hold back the tears threatening to spill. She needed to be strong and not cry until later when she was alone.

It seemed as if the whole town of Hidden Oaks showed up to pay their last respects to her parents. Her parents were well liked in the community and made a lot of friends over the years. It was evident by the crowd gathered there today.

The memorial service began and when it was time for her to go up front to give the eulogy, her legs felt as if they were going to go out from under her. She could barely speak, and when she did, she heard her voice crack. How she managed to finish the eulogy was beyond her.

When the service finally ended, she was relieved. Blade came up behind her as she was getting in the car. "Do you want me to drop you off at the picnic or do you want to go back to the ranch with Martha and me to get the food?"

"What picnic?" No one mentioned anything to her about a picnic before this. She

wondered how she would make it through a social gathering.

"We're having a picnic in the west pasture. The whole town is invited out to it." She knew there would be a large turn out. She bit her lip nervously.

She wanted to be alone, but she didn't want to seem anti social, either. She couldn't allow herself to become a hermit. Her parents wouldn't like that. She hated the thought of having to explain to everyone why she never returned to Hidden Oaks until now, but she would have to go to this picnic and face everyone. "I'll go help you and Martha with the food, and we can go to the picnic together," she said at last.

He reached up and stroked her face, causing every nerve in her body to come alive. "I was hoping you would," he said in barely a whisper. She felt the urge to kiss him and backed away from his touch. Getting in the car, she closed the door, which acted as a shield between them. She breathed a sigh of relief.

In no time flat, they were parked near the west pasture where it appeared everyone in town began to gather. She felt a knot in her stomach. Was she really ready to face everyone from her past? A small part of her wanted to turn and run back to her cabin at the ranch, locking the door securely behind her. She forced herself to stay. She was going to be living here for a full year. She might as well get it over with and face everyone now.

As if sensing her uneasiness, Martha came up behind her and patted her gently on the back. "Everything will be fine, dear. A lot of people around town have been asking about you. They have been looking forward to seeing you again. It's a safe bet to say everyone here missed you while you were away."

She nodded before taking the pie Blade was handing her. She followed Martha and Blade to join their guests.

Martha spread a large red and white checkered tablecloth down on the ground; while Blade began setting the food up on a picnic table several of the ranch hands placed there earlier. She set down the pie she was carrying and began helping Blade set the food out. Before long, people began to line up and help themselves to the spread before them.

She excused herself, went and sat down on the blanket with Martha. Her eyes were drawn to Blade's every move, no matter how hard she tried to look away. Martha noticed her watching him. "Some things never change, do they?" the older woman commented.

She was startled by Martha's question. She turned to Martha who wore a warm, gentle smile on her face. "What do you mean?" she quickly asked. She prayed Martha wasn't referring to the crush she once had on Blade back when she was just a young girl.

No such luck. "I'm talking about your feelings for Blade. I know you're in love with him. I can see it in your eyes. He loves you too, you know."

"What makes you so certain I love him?" she asked on the defense. She knew she was right about her feelings for Blade, but as for Blade's feelings for her, she felt he wasn't exactly in love with her.

"Don't try to deny it. I've been around long enough to know love when I see it." Martha's words were pretty convincing, but still Megan had some lingering doubts.

"Maybe I do love him, but what good does it do?" She felt helpless. "You're wrong about Blade loving me. The only thing Blade is interested in is sex. I doubt he even cares what woman he does bed as long as one is there with him. I just happen to be convenient for him at the present moment. Our history means nothing to him right now."

"You don't really believe that, do you?" Megan could tell by the tone of Martha's voice she was concerned.

"I most certainly do." She tried to sound stronger than she was feeling at the moment, but she failed when her voice slightly cracked.

"When are you going to be honest with yourself and Blade about how you really feel about him?" The question caught Megan off guard and she quickly pulled herself together.

"Never," she responded with a smirk. "The last thing I need to be doing is putting my heart on the line. Besides, haven't we talked about this? This is sounding all too

vaguely familiar." She knew her words were harsh, but she couldn't help herself.

"Come on now. Don't be this way. You have always been stubborn, but I'd hate to see you mess up your entire life because of it. He never expressed this verbally, but whenever your name got brought up, just by the expression on Blade's face I could tell he longed for the day when you would return home to the ranch and to him."

"Are you sure? You could be mistaken, you know." She wanted to believe Martha's words, but how could she?

"I know he has a funny way of showing it, but the man is one hundred percent crazy about you." Could it be true?

"Are you sure?" She felt a tiny spark of hope.

"Trust me on this one. Have I ever steered you wrong before?" This was one question Megan knew the answer to without a shadow of doubt.

She was more confused now, but she knew she needed to listen to Martha. In the entire time she had known the woman, she never knew her to be wrong about anything. "What do I do?" she asked helplessly.

"What is it they teach you girls in New York? Haven't you heard? The best way to a man's heart is through his stomach." A smile settled on Megan's lips.

\* \* \* \*

As the day progressed, she got reacquainted with the citizens of Hidden Oaks. She even met a couple new families who moved to the community after she left. She even saw Alex Corbin, the first boy she ever dated. He looked the same, except older.

Alex was still attractive, but in no way did he come close to comparing to Blade. She doubted any man would. She tried to concentrate on what Alex was saying as he tried to catch her up on his life story, but her mind kept wandering back to Blade and Martha's advice where the cowboy was concerned.

Blade and the other ranch hands had already excused themselves after eating to go back to the ranch to change clothes and meet the truck delivering a load of feed. She knew she wouldn't be able to go grocery shopping today, which meant the romantic dinner she was planning in her mind for Blade would have to wait. Maybe



tomorrow. How would Blade react to what she had planned for him?

"So, tell me Megan, what have you been doing with your life since you left Hidden Oaks?" Alex asked, breaking into her thoughts.

She felt bad because she heard very little of what he just said to her. "I work as an advertising executive for the leading advertising agency in New York City."

"Wow! Pretty impressive. How long are you in town for?" he asked. She could hear the hope in his voice.

"One year." It seemed almost like a prison sentence.

He let out a low whistle. "You left a wonderful job back in New York City and you're going to stay here in little Hidden Oaks, Idaho for a whole year?" The hope she had once heard turned to shock and disbelief.

She knew it sounded unbelievable. She could hardly believe it herself. She wished in a way it wasn't true, but the thought of going back to New York and leaving Blade behind suddenly bothered her. She couldn't explain why. "My parents left a stipulation in their will. I have two choices. I stay here for one year and run the ranch, or I lose the entire ranch to Blade Thorn. I can't allow my parents' ranch to be turned over to that man."

Alex gave her a sympathetic look, and reached out to grab her hand. "That stinks. I know this is a weird time to ask this, but do you think that maybe you and I could go out sometime? Before you have to go back, I mean." He sounded sincere.

Still, his question caught her off guard. She wasn't expecting it. The way she was confused about her feelings towards Blade, she didn't feel right about accepting a date with Alex. She also didn't want to turn him down completely, either. She wanted to leave her options open. "Look Alex," she said, squeezing the hand holding hers. "I know you're a really nice guy and all, but now is really not a good time for me. I need a little time to think it over." It was a hard thing to do. She felt a little bit of relief once the words were out.

He looked crushed, but he accepted her answer. She felt bad, but also a bit relieved. She knew deep in her heart she'd done the right thing. There was no use in

leading him on.

Alex went off to join some of the other guests and she went back to join Martha on the blanket. She was glad when the day was finally over. Everyone pitched in to help clean up. Blade returned to drive her and Martha back to the ranch, while the other ranch hands collected the picnic table. She had to admit, she made it through the day better than expected.

\* \* \* \*

It was a couple of days before she was finally able to go grocery shopping. She tried to sneak off with Rex without Blade finding out, but no such luck. He spotted them as they were getting in the truck and came running towards them. This was just what she needed.

After a few heated words with Rex, Blade was now behind the wheel of the truck driving towards the grocery store. She should have known he would pull this. She hoped he wouldn't become suspicious. She wanted the dinner she planned for the two of them for the evening to be a surprise. She wanted tonight to be special.

After they got to the grocery store, she got all the food in the cart without mishap. Right before they got to the checkout, she picked up some flowers to use as the centerpiece on the table. When Blade gave her a funny look, she said, "I thought they'd brighten up the cabin some." She was glad he bought her explanation without any questions.

When they arrived back at the ranch house, Blade said, "I'll help you with these groceries, and after we get them put away, I'd like you to come up to the ranch house and eat at least one more meal with us." This time it was a request, not an order.

She didn't want to upset him like last time by flat out refusing his invitation to dinner, and yet she couldn't tell him yes and ruin the evening she planned for the two of them. She simply said, "We'll see," and left it at that. He didn't argue.

"Fair enough," he said as he loaded his arms with groceries and followed her into her cabin. He sat the groceries down on the counter. She placed the flowers in a crystal vase before she began helping Blade put the groceries away. She could almost see

them doing this as a married couple. She tried to shake the image from her mind. Even if tonight's dinner was a success, marriage was not in the cards for them. His life was here on the ranch and hers was back in New York City. The thought almost made her want to cry. She was sure going to miss him. There was no question about it.

\* \* \* \*

After the groceries were all put away, Blade promised to be back in an hour to see if she changed her mind on the dinner invitation. As he walked out the door, she knew she needed to act quickly if she planned to have everything prepared by the time he returned.

She had just set down a bottle of wine she chilled in the small refrigerator while she cooked and just lit the candles when his knock came at the door. He must have noticed the lights turned off because he called out, "Megan, are you in there?"

She walked over to the door and opened it. "Is there something wrong?" he asked as soon as she got the door open. "All the lights are off."

She stepped back to allow him entrance. "Why don't you come in and find out for yourself?" She didn't know why, but she felt flirtatious at the moment.

"Don't mind if I do," he said, removing his cowboy hat and stepping inside, making the already small cabin seem even smaller, but this time she didn't mind.

"What's all this?" he asked when he spotted the romantic setting. She could have sworn with the little bit of light reflecting from the candles, she saw a hint of jealousy flash in his eyes. "Do you have a date tonight?"

"You could say I do," she said coolly.

"What do you mean?" She watched him squirm uncomfortably.

"You're my date, Blade." She didn't like the idea of playing around with him anymore than what she just did.

"Are you telling me you did all this for me?" He seemed genuinely surprised.

"I thought you'd like to share my first meal in my cabin with me." She smiled up at him warmly.

"It would be an honor. I just need to run back up to the house and let Martha

know.” He turned to go, but Megan stopped him.

“She already knows. This was actually Martha’s idea,” she revealed.

Blade looked her up and down, as if noticing what she was wearing for the first time. She wore a pink dress with red embroidered flowers running around the neckline of it. “Should I go back up to the house and change into something more formal?” He sounded nervous. She never saw him act so uncomfortable before. It was somewhat charming.

“Don’t be silly. You look great. In fact, you look down right sexy.” She had never felt this bold around any other man. Only Blade could bring out this side of her.

“Megan Marie Nelson, are you coming on to me?” he asked with a devilish grin.

“Maybe, if that's what you want to call it, now let’s eat before the food I’ve worked so hard to prepare gets cold.” If they didn't, she doubted she could trust herself not to rip his clothes off.

He followed her over to the kitchen table, and like a true gentleman, he seated her before taking his own seat across from her. If only we could spend every night like this for the rest of our lives, she thought. She knew it was impossible though. She pushed the thought to the back of her mind before she started crying and ruined their romantic dinner. She wanted to enjoy her evening.

Dinner was lovely. They barely spoke a word, looking at one another as though they were really seeing each other for the first time. It put Megan in a state of bliss. When they finished eating, he led her into the living room. “Would you care to dance?” she asked, looking up at Blade with a grin on her lips.

“But there isn’t any music.” He looked confused.

“We’ll make our own music,” she said as she began to hum a soft tune.

He swept her into his arms, but acted as if he didn’t know where to put his hands. Gradually, he began to relax. Twenty minutes later, he kissed her. It was a magical moment and she didn’t want to ruin it, so she kissed him back.

Before long, they danced their way into the bedroom. Lost in a world all their own, she allowed him to slide her dress up and pull it up over her head. He dropped it

on the floor and it pooled at their feet.

He continued kissing her, caressing her as a heat began building between them. A liquid heat surged through her and pooled between her legs.

She kissed him back hungrily as she undid his belt. In one swift move, it was off him and she dropped it to the floor before fumbling with the clasp of his jeans. As she unzipped them, she could feel the large bulge, which seemed eager to be free of them.

She pulled his pants down, and while continuing to kiss her, he stepped out of them. Her fingertips set to make short work of the buttons on his shirt. Her mind screamed for her to stop. She wasn't into one night stands and the thought kept repeating itself in her mind like a broken record. But she couldn't stop now. She didn't want to stop. It was if she were on autopilot.

He caressed her shoulders before pulling down one bra strap before the other. He fumbled with the clasp, and when he got it undone, he dropped it to the floor. He continued his exploration, caressing her thighs and hips before hooking his thumbs into the waistband of the lacy garment she called panties.

Once she was completely naked, he stepped back and examined her in the pale glow of the moonlight, which flowed through the window and bathed them in its milky glow. "God, you're beautiful," he growled before pulling her back into his arms and kissing her hard, taking her breath away.

She finished undressing him and he began pushing her onto the bed. He continued kissing her, exploring her body with his hands. She allowed her own hands to explore. A fire burned out of control between them.

He stopped kissing her and their eyes locked. He sank his manhood deep inside her and they became one. At first he didn't move, allowing her to adjust to him being in her. "Make love to me," she cried out, when she couldn't take it anymore.

He began a rhythmic motion. A raging inferno burned deep within her. Nothing like she had ever felt before. While looking into each other's eyes, they exploded, rocking their whole bodies. She cried out into the night when she reached her climax. He followed close behind. When it was all over, they laid there in each other's arms,

drenched in sweat.

## Chapter Six

The next morning as she slowly started to wake up, she wondered if she was dreaming. She stretched, yawned, and opened her eyes to find herself wrapped in Blade's embrace. Her mind reflected back to the night before. She never meant for the night to end the way it did. What was she thinking? It had to be the two glasses of wine she consumed.

She watched Blade as he slept. The sun was shining brightly in through the window. The rest of the men on the ranch were probably up and working by now. Surely, they were wondering where Blade was this morning. She would be mortified if any of them were to come to the cabin looking for him and found them in bed together.

She needed to bathe, dress, and prepare breakfast for her and Blade so she could send him on his way and not have to feel guilty for not feeding him. It was the least she could do. First she needed to find a way to get out of bed without waking Blade up in the process. As she tried to untangle herself from him, she felt his arms tightening around her. Could it be possible he was awake?

She studied him in the early morning sunlight. His eyes were shut and she could see the steady rise and fall of his chest as he breathed in and out. She tried again, but felt herself being pulled closer to him. Was he really awake? Didn't he understand what they did last night was a mistake?

She only meant for them to have a romantic dinner together and for the night to

end with dancing. Making love was not part of the plan.

Once they started though, she was powerless to stop it. What if Blade wanted an encore of last night? If so, would she be able to stop him? She needed to. To make the mistake twice would be bad for them both.

She shifted again in a final attempt. To her surprise he rolled over and pinned her beneath him, making it impossible for her to move. "Why are you in such a big hurry to get out of bed this morning?" he whispered in her ear, and then began trailing kisses along her jaw and neckline. Heat instantly coursed through her veins and deep within her, and a steady ache began to grow as memories of the night before flashed into her mind.

How could she tell him no? The look he was giving her was almost irresistible. In the position they were laying in, she could feel the heat radiating between them. She wanted him again so badly she ached for him. What would one more time hurt? No, Megan, her brain screamed. This can't happen again. It shouldn't have happened to begin with. She pulled herself together.

"Stop!" she said, trying to push him off her. "We can't do this." She wished she could give into his advances. If only the circumstances were different.

He stopped kissing her, but kept her pinned beneath him. She could barely think and a part of her wanted to plead with him to make love to her. She was on the verge of tears and feeling frustrated, but she wouldn't let him see her cry.

He watched her for a few minutes before he spoke. "Tell me why not? Don't you like it?" She hated being put on the spot.

She did however, love what Blade was trying to do to her. She loved how he made her feel. She loved him still, she realized, but she couldn't tell him. Her mouth felt dry and she couldn't seem to find her voice. She licked her lips frantically and saw a flicker of desire spark in his eyes. She needed to put an end to this madness now before it was too late.

She said the first thing that came to mind. "You have work you need to do, and if you don't dress and leave now, someone will come looking for you. We can't let them

find us this way." Panic filled her voice.

"So what if they find us this way? You're not a little girl anymore, Megan. You're all grown up. Everyone knew this was bound to happen."

She cringed with embarrassment. She hoped he wouldn't notice, but he did. "Even if everyone was expecting this to happen, I don't think being discovered this way would be very appropriate." She informed him.

"No, I don't think so. I'm not letting you out of this bed until you tell me why you won't let me make love to you this morning." His steel gray eyes were ablaze with anger. What happened during the night to make you change your mind?

If she didn't tell him the truth now, she'd end up giving into him. She couldn't tell him the complete truth though. She'd never felt more confused than she did right now. "I don't think it would be a good idea if you and I were to repeat what we did last night." She knew in her heart she was doing the right thing.

"What the hell is wrong with you, Megan? You're hot one minute and cold and putting on the breaks the next." He released his hold on her and got out of bed.

She didn't know what to say, so she just lay there, watching him gather his clothing up off the floor where they'd been hastily thrown last night. As he dressed, he kept his back to her, as if he couldn't stand to look at her. Tears started stinging her eyes.

What did she get herself into? She should have drawn the line at dancing last night before it got this far out of control. She couldn't stand it anymore. She got up, pulling the sheet around her. She left the room. He didn't try to stop her. Didn't he care about her the slightest little bit?

With the bathroom door closed securely behind her, she sat down on the toilet and started to sob. A short time later, she heard him leaving the cabin. How could she have been so foolish? She should have known she couldn't trust Blade Thorn.

He was the type of man who tossed women aside as soon as he got what he wanted and grew tired of them. She always thought it would be different with her. Apparently, it was just another one of her childhood fantasies and she was officially



one more name for him to add to his growing list of conquests. To make her feel even worse, she realized she wouldn't be the last. There would be other women to follow.

Her hurt turned into anger, and she dried away her tears with the back of her hand. She got up and drew herself a bubble bath. She lowered herself down into the bubbles and began to relax.

She realized she needed something to keep her busy. This way she'd be able to avoid Blade. Right now, she didn't want to see him ever again.

\* \* \* \*

After her bubble bath, which left her feeling refreshed and rejuvenated, she went into the bedroom. She got dressed, made the bed, and went to the telephone to make a call. A plan already formed in her mind, but there was someone she wanted to talk to first. It was her best friend, Julie Monroe in New York City. Talking to her closest friend would help her get through this situation and help her get over Blade.

She waited through several rings before Julie answered the phone. "Hey Jules, it's me."

"Hello, Megan! How the heck are you?" It was good to hear Julie's voice.

"I'm as well as can be expected." That was far from the truth, but she needed to figure out how to get the conversation started.

"When are you coming home?" By the tone of Julie's voice, she could tell she was lonely. She missed Julie. Back in the city, she would go over to Julie's apartment after work and they would talk about this over big bowls of Ben & Jerry's New York Super Fudge Chunk ice cream. She longed to be there now.

"That's just it. I have to stay right here in Idaho for a full year." She curled the telephone cord around her finger. She sighed. Why did she have to fall in love with Blade? Why couldn't it have been some other man?

She could have sworn she heard her best friend gasp. "You have got to be kidding me. Please tell me this is a joke? Am I on one of those hidden camera shows? Is someone like Ashton Kutcher or Jamie Kennedy going to jump out from behind the door?" Julie's words caused Megan to laugh.

"I wish I could honestly tell you that, and you only wish Ashton Kutcher would jump out from behind the door, but I'm serious. This is no joke."

"Why are you staying for a full year?" Megan could hear the disappointment in her best friend's voice.

"It's one of the stipulations my parents put in their will. I have to stay here for that length of time and run the ranch with Blade Thorn. If I fail to do so, the ranch will be turned over to Blade."

Jules sighed on the other end of the phone line. "Tell me about this Blade Thorn. Just his name sounds intriguing."

"He's the head ranch hand and he runs everything around here." *Including my life*, she thought. At least he tried to and she continued to fight him every step of the way.

"Wait a minute!" Jules gasped, sounding as if she just struck gold. "Don't tell me. This is the man you developed a crush on all those years ago. He's the reason you left Hidden Oaks and didn't want to return." Leave it to Jules to figure everything out.

This was the last conversation she wanted to have with anyone. Jules wasn't making this any easier on her. She was trying to forget about Blade Thorn. If it wasn't her mind betraying her, with images of Blade shirtless, his taut muscles glistening with sweat, the hot sun beating down on him as he worked, it was someone wanting to talk about Blade. She was beginning to feel exasperated. She tightened the cord around her finger.

"Can we change the subject?" she asked, hoping her friend would move their conversation in another direction. "I don't want to talk about Blade."

"Something happened, didn't it? You and Blade have hooked up and have done the horizontal mambo together, haven't you?"

Jules knew her better than she knew herself. She just wished Jules never stumbled upon this piece of information. If she lied, Jules would know. "Yes, as a matter of fact, we did." Tears stung at her eyes.

"Good grief! Spill it, girl! Don't be skimpy on the details, either. Was he any good?"

"Last night he spent the night in my bed. And Jules, oh my gosh, it was incredible." There, it was out in the open. It felt good being able to express that to someone she could trust not to tell anyone else.

"Ooh. And this morning?" Images of their fight filled Megan's mind.

"He left. That's all there is to it." She kept her answer simple, not wanting to get into too many details.

"What about next time?" Megan stilled, the question catching her off guard.

"There isn't going to be a next time. Last night was it." Saying the words out loud slashed through her heart like the sharp blade of a knife.

"You mean a one night stand? This is so unlike you. You've never seduce a man without the promise of a commitment." Megan could hear the shock in her best friend's voice.

There were times when she wished her best friend didn't know her so well. Right now was one of those times. She started twisting the phone cord around her finger again. It was a bad nervous habit.

"Yes it was a one night stand, but I never meant for it to happen to start with. You know the old cliché, it just happened. One minute we were dancing the night away, which is as far as I meant for it to go and the next minute we were in bed having the most fabulous sex of my life. Can we please change the subject? I really don't want to talk about Blade." Right now, just the thought of him made her want to cry. What she wouldn't give to be back in New York. She knew if she was though, she would miss Blade. *I must really be messed up*, she thought, releasing the phone cord.

"I understand, but I have one more question about Blade, and I swear I'll drop the subject after this." Megan rolled her eyes. Now what?

"What?" she asked, knowing full well she would soon regret allowing this conversation to continue.

"Why can't you just let Blade have the ranch? Pack up and come back home. You were planning to sell the ranch anyway, and besides, ranch life isn't for you. Your life is here in the city now." Another question she hated answering. She couldn't believe

Jules could even ask her to turn everything over to Blade.

She knew Jules was right about her life being in New York now. She no longer felt cut out for simple country life, but she wasn't ready to leave yet. She was determined to stick it out for the full year. She couldn't turn her family's ranch over to such an arrogant man. "I can't just let Blade have my family's ranch. You know me, Jules, I can't resist a challenge." She lived for it seemed more accurate. Being in New York and the work she did there was challenging. She thrived on it.

"Are you sure you want to stay in Idaho when you could be home resuming the life you have created for yourself here?" She longed to be there, but she had a job to do here. It was the least she could do for her parents.

"It is not a matter of me wanting to stay in Idaho. It's a matter of me not wanting to back out of a challenge. Besides, my mom and dad made this request and it is the last thing I can do for them before I put everything here behind me."

"If you're sure this is what you want..." Megan cut her off before she could finish getting the words out.

"I'm really sure." The last thing she wanted was to fight with Jules right now.

After promising Jules she'd call her more often and hanging up, she knew she needed to call the advertising agency. She put it off long enough and she wanted set everything for her plan in motion today. She just hoped Mr. Harper would agree to it. She was nervous.

His assistant, Vanessa Carlisle, answered the phone after several rings, but when Mr. Harper learned it was her, his voice came over the line in a matter of seconds. "Please tell me you've come to your senses and you're coming back home today. We need you here, you wouldn't believe the work load we have on us right now."

"I'm not coming home yet." She sighed as soon as the words were out and waited for her boss to explode.

"And tell me why the bloody hell not?" There it was, as expected.

"I told you before when we spoke the other night. I have to stay here for a full year." She hoped he didn't fire her.

"Yes, I know you told me." He let out a long sigh, sounding exasperated. "I just thought by now you would have come to your senses and figured out a way so you could come home. We need you here. One client is personally asking for you to work on his latest campaign. He loved the work you did on the last one."

"No I haven't, but I do have a plan." Would he accept the proposition she was about to make to him?

"What is it? If it involves you coming here now, I'm all ears." She sighed again. He wouldn't make this easy on her. Mr. Harper could be a very complicated man at times.

"No, sir, it doesn't, but I need you to hear me out just the same." Would he go for her idea?

"Oh alright, what is this plan you have come up with?" The man seemed disinterested, but he would hear her out just the same. She would see to it he did.

"I was hoping you could set me up with a computer and teleconference equipment so I can do a lot of work here at the ranch." She stopped, waiting for his response.

"Are you serious?" He didn't seem very eager about the idea.

"Of course I'm serious. I can't come home yet, so what choice do we have?" She held her breath for a few seconds, giving him a chance to absorb everything.

He was silent on the other end of the phone line. She knew he was thinking about it. She crossed her fingers. "Fine, but on one condition," he said at last. "I'm not just sending the equipment you requested, I'm also sending Josh Burton there to work with you as your partner for the full year."

Her mouth went dry. She and Josh dated a few times in the past. They were really good friends now, but did she want him here on the ranch with her? "Mr. Harper, it won't be necessary. I just need the equipment shipped..." He cut her off.

"My final offer, Ms. Nelson. Take it or leave it." She knew he was serious. She let out a loud sigh.

He was leaving her no other choice. Josh came here or she would be out of a job she couldn't afford to lose. "Fine, you've got yourself a deal."

\* \* \* \*

On the day Josh arrived and began unloading the equipment, she watched as Blade approached him. She hadn't spoken with Blade since the morning he stormed out of her cabin, so he didn't know what was going on. She could only imagine his reaction when he learned Josh was staying.

She told no one about her plan, or the fact Josh was coming to spend the year with her on the ranch so they could work together as a team. She figured if there wasn't an empty cabin to be found anywhere on the ranch; Josh could stay in her cabin with her and sleep on the sofa.

She watched as Blade and Josh exchanged a few words before they shook hands. They exchanged some more words and suddenly Blade's head jerked up and his gaze traveled in her direction. He turned his attention back to Josh, said something to him, and then began walking in her direction. She braced herself for the confrontation she knew would be coming soon.

She was standing in the doorway of her cabin wearing a pair of cut off jeans showcasing her long, lean, tan legs, and a halter-top. She felt vulnerable as she watched him approach. What did he want? Would he be rude to her guest?

She wanted to run, but there was no place to go. She was trapped. She felt like a deer caught in the headlights of an approaching vehicle. Even if she went inside and closed the door, locking it behind her, she knew it wouldn't stop him from getting inside. She found it ironic Blade always got what he wanted. Including in her bed with her. She cringed at the thought.

"We need to talk," he said when he was within a few feet from where she stood.

"Is there a problem?" she asked innocently. She could tell he was upset about something by the spark in his eyes.

"I know you've noticed your friend has arrived. Why didn't you tell anyone he was coming?" He looked put out and for a moment she felt guilty, but she decided not to let him get to her.

"I didn't know I needed your permission." She looked at her fingernails, giving

him and anyone passing by the impression she was bored.

"That isn't what I meant," he said, sounding frustrated. She could tell he was having a hard time keeping his temper under control.

"What did you mean?" she asked, smiling up at him.

"Where do you plan for him to sleep? All the cabins are booked solid for months. There are no motels for miles around. I think it's too much to ask any of our neighbors to take him in for a year." Had she pushed things too far? No. This was her ranch. She just needed to take care of some technicalities to make it official.

"I thought he could stay in my cabin. After all, Josh and I will be working together." She couldn't deny the look of jealousy that crossed his face.

"And where in your cabin is he going to sleep?" She could see a flicker of anger in his steel gray eyes. She thought about yanking his chain and playing around with him a bit, but she thought better of it. She could tell he wasn't in the mood for it.

"It's not any of your business, but I'm planning to let him sleep on the sofa. Do you have a problem with it?" she challenged him.

"As a matter of fact, I do." Before she could respond, he swept past her and entered the cabin, leaving her standing there in shock.

\* \* \* \*

He didn't fully understand why, but he always felt possessiveness when it came to Megan. Ever since the night he made love to her and slept in her bed, the feeling had grown. He wasn't sure of the type of relationship Megan and Josh shared, but he'd be damned if he'd let this Josh fellow sweep in here and take her from him now. He had waited too many years for her return to lose her to another man.

Of course they fought that morning after making love the night before, but he'd been so sure she would come around. It pained him when he realized she was avoiding him like the plague. There were times since that night when he wanted nothing more than to be close to her, but he knew she wouldn't welcome it. It seemed as though she were going out of her way to avoid any contact with him.

When he saw her standing in the doorway of the cabin only minutes before,

dressed in those damn cut off shorts displaying her legs so well, it drove him crazy with want. He wanted to run his hands up and down those legs, and over the halter-top showing off her midriff and outlining the soft mounds of her breasts. He fought the strongest desire to lift her into his arms, carry her inside the cabin, and make love to her forever.

There was that word again. The word forever seemed to creep into his mind whenever he thought about her. When he thought about being with her forever, it didn't seem long enough. Hell, an eternity wouldn't be long enough. He knew she didn't realize it now, but she belonged here with him. If it took the rest of his life, he'd spend it convincing her of this. There was no way he was going to allow her to return to New York at the end of the year. This was her home. It always would be. He couldn't stand by and watch her throw it all away as she seemed bound and determined to do.

He walked into her bedroom and she was right behind him on his heels. He got her suitcase out of her closet where she stored it. He began packing her clothes for her. "Damn it, Blade Thorn, look at me," she demanded. He was trying to avoid looking at her so he wouldn't give into the desire and make love to her right now, right there, regardless of who saw them. When he turned to look at her, her eyes were blazing with anger. Damn, she was even sexier when she got angry. How would he ever be able to keep fighting his desire for her with her looking at him that way? "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demanded.

"What does it look like?" He smiled at her, but regretted it. It seemed to make her even more upset than she already was.

"But why?" she practically yelled as he turned and began packing her clothes in her suitcase again.

"Because I'm moving you into the house and your friend can have the cabin." Shock furrowed her forehead.



## Chapter Seven

Did she hear him correctly? Did he say he was moving her into the house? Where did he get off thinking he was her boss. A new wave of anger washed over her. She stood her ground. "I'm not leaving this cabin. I'm staying right here."

"You're suggesting Josh stay in your parents' old room?" he asked as he stopped packing to look at her. "The choice is yours."

"No, I'm saying I'm staying right here and Josh is sleeping on the sofa." She wasn't about to back down.

He resumed packing her things again. What choice was he giving her? From where she stood it looked as if he'd already made up her mind for her. She reached out to grab her clothing out of the suitcase. She made a big mistake. Blade reached out, grabbed her wrist and spun her around to face him. She was startled by the direct contact. Not even an inch of space remained between them. Their eyes locked. She felt all the fight drain out of her.

Their lips, having minds of their own, moved toward each other and were soon locked together; as their tongues danced a timeless dance. Someone cleared his or her throat, startling her. She quickly came to her senses and realized what just happened. She and Blade pulled back at the same time, and stepped away from one another instantly. Her legs felt like rubber. Her cheeks burned bright red. What just came over her?

"Is this a private party or can I join in?" Josh asked them, a smirk on his face. Megan felt embarrassed.

Blade glared at him. "We'll be out of your way soon, Mr. Burton. I just need to finish packing Megan's personal items so I can move her into the main house. The cabin will be all yours." If she didn't know any better, she would say Blade was jealous.

"Call me Josh. I didn't catch your name." Josh held out his hand to shake Blade's, but Blade ignored it.

"I didn't throw it, but if you really need to know, my name is Blade Thorn. I'm in charge of things around here." He needed to make sure this city guy knew who was boss around here. If Josh had any plans of sweeping Megan off her feet, Blade planned to make it impossible for him.

"Okay Blade," Josh said, the look on his face showing he really wasn't happy with the attitude Blade was giving him, and who could blame him, but Blade didn't care. It was Megan he cared about. "I really don't think it's necessary to move her out of the cabin," Josh explained. "I will be comfortable sleeping on the sofa in the living room."

"I'm sure you would be, but just the same, I'll be moving Megan into the main house with me where she belongs." Without another word, Blade closed the clasp on the suitcase, picked it up with one hand, grabbed her wrist with the other hand, and practically dragged her out of the cabin. She must have been too stunned to say anything because she didn't protest.

\* \* \* \*

She looked around her parents' bedroom. It was her first time in this room since she left for New York and the lights of the big city. Not much changed. She could almost swear she could smell her father's aftershave lingering in the air. She felt wrapped in a sense of comfort and she embraced it welcomingly, but she was still unsure about being in this room. Was she ready? Regardless, she was here now.

She took a deep breath and sat down on the bed. It was a lot for her to take in all at once. She missed her parents deeply. The tears she was holding back rolled down her cheeks like identical waterfalls. She was grateful Blade brought her into the house, up the stairs, and into her parents' bedroom and left without so much as a word after

depositing her suitcase on the king size bed sitting in the center of the room. She needed this private moment to herself to reflect on the past and memories she treasured of her parents.

The bed was made of the same cherry colored wood as the night tables, the dresser, the rocking chair, and the chest sitting on the floor at the foot of the bed. Not long after her parents were married, her father built this furniture with little more than his bare hands. He worked on it late into the night after putting in a full days work on the ranch. They didn't have much money in those days, but her father always saw to it their family was well provided for.

It didn't matter what they needed, her father always worked hard to get the money to buy it if he couldn't make it himself. She remembered the tree house her father built for her in the big oak tree in the backyard. She wondered if it was still there. She wiped the tears away and pulled herself together before jumping up and running over to the window to look out.

Sure enough, it was there. So was the tire swing her father put up for her the summer she was ten. She was still mad at Blade for the way he treated Josh. She knew she should be helping Josh get settled in and helping him set up their equipment, but the old tree house of her youth seemed to call to her. What would a few minutes hurt to take a walk down memory lane?

Like the child she once was, she ran down the stairs, taking them two at a time in a rush to get outside. She continued running, heading for the back door. She nearly knocked Martha down in the process when she literally ran into her. This brought her to a halt.

"Whoa!" Martha said as she skidded to a stop. "Where are you off to in such a rush?" Breathless, Megan grinned up at Martha.

"I just wanted to go out and see the old tree house," she said as soon as she caught her breath.

Martha's eyes lit up. "Hey, I know, why don't you and I have a tea party up in the tree house for old time's sake?" It sounded like a lot of fun. It was something she and

Martha often did when she was a small child.

She hated to disappoint Martha. She would love to have a tea party with Martha and reminisce about the past right now, but she couldn't. "I'm sorry, Martha, maybe another time. I don't have time right now because I need to help Josh get settled in and set up our equipment." The expression on Martha's face changed. She seemed worried about something. What could it be?

"Blade was just in here, telling me about your friend from the city. You run along now, and remember to be careful." She could tell Martha was serious and meant what she said.

"I will," she said as she walked out of the house. She was puzzled. Was Martha warning her to be careful out in the tree house, or was she warning her to be careful with Josh? It must be the latter. Josh was the least of her worries. He was safe as far as Megan was concerned. The one she needed to worry about was, in fact, Blade Thorn. He seemed to be able to work his way into her heart at the drop of a hat.

\* \* \* \*

Blade just finished moving the last bale of hay and stepped out of the barn to be greeted by the bright afternoon sunshine when he noticed a lone figure emerge through the back door of the house. He raised his hand to shield out the sun so he could get a better look at the person. It was Megan.

She was still wearing those dang cut off shorts showing off her perfect curves and the halter-top, which seemed to accentuate her perfectly shaped breasts. The halter-top was made from scraps of bright yellow material, making her breasts look like large, golden globes. He ached to cup them in his hands.

A thought occurred to him. Did she wear the outfit special for Josh's arrival? The thought burned him up inside. The city man reminded him of a snake. The thought of Mr. City Man looking at her, let alone touching her, caused anger to build up deep inside him. He sighed. What could he do besides what he had already done? There was no way he could keep her away from this other guy. She worked with him for crying out loud.

When she suddenly broke out into a run, he thought something horrible must have happened. His first instinct was to go to her, to protect her. He then noticed the direction she was running. She was headed straight for her old tree house out in the back yard that she played in when she was younger.

He remembered the day as if it were yesterday when she announced she was too old for the tree house. Look at her. All grown up and behaving as if she were a child again. A smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. He loved watching her and wished he could spend the rest of his life doing that.

He never noticed before this moment how athletic she appeared to be. She must have one of those gym memberships so she could workout often. He watched as she climbed the wooden ladder in record speed and disappeared inside the tree house. She seemed as carefree as she had been as a teenager. He missed those days. He always enjoyed watching her every move in those days. She never seemed bothered by anything. Things were much simpler back then.

She didn't stay inside long though. She was only in the tree house a minute, if that, when she emerged and climbed back down the wooden ladder.

He watched in amusement as she headed straight for the swing. She was like a child let loose in an amusement park. He wished he could join her, but he knew if he disturbed her now, it would put an end to all her fun, so he left her alone in her exploration of the past.

He watched as she tested the rope to see if it was strong enough to hold her weight before she climbed on it. She didn't need to worry about it. He reconstructed the tire swing with new rope at the beginning of summer when a guest's little boy begged to swing on it. He wanted to please the little boy, and he didn't want him getting hurt.

He wondered what it would be like to have children of his own someday. He imagined watching his and Megan's very own child swinging on that tire swing. He tried to clear the image from his mind, but the truth of the matter was he wanted children, and he wanted Megan to be the mother of those children. The ranch would

be the perfect place for them to start a family of their own.

He knew it wouldn't be easy, and there would be many struggles ahead, just like her parents faced, but he knew him and Megan could make it. If only she would come to her senses and realize they belonged together.

Megan made the swing go in circles, her hair flying in every direction; she seemed lost in a world of her own. He enjoyed watching her this way. For the first time since her return to the ranch, Megan seemed happy and free. Despite all the years she spent living in New York City, and beneath her tough exterior, she still possessed a childlike innocence to her. He hoped no one ever did anything to her to change it.

She suddenly stopped the swing and sprang to her feet. With one last look up at the old tree house, she turned and walked in the direction of the path leading up to the cabins. She made several friends among the guests, and he hoped she was stopping in to check up on one of them, but instinct told him she was heading for Josh's cabin. He was right.

His heart sank as he remembered she didn't belong to him. She was free to choose any man she wanted, including Mr. City Man. "Not if I can help it," he whispered under his breath. "If I have anything to say about it, the only man she'll choose is me" He meant it. He wiped the sweat from his brow, tried to clear his head, and went back to work.

\* \* \* \*

When she entered the cabin, she found Josh surrounded by a bunch of complicated looking computer components and cable lines, half of which looked alien to her. He looked up at her wryly. A feeling of guilt washed over her and she felt the need to explain.

"I'm sorry about Blade's behavior earlier and running out on you like I did instead of staying here to help you get settled in and all this computer equipment set up."

When Josh didn't say anything, she continued. "Blade isn't the type of man who takes no for an answer and he's used to getting what he wants, when he wants it."

"So I've noticed in the short time I have been here," Josh said, looking up from the

computer line he was connecting. "Has he won your heart yet?"

His question caught her off guard and she nearly choked. She cleared her throat and composed herself before she asked, "What possessed you to ask me that?" What was he getting at?

Josh laughed, and with a lopsided grin plastered to his face, he responded, "It's only obvious the man has it bad for you. He's jealous of me, wildly so, and extremely possessive over you."

"Get real, Josh." She felt a blush creep over her cheeks.

"Don't you believe me?"

She sighed deeply before she sank down on the sofa and drew her legs up, encircling them with her arms. "Oh please!" she exclaimed, waving a hand at him. "The only thing Blade Thorn wants from me is sex. You should know how it is. You're a guy."

"Has he gotten sex from you yet?" The color covering her cheeks deepened.

"Don't you think you're getting too personal?" she asked, trying to hide her embarrassment.

"Judging by the kiss I walked in on today, he was either sampling what he knows is to come or he was trying to go for seconds of what he's already gotten. He would have devoured you whole if I hadn't interrupted you two, so I'll place my bet he was trying to go for seconds."

Their relationship, even while they were dating, always leaned more towards platonic. They were more like brother and sister than anything else. From time to time, they bantered with each other and she was comfortable with it, but there were times when he'd push the envelope, the way he was doing now. She was out of her comfort zone and she knew she needed to do something about it.

"Josh, please stop!" she pleaded. "I'm not comfortable talking to you about this." She hoped he understood.

The smile left his face. "Okay, okay. I'll stop, but seriously think about this: If you have already had sex with that man, and if it's all he wants from you, why does he

keep coming back for more and acts as if he owns you?"

"I think you're imagining things, Josh Burton. Has the polluted city air finally started killing off all of your brain cells?"

"Joke all you want, Meg if it makes you feel safe, but mark my words, Blade Thorn wants now and forever with you." Could Josh be right?

\* \* \* \*

Later that night as she laid in bed, struggling for sleep to come, with only a wall separating her and Blade, she thought about what Josh said to her earlier. She refused to admit it could be true. If she did, it would leave her heart open and unprotected. It was too big of a risk for her to take.

She was suddenly feeling hot and drenched in sweat. She was unsure if she was sweating from the summer heat, or if thinking about Blade was making her sweat. Maybe it was a little of both.

She needed a cold shower, but she'd settle for a cold drink of water instead. She climbed out of bed, not bothering to put a robe on to cover the sheer nightgown she was wearing; she made her way over to the door. She opened it and stepped out into the hallway. She quietly went downstairs, not wanting to wake anyone.

As she was entering the kitchen, she thought back to earlier in the day when she was out at her old tree house, she could have sworn she felt someone watching her. Perhaps it was Blade. It was impossible, she tried to convince herself. It was her imagination playing tricks on her.

She stopped and was debating if she should turn the light on or not when someone came up behind her and grabbed her. She let out a sharp gasp, and a hand clamped over her mouth. Her heart was beating so fast she thought it was going to jump out of her chest. She was getting ready to stomp the foot of whoever had her, but she didn't get a chance to.

"Shhh..." Blade whispered as he turned her around to face him. Although it was dark, she could tell he was only wearing a pair of pajama bottoms, and his chest was bare. She stepped forward and right into his embrace. It felt good there.



"You scared me," she whispered. "Don't sneak up on me again." She could only imagine what she would have done to him if he hadn't revealed himself when he did.

"I scared you? You scared me. I thought you were an intruder." She grinned.

"Maybe I should be thanking my lucky stars you weren't packing a gun," she hissed playfully.

"I don't own a gun, except for a hunting rifle, and I'm not in the habit of sneaking through the house with it. What are you doing out of bed at this time of night, anyway?"

"I was too hot and I couldn't sleep, so I got up to get a drink of water. I'm sorry I woke you up."

"Tell me about it. Let's get a drink and I'll take you to bed." He possessed a devilish gleam in his eyes causing her heart to skip a beat. Did he mean in his bed?

## Chapter Eight

She could feel his eyes on her as she sipped her water. She licked her lips nervously, and as she did, she heard a low growl come from somewhere deep within him. She fought the desire to look at him, but she was powerless. She seemed to lose all control when she was near Blade. She tilted her head and looked up at him.

His eyes were dark with desire. Did he see the same thing reflected in her eyes? In an instant, their eyes locked. Without breaking the contact, Blade reached out and took her glass from her. He placed it on the counter next to his own.

He began moving closer to her. She tried to step back to put distance between them, but her feet stayed firmly planted to the floor and wouldn't budge. A shiver went through her as he reached for her hand. She placed it in his. It was like a jolt of electricity when their fingers made contact.

She was still lost in the deep recesses of his eyes when he whispered, "Let's go to bed." She felt as if she were in a trance.

She wasn't sure what he meant by his words, but she allowed him to guide her out of the kitchen and up the stairs. She wasn't sure why she did it, but she let out a sigh of relief when he past up her bedroom and continued on to his own.

As soon as the door was closed behind them, he pressed her against it, kissing her greedily, tasting the sweet nectar she possessed. When they came up for air, she whispered, "Blade, what if Martha wakes up and catches us both in here?"

"Don't worry," he whispered in her ear. The heat of his breath on her ear and neck made her shiver. "She sleeps in one of the guest cabins, remember? She'll never hear

us.” She silently chided herself for being so silly.

She relaxed as he placed his hands on her waist. He slid his hands up, sliding her nightgown up at the same time. His breaths were coming in small short gasps. Her skin burned and tingled under his touch. If only every night could be this magical.

She looped her thumbs in the waistband of his pajama bottoms and tried to pull them off, but he stopped her. “Not yet,” he whispered.

He seemed to want to take things slow, but she wasn’t sure if she could handle it. She could feel a fire deep within her, which was burning out of control. “More, she whispered as he leaned in and started trailing fiery hot kisses along her neck, throat, and finally over the swells of her breasts.

He stopped long enough to slip her nightgown over her head, letting it slide to the floor in a pool of fabric. He reached behind her and flicked the light on. The brightness it created flooded the room.

He was breathing heavier as he looked at her. “I’ve never seen anything more magnificent,” he whispered to her. He sank his hands into the long, blond strands of her hair, which cascaded over her slender shoulders. He pulled her to him and kissed her on the lips.

She grasped his shoulders, digging her nails into his flesh. She let her hands roam freely, sliding them down his smooth, broad chest. The fit of their bodies amazed her. It seemed as if they were made for one another. She splayed her fingers out on his chest, loving the feel of it.

His kisses, like hot little flames began raining down her neck and shoulders. It was torture. She wasn’t sure how much more of this she could take, yet she didn’t want him to stop. Her whole world felt as if it was spinning out of control. She grabbed hold of him to keep herself steady on her feet.

This time when she looped her thumbs into the waistband on his pajama bottoms and pulled down on them, he didn’t stop her. They fell down around his ankles and he stepped back long enough to step out of them. He stood naked in front of her. With his rock hard muscles, he was a magnificent piece of art.

She allowed her gaze to travel downward until it reached his manhood. She licked her lips in anticipation, longing to feel him in her again. She saw the spark of desire in his eyes, darkening them more than they already were. He let out a ragged moan, which nearly made her come undone.

"Come," he whispered, holding out his hand to her. She grasped on to it, as if it was a life preserver and her life depended on it. She allowed him to guide her towards his California king size bed.

He waited until she'd laid down on the bed before he joined her. When she felt the weight of his body on hers, she moaned with longing. Her skin tingled beneath him.

He kissed her again until they were both gasping for air. When he caught his breath, he began a shower of torturous kisses along her neck and shoulders. Whenever his lips made contact with her flesh, it felt as if flames were dancing on her bare skin.

"Blade?" she practically cried out.

He stopped and looked at her. "What is it?" He looked startled.

"Make love to me," she pleaded.

"I am," he whispered before hooking his fingers in her hair and kissing her.

When he moved lower, she whispered, "Blade, what are you doing?" She froze as she realized where he was headed.

"Shhh..." he whispered and continued on his downward exploration.

She gasped as one finger, followed by two fingers parted her fleshy folds and dipped inside her, preparing her for him. He was stroking the flames into a fiery passion burning out of control.

When she felt she was getting close to climax, to her disappointment, which didn't last long, he pulled them out. "Now you're ready," he whispered as he positioned himself over her.

He entered her. His chest heaved as he breathed in deep breaths. She closed her eyes, and felt him plunge into her. She relaxed the best she could, enjoying the feel of him as he stroked the fire within her.

"This is where you belong," he cried out. "Right here in my bed, for the rest of our

lives." She was startled by his confession.

Josh's words rang in her ears. "Mark my words; Blade Thorn wants you now and forever." It was too late to stop what was already happening now. They both came undone together. Blade filled her, possessed her, in ways no other man would be able to.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning she opened her eyes. Sunlight seeped through the window and reflected off Blade's dark hair. As she watched him sleeping, memories of the night before came slamming back at full force. She almost groaned out loud at the sensation.

She could hear Martha moving around downstairs. Oh great! She flung an arm over her forehead. What if she discovered their sleeping arrangement? She needed to figure out how to get out of Blade's bedroom and into her own without getting caught.

She recalled how upset Blade became the last time she tried to sneak out of bed and the last thing she needed was another fight with him and Martha hearing them. If that happened, Martha would know exactly what had happened between her and Blade. She would just have to lie there and wait for him to wake up. She would have to talk to him when he did. She knew it wouldn't be easy though.

She thought she made herself clear to Blade the last time this happened. She specifically told him they couldn't have sex anymore. It was apparent she didn't get through to him or he wouldn't have brought her to his room last night. She also knew she was half the blame for the situation she was in and it didn't make her feel any better.

"This is where you belong, right here in my bed, for the rest of our lives", he cried out last night. What did he mean by that? Did he want a sexual relationship with her for the rest of their lives? He never mentioned anything about love. What kind of woman did he take her for?

Blade Thorn and late nights were a lethal combination these days. It seemed when she got near him after everyone else went to bed, she found herself in this situation with him the next morning.

He began to stir in his sleep. He slowly opened his eyes and a smile made itself at home on his face, which was covered in early morning stubble. He was too attractive for his own good. Maybe he was too attractive. She fought off the urge to run her fingers over it. She clasped her hands together.

"What a beautiful sight to wake up to," Blade said as he leisurely stretched. "I must have died and gone to heaven." Okay, so he didn't regret what they had done the way she did.

"Don't you think we should get up and get dressed for breakfast?" She was afraid if they didn't, she would repeat the same mistake for a third time, only it would be in the light of day.

As if on cue, the devilish look he gave her the night before appeared in his eyes again. "Darling, as far as I'm concerned, you are my breakfast." He grinned and tried to reach for her, but she rolled away from him. She was feeling annoyed.

"We need to talk." She had to get through to him.

"Can't it wait 'til later? Right now there are much more important things on my mind." *Like what?* She wondered. As far as she was concerned, the only thing that mattered was getting herself out of his bed without getting caught and seeing to it that she never found herself anywhere near a bed with Blade Thorn.

Anger flared up in her, but she tried not to let it show. What did he think she was? Did he think she was his plaything? "That's what I need to talk to you about."

He frowned, deep lines creasing his forehead. She could tell he was irritated, but she couldn't back down. "What?" All playfulness was out of his voice.

"I know we've talked about this subject once before and I hope this is the last time I have to repeat it. Last night wasn't supposed to happen. I told you before we couldn't be doing this."

Anger blazed in his steel gray eyes. "If I remember right, I heard no complaints from you last night. In fact, you were begging for it." She gasped at his accusation.

"I was not," she snapped, her anger bubbling up within her. She jumped out of bed and grabbed her nightgown up off the floor, covering herself with it. She turned

to him. "Last night was the last time you and I have sex, got it?" She moved toward the door.

"Oh yeah, I forgot. You're Megan Nelson. Ms. Sophisticated City Girl now. Is this how you city folks do it? You screw them and leave them?" How could he say such things about her?

She gasped. "You are the cruelest man I know, Blade Thorn."

She ran from his room and into her own, slamming the door behind her and locking it. She sank to the floor, her back leaning against the door. Her tears began to fall in deep sobs that shook her whole body.

Seconds later, she heard Blade's door open, and the sound of him banging on hers, but she ignored him. She couldn't even look at him right now, let alone talk to him.

How could her parents do this to her? Was the ranch really worth all this heartache? Maybe she should sign it over to Blade and get it over with. She'd call the attorney later today.

\* \* \* \*

"Come on Megan, please open the door. I'm sorry and I take back what I said." He desperately wished he could take the words back.

She didn't respond. The only thing he could hear was the sounds of her sobs. It twisted his heart, knowing he was the cause of her tears and all the sadness she was going through. He never meant to hurt her. He wanted her so bad each time she withdrew from him; it unleashed the anger in him and he exploded, saying things he didn't mean.

"What is going on up here?" Martha asked, coming up behind Blade who was standing outside her bedroom door in just his pajama bottoms. "Why are you shouting?"

"There was a misunderstanding," Blade explained, "and now she is refusing to talk to me."

Martha flinched when she heard Megan sobbing. She pinned her glare on Blade. "What did you do to the girl?"

"I said some things to her I shouldn't have. I wish she would talk to me." He knew if he didn't watch it, he was going to lose Megan again and his heart wouldn't be able to take it.

"What did you say to her?" she asked, jabbing him in the chest with her index finger.

"I all but called her a slut." He groaned, hating the sound of his own words as he said them out loud. Megan must really hate him now.

Martha's mouth hung open in shock. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself, young man. I wouldn't talk to you either." She turned and walked back downstairs.

Just great. Not only was Megan mad at him, but Martha was mad at him as well. He couldn't win for losing. He stomped back to his room to get dressed, hoping for the chance to make this all up to Megan later in the afternoon.

\* \* \* \*

Megan stuffed the last of her clothes into her suitcase, not caring if her clothes were unfolded and getting wrinkled. There was no way she was spending another night under the same roof as Blade. She never wanted to lay eyes on him again. Her heart was broken enough by him. She wasn't going to allow him to do it again.

She lugged her suitcase downstairs. Before she could get out the door Martha stepped in front of her and stopped her. At least it wasn't Blade. She looked around and didn't see him anywhere. She was relieved and relaxed a little.

"Where are you going?"

"It's not you," she sighed, the sad look in her eyes speaking volumes. She knew Martha understood. The sympathetic expression was there, playing all over her face. "You've been great as always, but I can't stay one more night in this house."

"But where will you go?" She could tell Martha was worried by the tone of her voice.

"I'm moving back into the cabin." She should have been more persistent with Blade and stayed there last night. Megan knew she wouldn't be in this mess now.

"If you're worried about sleeping our arrangements, I'll be sleeping on the sofa."



Martha looked relieved. "Will you at least come and sit down and have a cup of coffee with me?" Megan was tempted to take her up on her offer, but still, she worried.

"I don't know," she said, looking around nervously. "What if Blade walked in? Leave it to Martha to know exactly what she was thinking.

"Don't worry about Blade. He needed to go out to the far North field with some of the other men to repair a fence. Some of Old Man Farley's cattle knocked it down again. It'll be a few hours before he'll be back. I still have some peanut butter cookies left," she added when Megan still seemed reluctant.

She managed a slight smile. "You are good at bribing people, you know? You've got yourself a deal." She could rarely resist anything Martha baked.

She set her suitcase down and followed Martha into the kitchen. A fresh pot of coffee just finished percolating. She began to suspect Martha was watching and waiting for her to come out of her bedroom, and she planned on them having coffee together.

She sat down at the kitchen table and accepted the hot, steaming cup of coffee Martha offered her. She slowly took a sip, trying not to scald her tongue.

Martha set a plate of peanut butter cookies on the table and sat down across from her. "Do you want to talk about it?" Martha asked in her caring, motherly tone. She missed the talks she used have with Martha in her younger years, but she wasn't sure how much she should tell Martha, if she should say anything at all about her plans.

She had already called the attorney and arranged to meet him in his office later in the afternoon. She decided to hold off telling anyone anything until she did what she needed to do.

"There's not much to talk about. Blade and I got in an argument, nothing more." It was much more than that, but she didn't want to go into all the details with anybody.

Martha shook her head in disbelief. "Don't try to pull one over on me, Megan Marie Nelson. I may be old, but I wasn't born yesterday. I know there's more to it than you're telling me." As usual, Martha was right.

\* \* \* \*

She opened the cabin door without knocking and set her suitcase down. Josh was sitting at a desk he'd brought with him and put together himself. He was typing something on the computer, but he looked up at her without stopping. She was still standing in the doorway with the door open. "Are you going to come in or just stand there and let all the flies in?" By the grin on his face, she could tell Josh was joking with her.

She picked up her suitcase again and finally managed to get her legs to cooperate, carrying her in the rest of the way. She shut the door behind her, sat her suitcase down and collapsed on the sofa, drawing her legs up with her. She slipped off her sandals, letting them fall to the floor and land wherever they may. She let out a long, drawn out sigh.

"Is there something the matter?" Josh asked at last, jumping to his feet and walking over to where she sat. "You look like you've been crying."

"I don't want to talk about it." It was too humiliating to discuss with anyone. She wanted to keep it all to herself for as long as she could. To her grave would be nice.

"It's Blade Thorn, isn't it?" He was sure quick at getting to the source of the problem.

"More or less, it's him." She didn't want to give out too much detail of the situation, but she had a feeling Josh was about to drag it out of her.

"What has he done to you now?" She could hear the distaste for Blade in Josh's voice. Why couldn't he just leave it alone?

"I said I don't want to talk about it." She was becoming irritated with all his questioning.

"Okay, well I called the phone company this morning. They said it could be two to three weeks, at least, before they can get a DSL connection line out here."

"Don't worry about it. I don't think we'll need it." She felt drained from the morning's events. The events from the middle of the night were taking a toll on her as well. She needed a nap, but she wasn't going to get one.

"What do you mean? Our boss would have a fit. We have to have it to get the video conferencing working."

"We'll be back in New York City before they can get it out here. Believe me that will make Mr. Harper very happy."

"Stop saying it. You might jinx it and it might take a year or more to get it out here." He went back and sat back down at the computer. He started typing again.

"We won't be staying much longer. At least I don't think we will." She let her words hang in the air as she waited for his response.

Josh stopped typing and gave her his full attention. "What do you mean? I thought you needed to stay a whole year and help run the ranch in order to get full claim of it or it would be turned over to this Blade person who runs everything around here, including your life."

"It's true, but I have decided it's not worth keeping. I'm letting Blade have the ranch and I'm going back to New York as soon as all the legal stuff is squared away."

"Are you serious? It's a big decision to be making." He seemed skeptical.

"I've already called the attorney. I have an appointment with him this afternoon. Do you think you can take me in your rental van?" It would do her some good to get away from this place for a few hours.

"You know I'll take you anywhere you need to go. Have you told anyone else what you're doing?" Stopping what he was doing, he turned to look at her while he waited for her answer.

"No. I want to keep this between you and me until after it's done, so not a word of this to anyone, Josh. I mean it. I don't want to reveal my plans to anyone until we're ready to leave and I have all the legal stuff squared away."

## Chapter Nine

When Blade returned home, he was hot, tired, and in dire need of a shower. Before he took one though, he wanted to try to talk to Megan. He needed to make everything right with her. She was all he was able to think about all day while he worked.

The more he thought about her, the more he knew he needed her in his life. Why did she have to keep pulling away from him? As a teenager, she was practically attached to his hip. Now she was an adult, and he wanted her there always, she kept pulling away. He would never understand women. He needed to hold her in his arms this very moment.

When he got to her room, he knocked, but she didn't answer. He tried the doorknob and the door opened. He looked around the room. She wasn't there. He stepped inside to get a better look. He didn't see any signs of her using the room. There were none of her personal items in the room. He checked the closet. None of her clothes were there.

Panic seized him. His heart contracted and felt as if it were stuck in a vice. She wouldn't just leave, would she? He ran downstairs shouting, "Martha" as he searched the house for her. He finally found Martha. She was coming upstairs from the basement carrying a basket of laundry.

"What in the world are you shouting about?" she asked, setting the load down on the counter.

"Megan's belongings are missing from her bedroom. Where did she go?" He

needed to find her.

"Calm down. She moved back out to the cabin." That meant she decided to stay with Mr. City Guy. At least Megan was still on the property. He could live with it until he could figure out a way to get her to move back into the house.

Before Martha could say another word or stop him, he ran out the back door. He began running up the path leading to the cabins at record speed. When he got there, he began banging on the door. He got no answer.

He looked around and noticed the van Josh arrived in the day before was not parked where it was earlier. Where did they go? Did Josh take her back to New York? He was overwhelmed by fear and panic, which was slowly worming its way into his brain and finally consumed him. He couldn't lose her when he just got her back. He sank to his knees.

\* \* \* \*

Megan sat in Mr. Halifax's office. "I have decided I no longer want the ranch," she explained to him.

"Have you thought this through?" He seemed uncertain.

"Yes I have. I would like to get back to my life and my job I have waiting for me in New York."

"Are you prepared to give up all your rights to the ranch and turn it all over to Blade Thorn?"

"Yes. Can we get this over with?" The quicker she signed, the faster she could get out of here and put all this behind her.

"Yes, if you are sure this is what you want." She couldn't help but notice how hesitant he seemed.

"I'm sure." She just wanted to get it over with.

He adjusted his eyeglasses before sliding a document towards her he retrieved from a file folder. "Just sign and date where the 'X' is," he said, indicating where it was with the tip of his ink pen. She breathed a sigh of relief.

She signed the document and asked, "Does this mean "I'm free to leave Idaho?"

She held her breath; waiting for his response.

"Not yet?" Now what?

"Tell me why not?" She felt her heart rate speed up.

"Part of the clause states both parties have to agree. I will have to contact Mr. Thorn and have him come into my office and sign the document. After he does, I'll need to file and process the paperwork and wait for all of it to go through. You won't be able to leave for at least three to four weeks from now."

Her heart sank. Would Blade sign? He thought she was a slut. He would probably sign the document just to get her off his property once and for all. She would only be too glad to go and never return. At least she wouldn't need to wait the full year to leave. She thanked the attorney and left his office.

\* \* \* \*

Blade just stepped out of the shower when he heard someone knocking on his bedroom door. Megan? He threw bathrobe on and made a beeline for the door. He opened it to find Martha standing on the other side.

"You better go downstairs quickly," she told him. "The attorney who's handling the will is on the phone. He says he must speak to you. It's urgent."

In a flash, Blade was downstairs and on the phone mounted on the kitchen wall. "Hello?"

"Blade, I'm so glad I caught you. I need to speak to you about the will." He began to panic.

"Has something happened?" Was something wrong?

"Megan was just in my office. I'm not going to beat around the bush. She has decided she no longer wants the ranch. She has signed a document to turn it over to you. I need you to come by my office tomorrow and sign it as well. As you'll recall, the will states you both must agree to this. How does two 'o clock tomorrow afternoon sound?" Blade absorbed what the man was saying.

"I'm sorry. I won't be coming in tomorrow afternoon." He wasn't about to let Megan slip away from him as easily as she might like to.

"We can schedule it for another time. Do what works best for you." When hell freezes over, he thought to himself, but he didn't voice it.

"I'm not signing it." Had he hurt Megan so bad she wanted to get away from him?

"Blade, she says she wants to get back to her life and her job in New York." Blade thought about what the man was saying, but decided to stick to his guns on this one.

"I'm not signing it," Blade snapped. "Her life is here now." Before the attorney could respond, he hung up the phone.

Anger boiled up in him. There was no way in hell he was letting her go back to New York. He would do whatever it took to keep her on the ranch with him.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning she laid stretched out on the bed where Josh insisted she sleep while he slept on the sofa. She heard a knock on the cabin door. She groaned and pulled the blankets over her head. Josh could answer it. She wanted to sleep in longer.

"I need to speak to Megan." That got her attention.

She sat up in bed when she heard Blade's voice. What did he want? Didn't he realize he'd hurt her enough? She couldn't take anymore.

"She's still in bed," she heard Josh tell Blade. I'll let her know you stopped by."

"You slept with her?" Blade shouted. What the hell was Blade up to?

There was a loud crash followed by shuffling sounds. What was going on out there? She leaped out of bed and grabbed for her bathrobe. She threw it on as she ran towards the living room to try to resolve the problem.

"Megan is mine," Blade yelled just as she entered the room. Blade was on top of Josh slugging him. She gasped as she took in the scene before her.

"Blade?" she shouted to get his attention. It took him a few minutes to register she entered the room and shouted his name. He finally turned to look at her.

"Get off him! Now! Do I make myself clear?" she ordered. As far as she was concerned, Blade was acting as if he were a little child.

Blade jumped up. Josh stood and moved to the other side of the room to get away from him. She never saw Blade this way before and it was beginning to scare her.

"What has come over you?" Whatever his answer, there were no excuses for his behavior.

He waited until he caught his breath before he spoke. "How could you let him have sex with you?" Once again he accused her of having sex with another man. Did he think she was jumping from bed to bed the way he did?

She felt as if he slapped her. "I can't believe you, Blade. Don't you ever stop? First you accuse me of having sex with Rex. You practically called me a slut when I was in your bedroom yesterday morning. Now you are accusing me of having sex with Josh. It's not any of your business, but Josh slept on the sofa last night. We don't have the kind of relationship you think. He's like a brother to me. Of course you probably don't believe me because you think I put out to every man who comes along." She turned away as tears began to sting her eyes.

"Megan, I'm sorry. Please forgive me." She was unsure if she would ever be able to.

"I'm not sure if I can," she explained. "You've hurt me too much."

"Can we talk privately?" She thought about it.

She turned and looked from Blade to Josh. Josh had gotten a washcloth and was washing the blood off his lip.

"Give me about an hour to eat breakfast, and get bathed and dressed. I'll meet you outside the cabin." She said at last.

"Thank you. He apologized to Josh and left. She still felt shock over what just happened.

She turned to Josh. "Are you okay?" She felt bad about what Blade did to him.

"I think I'll survive. I just got my lip split open and I'm going to have one hell of a black eye." She winced. It looked painful.

"I'm sorry this happened to you." She meant what she said.

"Well, it wouldn't have happened if you two would have just admitted to each other you are in love. I think you two should do it now before some real damage is done." His words echoed in her ears. She wished it were that simple.



\* \* \* \*

Blade decided to go for a walk while he waited for the time to pass. He inhaled deeply, filling his lungs with the crisp morning air.

He could just kick himself. How could he lose his temper this way? To make matters worse he put his foot in his mouth and accused her of having sex with Josh. It sure as hell didn't win him any points with Megan.

How could he get himself out of this mess? He wasn't quite sure what he was going to say to her when the time came to talk. He hoped all the right words would come to him because he didn't want to lose her. He would do whatever it took to fight for her.

If Megan left because of his big mouth, he wouldn't be able to live with himself. He wouldn't be able to live without her period. He never felt more alive, more complete, until she came back into his life.

In the short time she'd been back, she'd turned his world upside down and made him see things a lot differently. He looked at his watch. It would soon be time. He started walking back towards Megan's cabin.

Before he reached it, he was accosted by Shanice Williams. A blond acquaintance attempting to weasel her way back into his life, Shanice did nothing for him.

"When are we going out again?" she cooed in his ear. She made it sound like a date and it grated on his nerves.

Why did he go and promise her horseback riding lessons? It was too late to say no. After all, she was a paying guest and she was paying extra for the riding lessons. He was hoping to do something special this afternoon with Megan. Now it would have to wait until later on in the evening.

"How about this afternoon?" he asked with faux excitement. He would fulfill his commitment, but not because he wanted to. He couldn't get out of it.

"I think it would be marvelous!" The blond grinned from ear to ear.

"I'll be by your cabin at one 'o clock. Now if you'll excuse me," he said, prying her arm off from him. "I have somewhere I need to be."

\* \* \* \*

Megan stood outside her cabin waiting. She watched Blade talking to the blond. From here, he looked happy to be getting some affection from her. Maybe the two were meant for each other. He was now heading in her direction and she did her best to push away all thoughts of Blade with his lover away.

Why was she willing to talk to him? She didn't know, but she should have told him no. She hated knowing her name now joined the undoubtedly long list of women he bedded, especially if the blond, who was watching Blade walk away and licking her lips as if Blade were an ice cream sundae she wanted to dive into, was among the ranks.

Now that she was weak and gave into him, Blade thought she was just like the blond he was walking away from. She knew she needed to be strong. All Blade needed to do was sign the document and she could go home. Three weeks seemed like an eternity. She hoped he would talk to her about the document and tell her that he had an appointment that afternoon. She didn't want to stay here any longer than she had to.

"I'm glad you're giving us a chance to talk this through," he said when he reached the spot where she was standing. "You must think what we have is worth it, as do I." Could he be for real?

She looked at him in disbelief. "What are you talking about?"

"Megan, we are meant to be together. I can feel it deep in my soul. I just can't figure out why you keep fighting it." She blinked at him.

She swallowed the lump in her throat. She couldn't let him get to her. The kind of relationship he was offering her wasn't what she wanted, but was she prepared to give him up all together? She reminded herself to be strong. She needed to move on and forget about Blade forever. She wasn't the teenage girl she once was who idolized Blade. She was a grown woman with a life waiting for her back in New York City.

"Blade, the only thing I want from you is your signature on a particular piece of paper freeing me to go home."

"I'm not signing anything. You can forget it."

"You really do enjoy torturing me, don't you?" Did he plan on dragging this out longer than necessary?

"It wouldn't be so bad if you'd stop fighting it," he said as he reached up and brushed a strand of hair out of her eyes. She shivered and almost lost all her resolve as his fingertips made contact with her flesh. "I'd like to finish this conversation where we won't have an audience," he said suddenly. "Let's go for a ride in my truck."

She never noticed until now, but some of the guests started coming out of their cabins, some still in their bathrobes. She allowed him to take her by the arm and lead her towards the truck, trying not to put on a show for them all. Maybe she'd be able to convince him to sign the form so she could go back home.

Once they were in his truck, neither said a word. Blade drove until they came to a clearing and turned down a dirt road. She knew exactly where they were headed. Why would he be taking her here now? What did he have as a motive for it?

Her family had a cottage on their property. When she was younger, it was used as a guesthouse. Her grandparents used to stay in it when they would come for Christmas. She forgot all about its existence until now.

She was beginning to feel as if she made a mistake when she agreed to go on this ride with Blade. She felt maybe he wanted to do more than just talk to her. If truth be told, neither one could trust the other and the two of them being alone could snowball into a situation she didn't want to find herself in again.

He was in for a disappointment. There was no way she was going to have sex with any man who thought she was a slut.

"Blade, why are you bringing me here?" She started to worry.

"So we can be alone to talk." She searched the expression on his face for a clue there might be another reason, but she could see none. Still she felt there could be more to it.

"Can't we go back to the ranch?" she asked, put off by all the orders Blade made since she arrived back in Idaho. "We can always go to the barn to talk."

"Oh right, and have all the men know what we are saying to each other? I don't think so. This is between me and you." Okay, so maybe it wasn't such a great idea, she thought.

"I'm sure there are other places we can go." She twisted in her seat so she now faced away from him.

Blade stopped the truck in front of the cottage and cut the engine. He turned to her. "I know I have done a lot to make you distrust me, darling. I promise I'll make it up to you. I don't care if it takes the rest of our lives." He sounded sincere, but she still had her doubts.

She wanted to believe there was a future for them. They honestly didn't have one. As long as Blade wanted a sexual relationship with her, there was nothing. She wouldn't settle for anything less with Blade than everlasting love and a future, which included starting a family. If he couldn't offer her those things, she'd pass on having him at all. Having him in her life only short term was recipe for a broken heart.

"I won't be around long enough for you to even bother trying to make it up to me," she said at last.

A sad look settled in his steel gray eyes. "You don't really mean it." He looked disappointed, but why?

"Yes I do. I have a life waiting for me to return to in New York. I can't put off going home any longer." She refused to let him see how much leaving the ranch saddened her.

"You can still have a life with me here on the ranch." She wished it were true.

"You and I can't have a relationship, Blade," she said with a sigh.

"Says who?" She turned to look at him. How could he even ask her that? He already knew the answer.

She ignored his question. "Even if we both wanted the same thing in a relationship, which we don't, I could never commit myself to a man who thinks I'm a slut." She saw him flinch.

"I have apologized to you for my words, which I didn't mean. Megan, I don't

know what else to do." A small part of her wanted to believe him.

"Sign the document so I can go home." Why was he putting her through all this over one signature?

"Is this what you really want, Megan?" He asked, leaning in close to her.

"Yes." He backed away from her.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, but I can't do it. I won't sign anything that will take you away from me." Now what? She wondered.

"You're not making this any easier," she groaned out of frustration. Why was he being so difficult? It was as if he was following the quote she once saw on a bumper sticker back in New York. He, who has the most toys, wins. He wanted it all. He wanted the ranch, he wanted the blond not to mention how many other women were on his list as well as her, and he refused to give any of it up. Megan was removing herself from his collection.

"Neither are you," he stated dryly. She turned to look away again.

\* \* \* \*

His advances weren't working. If he was going to win Megan Nelson over, he needed a new plan of action. He wasn't used to this. Most women, like Shanice, fell at his feet and all but begged him to have sex with them.

He knew he could have Shanice if he wanted her. He could have her out of her clothes at the snap of his fingers. But he didn't want Shanice. He wanted Megan.

What was happening to him? Was he losing his touch? He used to find all the female attention a turn on. Now he wasn't interested in any of them. Megan was the only one who sparked his desire and she was fighting off all his advances.

It wasn't just sex he wanted Megan for as he wanted all those women for in the past. He wanted to spend a lifetime with Megan. Was it too much to ask for? Was she against commitment?

She said she wasn't a slut, which he already knew. He had put his foot in his mouth far too many times as far as Megan was concerned. Did he blow what little chance he might have had with her? Hell, she was sending him mixed signals. Either

she wanted him or she didn't. It was that simple. She would have to make up her mind soon.

He glanced over at her in the passenger seat of his truck. She sat with her arms folded across her chest, almost defensively. Why was she trying to protect herself from him? He would never intentionally harm her. From the looks of things though, she wasn't too sure of that.

He reached over with one hand and gently massaged her shoulder, hoping she would relax. She stiffened under his touch. He remembered how she freely gave herself to him in his bed. He knew it was going to take a lot to repair the damage and this rift between them caused by his big mouth and his hot temper.

He continued to massage her shoulder. She turned to him with the saddest look in her eyes. It nearly tore him up inside to see her this way. He never meant to make her want to leave.

A single tear ran down her cheek and she quickly turned away, trying to hide the effect this situation was having on her, but it was too late. He already saw.

He would need to mend the damage soon, he knew. But what could he do? He'd have to talk to Martha as soon as possible. He hoped she'd know what to do to help him and Megan get on the right path for a happy future.

Megan broke the silence, bringing him out of his thoughts. "Can you please take me back to the ranch? Josh and I are supposed to be working on a project for a client."

She still wasn't looking directly at him and he could tell she was still crying. She was too stubborn to let it show though. He couldn't just leave things this way between them. He needed to think of something to say to her, but what?

"Megan, look at me, please, he pleaded. "We can't just leave things this way between us. It's tearing me up inside because I know I am the cause of your tears and heartache. I don't know what to do to fix it. Please help me and tell me what I can do."

She slowly turned to face him. Her cheeks streaked with tears, which she was quickly trying to wipe away with the back of her hand. "I told you what you can do for me."

"What you are asking me to do is too much. I don't want to lose you, Megan. You mean the world to me. I have never felt this way for any other woman." He knew he sounded frantic, but he didn't bother to hide it.

"Just take me back to the ranch," she whispered. "I need some time to be alone and think."

He reluctantly started the truck back up. Neither said a word on the drive back. As soon as he cut the engine at home, she got out and walked away without a word.

He watched as she disappeared inside the cabin she shared with Josh. He believed every word she told him and he trusted her, but he didn't know Josh well enough to trust him. Blade slugged the steering wheel in frustration.

## Chapter Ten

Megan and Josh worked all afternoon trying to come up with ideas to try to promote a new line of clothing coming out in the spring from one of the world's top fashion designers. As hard as she tried not to, her mind kept wandering back to Blade and the words he said to her in his truck before he brought her back to the ranch. It made it difficult to concentrate.

A part of her wanted to believe what he was saying was true. Her heart swelled with hope. She was half expecting him to say he loved her. When he never did, her heart sank, and disappointment washed over her. What would life be like now without Blade? She knew she was going to miss this ranch just as much as she had when she first left for New York.

They took a break for lunch, long enough for them to each grab a sandwich. They washed them down with iced tea while they chatted about different angles for the campaign so Josh could create a power point presentation of their ideas to be shown to the client. When they finished eating, they got back to work on a layout for one of their ideas.

An hour later, they were compiling a list of potential slogans when she decided she needed to get some fresh air and excused herself to go outside. When she exited the cabin, she found herself wishing she never did because of the scene she saw.

Blade was walking along the path with the blond attached to his arm. She turned away, refusing to look at them. She could feel Blade's eyes on her.



She turned and found herself looking into Blade's eyes. There was no mistaking the look of hunger shown in them as he looked at her. What was wrong with the man? He was with another woman, yet he was looking at her this way. Wasn't one woman enough for him?

She hoped he wasn't getting any funny ideas involving the three of them. She wasn't into that kind of stuff. A lump formed in her throat and she swallowed it before turning away and making her escape.

She hurried back inside the cabin to get away from Blade. She suddenly wanted him, minus the blond. What was wrong with her? She was never one to weaken to lust. Blade seemed to have this affect on her. She wished desperately that she could avoid him all together. It would be best for both of them.

"What's the matter?" Josh asked at her sudden return. He seemed genuinely surprised to see her back so soon. "I thought you needed some fresh air."

"I did. Now I'm ready to get back to work. Where were we?" She wasn't in the mood to talk about what just happened.

Josh shrugged and read back the last slogan idea they came up with. They would need to be creative and come up with several more ideas to find the right one for the campaign.

The clients wanted hip and trendy. She wasn't in the right frame of mind to think in those terms today. It was days like this when she needed to force herself to keep going. Before coming here, she loved her work so much; she never knew when to stop.

Josh must have noticed the change in her mood since she went outside because he suddenly asked, "Are you okay? Are you sure you don't need to take another break?" Josh was a good friend and she always enjoyed working with him. It was good to know he cared enough about her to be concerned.

"I'll be fine," she said, trying to concentrate on the job at hand. "Why do you ask?"

"You just seem real distracted. You acted this way before you went out and even more so since you've come back in. What happened out there? Anything I should know about?"

"I just need a cold drink of water," she said, excusing herself again. It was more like she needed a shower to slow her raging hormones down. There was no time for one though. Besides, if she wanted to take one, she would have to go up to the main house since there was only a bathtub in the cabin. It was tempting since Blade was out, but what if he returned. She wasn't going to chance it.

When she returned, Josh was getting on the Internet, using the already existing dial up connection, which was slow. He looked up at her when he noticed she returned to the room.

"I thought I'd email this list to the boss to see if we are on the right track for what the client is looking for and to see if he has any suggestions for us to use."

"Good idea," she said as she sat back down on a chair next to Josh in front of the computer. It was going to be a long day.

She knew with the slow Internet connection, this could take forever to do. She picked up the tablet and began reading the slogans out loud to him as he typed.

\* \* \* \*

Blade would have loved to dump Shanice on the spot, and to take Megan up to the ranch house, and up to his bedroom, even if he needed to carry her kicking and screaming the whole way, just so he could make love to her and prove to her how much he really wanted her.

He was too much of a gentleman to really do it though. He made a commitment to Shanice and he was going to see it through until the end. The last thing he and Megan needed was Shanice running back to Chicago and giving Happy Meadow Ranch a bad name. In the circles Shanice ran with, word would travel fast, and the ranch could lose a lot of business.

He was glad the riding lesson was over. How would he be able to endure giving her lessons all summer? His hormones sure got him into a fine mess he could not get out of. It sure as hell wasn't helping him make any progress with Megan, either. To be honest, the whole situation seemed to be coming between him and Megan.

Being the gentleman he was, he offered to walk Shanice back to her cabin, making

sure she made it safely. She clung to his arm the whole way there, acting as if he belonged to her.

"Please come inside," she pleaded when they reached her door. He should have seen this coming.

Blade cleared his throat before he responded to her invitation. "Not now, maybe some other time. I have other plans right now I can't change."

Her lips formed into a pout. "Not even for me?" she asked, still clutching his arm. He couldn't stand her touching him. If only it was Megan by his side. He would do anything to have it be her.

"Not even for you," he said, pulling his arm out of her grasp. "Now if you'll excuse me, I really must go." At this point, he didn't care if she got upset. He knew she would get over it in no time flat.

She didn't look too pleased, but at least she didn't stop him from turning and walking away. When this day was over, he would need to go into town and have a beer to unwind.

Blade headed for the ranch house. He needed to talk to Martha. He found her in the kitchen mixing up a fresh batch of biscuits for dinner.

"I'm glad I found you," he told her, removing his cowboy hat. He pulled up a chair at the kitchen table and sat down. He motioned for Martha to pull up a seat across from him.

"This better be important," Martha said as she washed biscuit dough off her hands at the kitchen sink. When she finished, she dried them on a hand towel.

"It is," Blade told her as she sat down. "Megan is insisting I sign the document so she can go back to New York. How can I convince Megan her life is here with me?"

"You can't. I know you're not going to like this, but I think you should sign the document."

He shook his head in disbelief. Did he hear Martha correctly? Why would she want him to sign it? "I can't sign it."

"Why can't you? Did you break your fingers and it's preventing you from picking

up a pen and signing it?"

"If I sign it, I lose her for good." He felt frustrated.

"Says who?" Martha demanded.

"Megan does. She'll run right back to New York." This conversation wasn't going as he had planned. He thought Martha would help him come up with a plan to get Megan to stay here.

"Let her go." He couldn't believe what he was hearing.

"How can you say that? I can't just let her leave. I'll never see her again if I do."

"If you never see her, it's your own fault for doing nothing about it."

"Wait a minute," Blade exploded. "I'm not the one threatening to leave, so how can it be my fault if I never see her after she's gone?"

"You're missing the whole point in what I'm telling you. Have you once stopped to think about this? You are asking the poor girl to do all the sacrificing. Don't you think it's time you started making some sacrifices of your own where she is concerned?"

"Are you saying I should leave the ranch behind and go with her when she goes?" Why hadn't he thought about that?

"It's exactly what I'm saying. Now go call the attorney and set up an appointment to sign the document."

Blade got up and went over to the phone. If it meant he needed to move to New York to be with Megan, he would do it.

\* \* \* \*

"I could use a drink," Josh commented later in the evening. I know there are no nightclubs around here, but is there somewhere nearby where a person can get a drink? I need to unwind."

"There's a bar in town called Harry's. A lot of the ranch hands go there at night to relax and have a beer." She remembered as a young teenager how hurt she was when she learned Blade went there to pick up women.

"Do you want to go there with me? It beats sitting around here doing nothing.

There isn't even anything on television tonight." She was surprised by the invite since she and Josh never did stuff together outside of work, but there was nothing better to do.

"Sure, just let me change into a clean pair of jeans and get my purse and I'll be right with you."

She went into the bedroom. A night out on the town away from this place would do her some good. It would help her keep her mind off Blade and her problems. Besides, she needed to be around people.

After putting on a clean pair of jeans, she checked her hair in the mirror and decided to brush it. She washed it this morning in the kitchen sink after returning from her talk with Blade.

She slicked her lips with a fresh coat of light pink lip-gloss before going out to join Josh.

"Are you ready to go?" he asked.

"Sure," she said with a faux smile. She wasn't really happy, but in her line of work, she had learned to play the part well.

"Should we take my car or your rental van?" Her car had been repaired and delivered back to her late that afternoon. She now had the freedom to come and go as she pleased, as long as she returned to the ranch at the end of the day and she did her best to continue helping run the ranch. She had promised Martha at dinner that she would go over the ranch books the next day on her lunch break. At least there was some kind of work she could do here.

"We'll definitely go in your car." She didn't mind driving at all.

She grabbed her keys off the coffee table and followed Josh out the door, locking it behind them. Out of habit, she looked around for Blade, but she didn't seem him anywhere. She felt a sting of disappointment, which was quickly followed up by relief.

Harry's was already filling up with the locals when they arrived. Because she wasn't feeling very social, they chose a booth in the very back.

She didn't even bother to look up when the waitress came over to take their

orders. "I'll have a beer."

"Oh my God!" the waitress exclaimed. "Is it really you, Megan? It has been ages since I saw you last. I never thought I would see you around these parts again."

She looked up and at first, she didn't recognize the woman. After a moment she remembered who it was. It was Karen Rodgers. At one time, she and Karen were like sisters. It all changed though when Karen stole a sweater from another girl at school and pinned the blame on her. After the incident, Megan was known around school and Hidden Oaks as a thief.

She forced a smile. "It's nice seeing you again, Karen." Megan didn't really mean it.

"We'll have to get together before you leave town." That was the last thing Megan wanted to do, but she knew she needed to be polite.

She was about to tell Karen she didn't think she'd have the time when the girl turned all of her attention on Josh, as if she'd just noticed him sitting there.

"And who have we got here?" she asked, all but drooling all over Josh. He didn't seem to mind all the attention she was giving him. He seemed genuinely interested in her.

"I'm Josh," he said, holding out his hand and shaking hers. "And who is this beautiful woman I'm having the honor of meeting?"

The way they were acting with each other made her sick. Karen finally wrote their orders down and moved on, leaving Megan feeling relieved.

She slid down in the booth when she saw Alex enter the bar, hoping he wouldn't see her. She was out of luck. He spotted her instantly and came walking over to the booth. He looked from her to Josh, taking in the scene before he spoke.

"I thought you weren't going to do any dating while you were in town? At least it was the impression I got when I asked you out." She felt heat rise in her cheeks.

"I'm not on a date, Alex." She wasn't used to being in this position. New York was so big when she turned down a date with a guy her chances of running into any of them while out with another, whether it be a male friend or date, were slim to none.

"Well, than who is this you're with? He looks like a date to me." She hated how Alex just jumped to conclusions. It wasn't as if she were still his girlfriend. What they once shared was great, but they were young then. He really wasn't her type.

"This is Josh. He's my co-worker and really good friend from New York. He came here to help me work on a project for an ad agency I work for. We're just relaxing after a day's work."

"Good to meet you, Josh," Alex said. The men shook hands.

She wished Alex would leave until she saw Blade enter the bar and start looking around as if he were here to meet someone. "Why don't you join us?" she asked on impulse.

Alex seemed surprised, but accepted her offer. To her disappointment, her plan didn't work. Blade spotted them and didn't let Alex's presence stop him from sauntering over to their booth.

"Do you mind if I join the three of you?" he asked, removing his cowboy hat. What was he up to?

Before she could open her mouth to say anything, Josh said, "Not at all. Have a seat." What was going on?

Instead of Blade sitting next to Alex, which would have been easier, Josh jumped up and moved to the other side to sit with Alex, leaving the space next to her available for Blade. Blade sat down and slid his arm around her, pulling her into his embrace.

She tried to move away, but in the small booth, there was nowhere to move. Not wanting to cause a scene, she laid her head on his shoulder.

Karen returned with beers for her and Josh. "My, my, my," Karen said, eying the four of them. "Don't you think this is a bit awkward, Megan?"

"What are you talking about, Karen?" she asked. She felt irritated.

"This. You come here with one man," she said, holding her hand out in Josh's direction. "Now you have your ex-boyfriend and the man the whole town knows you've always felt the hots for. How many men do you need, Megan dear?"

She wanted to jump out of the booth and rip all of her hair out, one strand at a

time. Blade must have sensed it because he tightened his arm around her.

"Karen, enough," Blade told her sharply. "I came here to have a beer and to relax a bit. I'm quite sure Alex would also like a drink."

"I'll have a beer as well," Alex said, not bothering to look in Karen's direction. Karen walked off in a huff.

Megan was seething with anger. "I would love to just rip the little witch's hair out."

"Don't let her get to you, darling." Blade stroked her cheek with his thumb. She flinched under his touch.

"If she's anything like she used to be, she'll be spreading it all over town I'm dating three men at once."

"She hasn't changed at all since I've known her," Alex said, confirming her worst fears.

"Too bad because you probably won't be around here long enough to hear any of them," Blade commented.

She looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"You'll probably be back in New York by the time Karen's vicious rumors make it full circle."

She came here to forget about Blade and her problems. Now Blade showed up and brought up her problems.

"How can I go back to New York? You won't sign the document."

"I have an appointment with the attorney to sign it tomorrow afternoon."

Here he was pretending to care and now he was letting her go. Was it true? He got what he wanted from her and he was letting her go now? He no longer wanted her. Her heart sank.

"I think this is our cue to leave," Josh told Alex.

"What about my beer? It hasn't even come yet."

"Don't worry about it. I'll buy you another one later. Right now there's something I want to show you," Josh told Alex as he practically dragged him out of the booth.



She tried to protest, but Josh ignored her. He dragged Alex away from the booth and out of the bar. Alex protested the whole way.

\* \* \* \*

Blade thought she would be happy, but he couldn't deny the hurt look he saw in her eyes. It seemed as if everything he did when it came to Megan was wrong. When was she going to make up her mind?

"If you'll excuse me, I need to use the restroom," she said, trying to step over him to make her escape.

"No, Megan," he said, blocking her retreat. She sank back down in the booth, but wouldn't look at him.

"Darling, you've done enough running. It's time for you to stay and talk things out with me. I'm not going anywhere."

"I know, you're staying on the ranch and I'm going back to my life in New York City."

He forced her to turn and look at him. "That's where you're wrong."

"What do you mean? You just said you were going into the attorney's office tomorrow afternoon to sign the document."

"Yes, I did, but you're not returning to New York alone, Megan." He wore a smug expression.

"I know. Josh will be going back with me. We're shipping the equipment back. He's going to return the rental van and we're going back in my car."

"That wasn't what I meant. I'm going with you." What made him decide to go with her?

"You don't need to. I'll be fine."

"The arrangements have already been made. Josh has a flight booked for one month from now and I'll be going with you in your car."

"Since when is he going back to New York by plane? Josh never told me any of this."

"Of course he didn't. I told him not to." What was going on here?

"How could you do this? When did you and Josh have a chance to talk without me knowing about it?"

"I sent him an email this afternoon." This explained a lot.

"Was that why he was suddenly on the Internet and wanting to email our boss?"

"Yes. He was requesting a flight back. When you were in the bedroom getting ready to go, he checked his email and your boss booked his flight. He emailed me the information and let me know the two of you were getting ready to come here like I asked."

"You mean this whole evening was planned out?" She couldn't believe the two men had managed to pull this off.

"How else was I going to get my woman alone on a date to talk to her?"

"I'm not your woman."

Blade laughed. "We'll see," he said and before she could respond. He tilted her chin up, and looked deep into her eyes before claiming her lips with his.

She surprised him when she didn't push him away. Instead, she leaned into him and deepened the kiss. She breathed in the scent of him.

"Catching up on lost times?" a female voice called out over the music pumping from the jukebox.

They both pulled apart and looked up to see Karen standing at the table with two beers.

"Karen, just put the beers down and go," Blade snapped at her.

"Why? So you can go back to what you were doing before I interrupted you?" she asked as she set the beers down on the table.

"Just go," Blade growled, "before I report you to your boss."

"Okay, I'm going," she said, turning around and walking away, swaying her hips as she went.

## Chapter Eleven

After drinking four beers, she regretted it. What was she thinking?

She wasn't used to drinking, so she was really feeling the effects of it. How was she going to get back to the ranch? She didn't think she could drive her car in this condition.

As if reading her mind, Blade said, "You're not driving your car tonight. I'm driving you back to the ranch in my truck."

She allowed him to guide her out of the bar and out to his truck. There was no way she would have made it there on her own.

She leaned her head on his shoulder on the way back to the ranch. "I don't want to sleep in the cabin tonight," she whispered.

"Do you want to sleep in your parents' bedroom?" he whispered back.

"I want to sleep in your bed."

"Are you sure?" Under different circumstances, he would have been jumping for joy.

"Yes. I don't want to be alone tonight."

"What about other nights?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to be alone tonight."

"You know I'm here for you when you need me. You never have to be alone."

"I'll be alone when I go back to New York," she whispered. She snuggled closer to him. Her eyes closed and she was asleep.

\* \* \* \*

Blade stroked her head as she slept. How long had she felt that she didn't have anyone in her life? Had she felt this way since the day she left on her eighteenth birthday? A feeling of guilt washed over him. If he only knew exactly where she was in New York, he could have gone to her. Maybe he should have hired someone to track her down.

He asked her parents for her address on several occasions, but they always felt it best to give her the space she requested. He couldn't blame them though.

Who was there to hold her and comfort her when she was sad? Who was there to see to it she was safe in the big city? Was anyone there for her? He knew if anyone was it should have been him.

It would be from now on, he vowed. He pulled the truck up the gravel drive and cut the engine. He glanced over at Megan. She was still asleep. He didn't want to wake her up.

He stroked her cheek with his thumb. She looked beautiful and peaceful as she slept. He watched the rise and fall of her breasts as he tried to figure out the best way to get out without waking her up.

He opened the truck door and breathed in, filling his lungs with the cool night air. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the lonesome howl of a wolf. He got out carefully, not waking her. She slumped over, but continued sleeping.

He closed the truck door as quietly as possible before walking around to the passenger side. He carefully opened the truck door and slid her out, scooping her into his arms.

Blade managed to get her into the house and up the stairs to his room. He gently laid her down on the bed and removed her shoes and socks before pulling the blanket over her.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning she awoke and stretched. She remembered the night before. She slowly opened her eyes.

The first thing she saw was Blade and her head was resting on his chest. How did

she end up in Blade's bed?

The last thing she remembered from the night before was dancing with Blade and ordering another beer.

How did things get this far? Did she have sex with him again? God, she hoped not. She couldn't remember if she did or not. She thought hard about it, trying to recall. This only caused her head, which was already throbbing, to hurt even more.

She tried to sit up, but her head was swimming and the movement made her feel light headed. She was stuck right where she was.

She worried about what Blade thought about her. He already thought she was a slut. Could his opinion of her have gotten any worse after last night?

She needed to get out of bed. She couldn't stay here in Blade's bed. Josh must be worried sick about her and they needed to get a lot of work done on the project they were working on.

She made another attempt, but without success. The movement caused Blade to wake up.

"Where are you trying to go?" he asked sleepily. "It's still kind of early." As if to prove his point, he yawned.

"Josh and I still have a lot of work we need to get done on the project we're working on." Suddenly a new problem occurred.

Blade must have known something was wrong because he asked, "What is it?"

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"Why do I have the feeling you need to do more than the usual business in there?"

"Maybe because I do," she said as she tried to get up again, but fell back down.

"Wait right there and don't move," he said as if there were any other choice.

He climbed out of bed and came around to her side. He pulled her into a sitting position and onto her feet. The whole room began to spin and she needed to hang onto him just to keep from falling back down.

He helped her into the bathroom and stayed right by her side as she threw up. He kept an arm around her the entire time, holding her hair back and stroking the back of

her head. She knew she looked a mess and she was embarrassed.

When it was all over and he was leading her back to the bedroom, she told him, "I need to get my shoes and socks on so I can get back to the cabin."

"The only place you're going is back to bed," he told her as he led her back over to the bed. He helped her get back in.

She was drenched in sweat. This was the last time she'd drink that much again. She knew she should have stopped after the one beer.

Blade disappeared into the bathroom and a few minutes later, he returned with a cool, wet washcloth. He placed it on her forehead.

"What am I going to do now?" She couldn't stay holed up in his room.

"I would suggest you stay in bed for the day."

"I can't."

"What other choice do you have?"

He was right. She couldn't even sit up on her own without the room spinning. There was no way she'd be able to walk out to the cabin on her own.

"I'm sorry Blade." Why couldn't she have stopped at one beer?

"Why are you sorry?"

"I look a mess and I'm stuck in your bed."

"You look beautiful, as always."

"But I'm stuck here."

"Darling, don't worry about it," he said as he climbed back into bed next to her and pulled her into his embrace. She was too sick to stop him. "As far as I'm concerned, this is your bed too. You're right where you belong."

He held her, and brushed away the few strands of hair falling across her cheek. She fell asleep there in the comfort of his arms, feeling safer than she'd felt in a long time.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later, she woke up. She was surprised to see Blade was still in bed with her. What about the ranch? Why wasn't he up working? She never meant to

disrupt anything around here.

Her head still hurt and she felt a little sick to her stomach. Other than that, she felt fine. She needed to get up.

She studied Blade as he slept. He reminded her of a statue of a Greek God. His body was perfectly sculpted and muscular.

She allowed her eyes to roam and looked his body up and down. Her hands, which were still resting on his chest, longed to explore his body.

She bit her lip as she tried to decide if she dared let her hands explore or not. As if they had a mind of their own, her hands began to glide over the expanse of his solid chest.

She was surprised and jumped back, retracting her hands, when she saw a lazy grin spread across his face. How long had he been awake? Did he know she was checking out his body? Her cheeks burned bright red with embarrassment.

His eyes opened and they were dark with passion. "Why did you stop?" he whispered.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have crossed the line," she said, turning away from him.

He pulled her back into his embrace. He left her no other option than to look at him. "Why are you apologizing?"

She squirmed, trying to pull away from him, but he kept a strong grip on her. "Please let me go."

"Not until you answer my question."

"I shouldn't have done it."

"Why shouldn't you have? It was nice. I would love to wake up this way every morning for the rest of my life."

"That's why I shouldn't have been."

He looked confused. "Are you saying you shouldn't have been touching me because I liked it?"

"Well, yes," she said around the lump forming in her throat.

"What if I want you to?" he asked, taking both her hands, and placing them on his

chest, holding them there when she tried to pull them back.

"I can't. It was a mistake." She wished he would drop it.

"How could it be a mistake? Didn't you like what you were doing?"

"Yes," she admitted reluctantly. "I admit I liked it. Are you satisfied?"

"No, not yet I'm not. If you liked what you were doing and I liked what you were doing, how could it be a mistake?"

"It would lead to other things."

"What other things?" he asked, pressing for more details.

"Sex," she said, turning an even deeper shade of red.

"Would it be so bad?"

"Shouldn't you be working or something?"

He looked disappointed when she changed the subject. "No. Rex has everything under control now, just like he will when we're in New York City." She had forgotten all about that.

"You don't need to go with me. I'm perfectly fine on my own."

"Don't argue with me, darling. I'm going with you."

"I would prefer you didn't."

"You say it now, but I know you don't mean it. My place is with you."

"If you are planning to come with me so you can protect me, don't bother. I can take care of myself."

"It isn't the only reason I'm going with you."

"Give me one good reason you feel you should go with me."

"I want to be with you." His answer wasn't enough. She wanted to hear him say he loved her.

There was still no mention that he loved her. No mention of commitment. If she allowed him to go with her, how long would it be until he grew tired of her and went running back to the blond?

"What about the blond?"

"What blond?"



"The blond woman I've seen you with. Don't tell me you've forgotten about her already."

"I don't know what makes you think she's my girlfriend. She's not my girlfriend and she never was."

"You could have fooled me. I know you have dated her. Is she your type?"

"I don't have a type and I've never dated her. Who told you we did?" By the expression on his face, Megan could tell he was confused.

"My first night here, she asked you when you were going to take her out again."

Blade started laughing. "All this time you thought I was dating Shanice?"

So, her name was Shanice. "What's so funny?"

"I never dated her."

Why was he lying to her? "How can you say that when I heard her ask you when you were planning to take her out again?"

"True, she did ask, but I never dated her and don't plan to."

"Why did she ask you about it if you never did?"

"Shanice has rented the cabin she is staying in for the entire summer and she's paying extra for me to give her horseback riding lessons."

His explanation still didn't change the fact he thought she was a slut. She couldn't allow him to go with her when she went back to New York. She wasn't in the mood to argue with him about it, so she changed the subject. "I need to get back to the cabin to help Josh."

"Not so fast," he said, tightening his embrace. "Josh knows you're here. He said for you to get some rest."

"How did he find out I was here?" she asked, feeling alarmed.

"He showed up looking for you this morning. Martha came up to see if I knew where you were."

"Martha knows I'm up here in your bed?" she hissed.

"Yes she does, but don't worry. I explained everything to her. She wanted to know if you wanted some chamomile tea. It'll calm your stomach."

"Actually, I would like some. I still feel a little sick to my stomach." Maybe it would give her some strength back.

"I'll go tell Martha and come right back." He crawled out of bed and left the room, leaving her alone with her thoughts.

\* \* \* \*

When Blade returned with her tea, she managed to convince him she didn't need him to stay in bed with her all day. She quickly turned her head when he dropped his pajama bottoms so he could get dressed. When he finished, he reluctantly left the room.

Later in the afternoon, after another cup of chamomile tea and a couple slices of toast, she was finally able to convince him she felt well enough to get out of bed. Before he gave in though, he made her promise she wouldn't do any work for the rest of the day.

She entered the cabin and sank down on the sofa. She let out a long sigh. She'd never been happier to see the cabin than she was at this moment.

Josh was seated at the computer waiting for a download, which no doubt was taking forever with the dial up connection.

"How are you feeling?" he asked casually. His arms were folded across his chest as he leaned back casually in his chair.

"A lot better after the chamomile tea Martha gave me to drink earlier."

"I've never known you to drink yourself to the point of a hangover before. Are you sure you're okay?"

"It was a one time mistake I will never let it happen again."

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. I sure as heck didn't enjoy waking up feeling the way I did." She knew he was concerned about her, but she wasn't in the mood for it right now. "What are you downloading?"

Josh chuckled. "There you go changing the subject. Now this is the woman I have come to know. I'm downloading a file containing images of the clothing line we are

developing ads for. Mr. Harper thought it might help if we could see the clothes in question."

"I want to see them when they are finished downloading." She knew it could take forever. She didn't have the patience Josh seemed to possess.

"You will see them. I'm going to print them out on some photo paper I brought with me and hang the pictures up over there," he said pointing to a blank wall on the other side of the room.

There was a knock on the cabin door. She stared at the door hoping it wasn't Blade. "Were you expecting someone?" Megan asked.

"No," Josh responded as he got up to answer it. It wasn't Blade. It was Edith. She seemed genuinely surprised to see Josh.

"Who are you?" she heard Edith ask.

## Chapter Twelve

"My name is Josh Burton."

"Oh! I was under the impression this was the cabin Megan Nelson was living in."

"She does live here."

"Are you visiting from another cabin?"

"No I'm not. I'm from New York. I'm staying here with her until she returns home."

She could tell Josh was getting irritated by Edith's twenty-one questions routine. She decided it was time to get him off the hook. She got up off the sofa and walked over to the door.

"Do you really think it's necessary for you to stay here with her until she goes back?" Edith was asking when she got to the door.

"Our boss seems to think it is. Maybe you can take it up with him."

"What does he have to do with you staying here?"

She knew it was time to intervene. It was apparent Edith wasn't happy about Josh being there.

"Edith, would you like to come in? I could fix the three of us some iced tea and we can sit down and talk about this."

At first Edith looked unsure, but gave in after some thought. "I don't see why not," she said as she entered the cabin.

She offered the older woman a seat on the sofa before she excused herself to go

into the kitchen to make the iced tea.

When she returned with the iced tea, Josh was back at the computer and Edith was sitting on the sofa, obviously ignoring each other's presence.

"Get over here," she hissed in Josh's ear as she handed him his iced tea. She turned to Edith with a smile on her face. She walked up to Edith and handed the iced tea to her before sitting down next to her on the sofa.

She waited until Josh pulled his chair up a few feet from where they sat before she spoke. "I think now would be a good time to introduce you two."

Edith cleared her throat. "Megan dear, before you do, I have a very important question I must ask you." The older woman cleared her throat.

"What?"

"What about Blade?"

"What about him?"

"You and Blade are perfect for each other. He is the man you should be with."

What was wrong with everyone? Why was everyone around her pushing so hard for her to give in to Blade's sexual advances?

Josh spoke up. "I couldn't agree with you more."

Oh great! Josh was now joining their team. Whatever happened to what she wanted and what made her happy? It seemed most people forgot about it, or they just didn't care.

"Excuse me? If you agree with me young man, what are you doing here shacking up with her? How is your being here going to help her and Blade be together the way they should be?"

"I'm not here to seduce her as you seem to be implying."

"Why are you here?" Edith eyed him as she waited for an answer.

Josh adjusted his eyeglasses, which kept sliding, down his nose. "I'm here on a business trip. Megan and I are working on an ad campaign for the advertising agency we both work for in New York."

"You mean to tell me the two of you are not lovers?"

"It's what I have been trying to tell you," Megan interjected. She took a sip of her iced tea before setting the glass down on the coffee table. "If you'll recall, I was trying to introduce the two of you, but was interrupted."

"You were," Edith said as she relaxed somewhat. "My apologies."

"Edith, this is Josh Burton. Josh is my co-worker and good friend. We are not lovers. He sleeps on the couch while I sleep in the bed in the bedroom. Its all very innocent."

"Now I'm embarrassed," Edith said as she tried to compose herself. "Will the two of you please accept my apology?"

"Apology accepted," Josh said.

"Josh, this is Edith. She and my mother were best friends."

Josh got up and walked over to Edith to shake her hand. "It's nice to meet you."

"It's nice to meet you too, Josh," Edith said with a smile.

After, they were able to have a nice visit. Edith asked questions about the advertising industry and she and Josh did their best to answer all her questions.

\* \* \* \*

With Megan's hangover and everything happening at the ranch, Blade almost forgot about his appointment with the attorney.

He didn't have time to change into his suit before he left the ranch and he just barely made it in time for his meeting to sign the document.

Maybe he purposely forgot the meeting. He wasn't looking forward to signing the document to turn all ownership of 'Happy Meadow Ranch', a place rightfully belonging to Megan, over to him.

He didn't want to take advantage of her, and he didn't want her to feel as if he were. If everything went according to plan, he'd be turning ownership of the ranch back over to her soon.

Mr. Halifax entered the office and Blade apologized to the man for his shabby appearance before shaking hands with the attorney in the dark blue pinstriped suit and eyeglasses.

They both sat down and the attorney placed a file folder on the desk in front of him. He opened it and took out the document he was to sign.

He placed the document in front of him and held out an ink pen for him to use.

Blade took it from him. There needed to be another way. "Is there any other way around this so she retains ownership of the ranch?"

"I'm afraid not. You could contest the terms of the will in court, which could take months or years, and in most cases, the terms of the will are carried out as they are written in the end."

With a shaky hand, he signed the document and handed it back to Mr. Halifax. He finally had it done and over with.

"If this is all you need, I'll be on my way," Blade said as he began to get to his feet.

The attorney stopped him. "Not so fast Mr. Thorn. There's still one more business matter we need to discuss before you leave."

"What?" Was something wrong?

The attorney reached into the file folder and held up an envelope. "What am I supposed to do with this?" Blade asked.

"What is it?"

"Megan's parents gave this to me at the time they filed their will. It's a letter her parents gave me with strict orders to give it to her when the year was up. They never left any instructions on what to do with it if she didn't complete the year."

"I can take it and give it to her when the time is right," Blade said as he reached for the letter. Mr. Halifax pulled it back out of his reach.

"How are you going to give it to her when she won't be here? She's going back to New York, remember?"

"I'm going with her when she goes and wherever else she decides to go in life."

"Take this and make sure she gets it," Mr. Halifax said as he handed the letter to Blade.

Blade thanked the attorney and said his farewells before leaving the office to head back to the ranch, which was now legally his, but he would always view it as Megan's

ranch.

He still needed to run several other errands to put together the surprise evening he was planning for her. He'd have to hurry if he wanted to get it all done in time.

\* \* \* \*

She was in her bedroom reading the mystery book that she began reading several days ago when there was a knock on the door.

"Come in."

It opened and Josh walked in. "I have a brilliant idea," he announced.

"Really? What's so important you tore yourself away from the computer?"

"Why don't we play dress up," he said as he walked over to the closet. He opened the door and peered inside.

Did the man go crazy or what? "Have you completely lost your mind? I think you have spent way too many hours in front of the computer. It must have fried your brain."

He ignored her comments. "This is perfect," he said, pulling a powder blue sundress from its hanger. She was beginning to wonder where he got his sense of fashion.

She sat up and stared at him in disbelief. "What is it perfect for?"

"It's perfect for playing dress up, of course. You have five minutes to get out of your clothes and into this dress before I come back in. Starting right now," he said, pointing to his watch on his wrist. He placed the dress on her bed and turned to go out.

"Wait." Josh stopped and turned to look at her. "Why do you care about what I'm wearing all of a sudden?"

"Come on, Megan. Loosen up and have some fun. Remember time is ticking away and I'll be back. He turned and walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

She knew Josh was up to something, nevertheless, she picked up the sundress and held it up to herself, playing along with it. Maybe it would be fun.

She sat the dress back down and climbed out of bed. She stripped down to her bra



and underwear. She picked up the sundress and slipped it over her head. She walked over to the mirror and examined herself in it. She had only wore this dress a couple of times.

There was a knock on the door and Josh walked in before she could respond. "Now for the next step," he announced.

"What next step?"

"The next step is hair and makeup." Was he joking? How far did he plan to take this thing?

"C'mon, Josh. You can't be serious. I put this dress on for you. Doesn't it make you happy?"

"Where is your sense of fun and adventure?"

"Fine, I'll do it," she said, picking her hairbrush up off the dresser. She ran her brush through her hair a few times. She decided if they were playing dress up, she'd wear her hair up the way she always did in New York. She'd go for glamour and sophistication.

Back in the city, men would go out of their way to ask her out. She wondered if it would have the same effect on the men in Hidden Oaks.

She'd never know since she didn't plan to go outside. This was just a harmless little game of dress up to satisfy her bored friend and keep him entertained.

She pulled her hair up and pinned it in place with hairpins. Next(,) she applied her makeup. It was the first time she put any makeup on since the morning she left New York.

She admitted to herself this was fun. She glanced over at Josh. She couldn't believe it. This whole thing was his idea, and now he looked bored out of his mind, wearing the same clothes as before!

She knew what the problem was. She was the one having all the fun. He needed to play dress up himself to experience the fun she was having.

She imagined Josh in a dress and makeup. She laughed out loud at the mental image. If only she could get him to play this game too.

"What's so funny?" he asked, looking up at her.

"It's nothing. I'm having so much fun I think it's your turn to experience the fun."

"I don't know, maybe. I'll think about it while I pick out a pair of shoes for you and some accessories."

He dug in her closet, and a few minutes later, he emerged holding up her light pink flats and handed them to her.

She sat down on the edge of her bed and slipped them on while Josh went through her jewelry. When she finished, he handed her a simple pair of diamond solitaire earrings and a strand of pearls. She put them on and looked up at Josh and smiled.

"What?" He suddenly looked nervous.

She got up and walked over to him. "It's your turn," she said with a devilish grin as she tugged on his hand. "I know the perfect dress. It'll look great on you."

"I don't think so," he said as he pulled his hand out of her grasp.

"Drats, you're no fun," she teased, sticking her tongue out at him.

There was a knock on the cabin door and all playfulness came to an end. "Who's out there?" she asked Josh. "Were you expecting someone?"

"No, I wasn't expecting anyone. Why don't you go to the door and open it and find out whose out there?"

"Me?" Why couldn't Josh get the door himself? Did he have something to hide.

"Yes, you answer it. I always answer it. It's your turn now."

"Oh alright," she said dramatically as she turned to leave the room. When she got to the doorway, she couldn't resist teasing Josh one more time. "Just remember, buddy, if there is an ax murderer on the other side of the door, I'm holding you responsible."

Josh laughed. "Just go answer it before whoever is knocking gets tired and leaves."

"I think I know who's on the other side," she said before turning and walking out of the room. She walked over to the door and opened it. She was surprised to see Blade standing there wearing a suit. He let out a low whistle.

"Blade, what are you doing here?"

"I'm here to pick up my date."

"You're here to do what?" she asked, unsure if she heard him correctly. Could she be dreaming?

"I think you know what I said. I'm here to pick up my date."

"Me?" she asked for the second time tonight.

"Of course I mean you. I'm not going out with Josh."

She laughed nervously. She was about to tell Blade she wouldn't go out with him when he pulled out a light pink corsage she knew would look good with her dress. How could she tell him no now?

She stared in shock as he slipped the corsage on her wrist. She was too stunned to say anything.

"Are you ready?" Little did he know, she was born ready, but decided to play it cool.

She fought to find her voice. "It all depends. Where are we going?"

"Let it be a surprise."

She allowed him to take her by the arm and steer her out to his truck. He opened the passenger side door and waited until she was inside, with no parts of her dress hanging out, to close it. Moments later, he slid behind the wheel.

"Where are you taking me? Is it very far from here?"

"You'll see," was his only response. She wasn't going to get any clues from him. It was just as well. She loved surprises, even if the anticipation drove her nuts.

He started the engine and drove down the gravel drive leading out of the ranch. He pulled out onto the paved road and drove for a short distance.

She was surprised when he turned down the dirt road leading to the cottage. "Why are we going to the cottage?" What did he have up his sleeve?

"You'll see when we get there."

The anticipation was driving her out of her mind when he pulled the truck to a stop in front of the cabin.

He cut the engine and hopped out of the truck. He came around to the passenger side and opened the door for her.

He helped her out and held her hand as he walked her up to the cottage. She could hear rock music coming from inside. She looked up at him questioningly.

She waited as he unlocked and opened the cottage door. "Welcome to your prom, Megan Marie Nelson."

## Chapter Thirteen

The cabin was lit with candles placed periodically throughout the place, since there was no electricity. The music came from a battery-operated stereo. Furniture was moved to create enough space for dancing. A table set off to one side of the room, set for an intimate dinner for two. The cottage was decorated like a school gymnasium. She was too busy taking in her surroundings to say anything.

"I know it's not much and it won't take the place of the real prom you missed. I just wanted to make this evening special for you."

"It's perfect," she said just above a whisper. She couldn't believe he remembered. She missed her own prom. She worked up enough courage to ask him to escort her to the prom, but he turned her down.

As if reading her mind, he said, "I couldn't take you to your real prom because you were too young for me to date back then. There are laws against that sort of thing."

"I understand now, although I didn't understand it when I was a teenager. I was devastated when you told me no. Several guys asked me to the prom afterwards. I turned them all down because they weren't you."

"You never have to worry about it again," he said, pulling her into his arms just as a slow love song came on. "May I have this dance?"

"Yes," she told him as she melted into him. She laid her head down on his chest and they began to dance to the music. She wished this moment could go on forever.

She tried to shut out the fact she'd be going back to New York soon. Right now, she wanted to live for the moment and enjoy this time with Blade, which would soon be only a distant memory.

When she was in his arms, swaying to the music, time seemed to stand still. She could hear the rhythmic beat of his heart and became lost in it. All too soon the song ended.

"My sweet Megan," he whispered and began trailing kisses along the top of her head. He pulled each hairpin out one at a time, allowing her hair to cascade down her shoulders. He hooked his fingers in her hair before claiming her mouth with his.

A few minutes later, he pulled back and grinned down at her. "If I keep this up, we won't be having any dinner."

"Would it be so bad?" she challenged him.

"I would say no, but Martha slaved all afternoon preparing our dinner."

"If she cooked it, it must be delicious." She couldn't wait to taste it all.

"Are you saying if I cooked our dinner, it wouldn't be delicious?" he asked, pretending to be offended.

"I'm not saying that at all. I'm just saying everything she cooks is delicious."

"Are you sure you want to go back to New York and give up Martha's cooking?"

"Let's not talk about it tonight. I just want to enjoy our prom night."

"Fair enough," he said as he dipped her.

"What did Martha fix for Dinner?" she asked when she was righted again.

"Fried chicken, a fresh batch of her biscuits, mashed potatoes and gravy, and corn on the cob. For dessert, she has prepared us an apple pie she baked earlier today. All this talk about food is making me hungry."

"Me too," she said as her stomach growled. "I'm starved. Let's eat."

The food was delicious as was expected. It was always the case when it came to Martha's cooking, though. Neighbors used to come from miles around just to have dinner with the Nelsons because of her cooking.

Throughout the meal, she caught Blade watching her, a look of desire blazing in

his eyes. A tingle of excitement shot through her like a current of electricity.

She was about to take her last bite of apple pie when Blade surprised her. He took the fork from her hand and fed it to her. There was something sensual about the act.

Oh Lord! Did she die and go to heaven? How was she ever going to be able to go back to New York and leave this man behind? She couldn't ask him to give up his life in Idaho and follow her to New York. She wasn't even sure he loved her.

If he did, wouldn't he have told her by now? It seemed logical he would have. What did it matter? Now he owned the ranch, his life was here, while her life was back in New York waiting for her to return to it.

Did she really want to leave? The way Blade was looking at her right now made her want to stay here forever.

He got up and walked around the table to where she sat. He knelt down on the floor in front of her. "I want to take you upstairs and make passionate love to you, which I intend to do later, but there are a couple of things we need to deal with."

"What is it?" she asked around the lump forming in the back of her throat. She wasn't sure she wanted to know whatever it was he wanted to say.

"Before I tell you what I know I have to tell you, I need you to know I love you." Blade finally said the words she longed to hear all these years.

Tears formed in her eyes and her throat suddenly felt dry. Did he just say he loved her? She fought to find her voice. She knew how she felt about this wonderful man. She always knew. "I love you, too," she finally managed to say. It felt strange saying those words out loud.

She watched as Blade reached into his suit jacket, and from a secret pocket inside the lining, he pulled out an envelope. "This is for you," he said, holding it out to her.

With trembling hands, she reached out and took it from him. "What's this?"

"I'm not sure exactly. You need to open it and read it for yourself."

"It's not from you?" Who wrote this letter? Why was Blade giving it to her?

"No."

"Who's it from?"

"It's from your parents," he explained. "I got it from the attorney today."

"My parents?" she asked, trying to fight the tears, which were now running down her cheeks.

"Yes. You don't need to open it now if you're not ready..."

"No, I'm fine," she said as she opened it with trembling hands. She pulled the letter out and began to read it:

*Our Dearest Megan,*

*If you are reading this, it means we have passed away. We are also hoping this means you have just spent a year on the ranch with Blade, as we have requested in our will.*

*When you left Idaho and went to New York to start a life of your own, your father and I missed you, but we weren't the only ones who missed you in your absence from the ranch.*

*Blade missed you as well. You may have figured this out by now for yourself. Blade was right here waiting for you all those years, longing for the day when you would return to the ranch.*

*As each year passed, we began to wonder if you were ever coming back home to us. After much discussion about this situation, your father and I decided to make this our dying wish if you didn't come back to the ranch by the time we passed away.*

*We engineered the clause in our will so you would have to come home and stay with Blade for at least a year. By now, we are hoping you and Blade are a happy couple. If not, we hope you will make the best choices regarding your future with Blade.*

*If you and Blade are engaged or are planning to in the near future, please know you have our blessings, and even though we won't be able to attend the wedding, your father and I will both be there in spirit.*

*We have always wanted what is best for you. We want you to be happy. We know this is what you can have with Blade for a lifetime. We hope by now, you can see this for yourself.*

*We will always love you and care about you, even though we are no longer there with you physically. We trust Blade to take care of you and to always keep you safe. He loves you deeply and always has. Don't let anything in life stop you from seeing this.*

*Love,*

*Your (Mom and Dad*



The tears fell down her cheeks in a downpour of emotion by the time she finished reading the letter. She folded it up and placed it back inside the envelope. Her parents knew the whole time she was in love with Blade. Better yet, Blade was in love with her. It couldn't get any better than this.

Blade got to his feet and took her in his embrace. She wrapped her arms around him and clung to him. "Are you alright?" he whispered in her ear.

"I think so." He wasn't trying to make her stop crying. He was allowing her to cry it out, yet he was still there for her. She respected him for it.

She thought about what the letter from her parents had said. She felt bad she didn't last the whole year as her parents expected her to. "What you said to me before you gave me this letter and what this letter says changes everything."

"What has changed?" Blade seemed concerned.

"I can't go back to my life in New York. Not ever. I don't want to go back."

"Why not? I'll be with you."

"I want to stay on the ranch if you'll allow me to." She held her breath, waiting for his answer.

"Of course you can stay. The ranch is and always will be your home for as long as you want it to be."

"I want to stay on the ranch with you forever. Is that too long?"

"Too long? I don't think forever is long enough. I was hoping this topic would come up because I want to talk to you about it."

"If there's a problem with me living on the ranch, I can always fix this cottage up and live in it."

"You'll do no such thing. You'll sleep in the ranch house every night in our bed from here on out."

He reached into the same pocket he got the letter from her parents out of and pulled out a small, black jeweler's box. She could feel her heart rate speeding up. Was this what she thought it was? "I meant what I said when I told you I love you."

He dropped back down on the floor on his knees in front of her. He opened the

jeweler's box. She gasped. It was exactly what she thought it was. He took the ring out of the little black velvet box.

"Megan Marie Nelson, will you marry me?" This moment was better than she dreamed it could be.

She began to cry, but this time it was tears of happiness. "Yes, I'll marry you, Blade Thorn."

She just got the words out when he slipped the engagement ring on her finger, making it official. It was a small gold band with a single solitaire diamond mounted to it. It sparkled as the light from the flickering candles caught it. It was the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen.

"The ring used to belong to my great, great grandmother," he explained. "It has been passed down through my family. I knew when you were seventeen, someday I would be slipping it onto your finger."

"I'm glad you chose me," she said as a fresh rain of tears threatened to wet her cheeks. She would remember this moment and cherish it forever.

He jumped up and pulled her into his arms. "I plan to make you happy for the rest of our lives," he promised.

He kissed her and told her to wait right there for him. He returned a few minutes later with a flashlight. He handed it to her before he began to blow out all the candles.

When he finished, he took her by the hand and led her upstairs to the bedroom. They made love to celebrate their love for each other and their engagement.

After making love for the third time, she whispered, "I love you, Blade Thorn."

"I love you, too Megan Nelson."

Afterward, they fell asleep wrapped in each other's arms. She never felt more content in her life than she did now.

The next morning, she awoke to her first of many happy mornings in the embrace of the man she loved. She felt no regrets. She looked down at her engagement ring in the early morning light to be sure she didn't dream it.

They kissed each other good morning and it wasn't long before Blade was raining

hot, searing kisses along her neck and shoulders.

The heat began to build between them and she welcomed it. "I promise to make love to you every night and every morning," he whispered, his breaths coming in short gasps. His hands explored her body.

Wherever his hands touched her bare flesh, they ignited a fire in their path until she begged him to make love to her, which he gladly did again and again.

It was always going to be this way, she decided. The way it should be. She'd spent her youth right here on the ranch, waiting for Blade. Blade spent much of his adult life, right here waiting for her. Now it came full circle, they wouldn't be waiting anymore.