

RANGE WAR BRIDE

by

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WHAT THEY ARE SAYING ABOUT *RANGE WAR BRIDE*

“In times where mysteries, romance and suspense rule the bookshelves, comes a western using all three elements to entice the reader...erotic romance with intense emotions.”

Lia Schizas, Muse Book Reviews

“...a touching story involving a couple who finds love with each other despite the chaos that reins around them.”

Chrissy Dionne, Romance Junkies

Dedication

This is for my fellow
Mistresses of the AMOROUS AUTHORS—Ann Cory,
Rayne Forrest, Monica M. Martin,
& Twyla Dawn McKnight.

Chapter 1

Danika's nipples went taut. She loved the sensation that reading a romance could stir in her. Carefully, she turned the page in the worn dime novel. She had brought a dozen from the city and didn't anticipate finding new ones in the untamed west.

"Danika, what are you doing?" her brother, Nicholai, yelled.

His voice startled her, and her most cherished possession dropped from her hand.

"It's called reading," she grumbled, bending down and retrieving the book.

He came near and plucked it from her fingers.

"Nicholai, give it back."

"You're supposed to be hoeing weeds from between corn."

He flipped the pages and then closed it to look at the cover. She swallowed the dryness causing a lump in her throat. The picture on the front had a somewhat provocative drawing of a saloon girl with a cowboy.

"What is this about?"

She lifted her hoe and tapped it around a cornstalk seedling to avoid looking at him.

"Nothing of interest to you."

“Read at home, not in field.” He grunted and held the book to her.

She put it under her arm and kept working the garden implement along the row. She looked at the others working. Out of nearly a dozen people, only she and her younger brother, Anton, knew how to read English. It was a good thing, since the book she read was about the love between a cowboy and a saloon girl.

She turned her back on Nicholai and slipped the book into one hand to start reading again.

She walked along the furrow, getting further away from the distractions of her family. They could get more done without having to keep prodding her into working.

“Come on up to my room,” Rose, the saloon girl said.

“You know just how to treat a man, little lady.”

“No, I think I’ll be thanking you for how you treat a lady, cowboy.”

Danika closed her eyes. She hugged the book to her aching bosom. Her body tightened and she dreamed about the cowboy. She always thought about him and what it would be like to have herself a real cowboy.

She imagined him touching her naked flesh while she watched his handsome features. She could feel the way his fingers touched her breasts. Her hand went naturally to her left nipple and she rolled it around, delighting in the hardness. She dropped her arm down, holding the book. Her other hand left her breast and skated over her midsection.

She lifted the book and fingered open the pages to a familiar place.

The cowboy kissed Rose. She liked the way his hands moved all over her. A workingman had a knack for using his hands.

Danika moaned softly. Her body clenched and leaked so she felt the warm trickle glide down one thigh. It soaked into the cotton of her underdrawers. The tremors continued longer than normal, and she tried not to move or attract attention.

Her breathing slowed and her body cooled to the heated stimulation. She still felt a thunder rolling toward her. Turning to the long drone of noise, she watched the cloud of dust on the warm Wyoming plains. Like a tornado that didn't touch the sky, the billowing dirt tumbled toward her. The tranquil blue heavens held no threat of a storm and yet, thunder came with an increasing clarity.

She'd heard of dust storms and their severity. She never imagined she'd see one barreling across the prairie as if the world were a dirty carpet rolling up into a ball. She coughed and glanced around for her brothers.

"Nicholai?" She dropped her hoe in the furrow and lifted her skirt. Nicholai!"

The day turned to a haze of brown. The thickness to the air clogged her throat and she only made out silhouettes of workers in the rows of tender emerging cornstalks. She ran toward the shadowy movements of those people, her feet trampling the small sprouting plants.

"Nicholai!" she shouted.

The outlines dimmed and fear erupted from the pit of her stomach. The cloud enveloped her in the dust. She had no idea where everyone went or which way she should go. Her eyes strained to see the tree line floating in the

distance. In a stumbling frenzy, she fell in the furrows of plowed soil. When the air thickened, she choked on the gritty particles she inhaled, garroting her lungs.

“Nicholai!” she cried weakly, unable to breathe in enough air to scream.

She crawled on hands and knees and rose up on her feet. The thunderous drumming came closer and closer. The dirt coating her face blurred her vision.

Ever since they came to America from Russia, she had dreamed of kissing a cowboy. With the idea she’d die and never experience the closeness of a man, her pulse raced to get her out of the burl of dust.

The steps she took weren’t careful. Her footing misstepped on the uneven ground. She fell hard. Her arm twisted into an unnatural position, and knife-cutting streaks of immeasurable pain, skittered from her shoulder to her fingertips.

“Nicholai!” she screamed.

The sound of her voice barely made an impact against the rumble of the earth’s rampaging tempest. From the smoky darkness, she saw looming shadows approach. A hand grabbed her arm and lifted her. Whisked from the ground as if she were a feather caught on the rushing wind, she held onto a man on horseback. The suffering of her injury increased to new heights, but it didn’t stop her from holding onto her rescuer the best she could.

The man’s strong, thick arm circled her back. His gloved hand held the back of her head pulling her head to him. She buried her face against his collar in disbelief. She found herself in the arms of the first man not her brother. He held her tight. Her breasts compressed to the hardness

of his body. Her heartbeat skipped wildly, and she hadn't even seen his face.

The stench of sweat, dirt, and cattle overpowered her senses. Beneath the dirty odors, she caught a hint of cigarettes, soap, and something she couldn't place. That single scent of sweetness held her concentration. She needed something to forget the pain in her shoulder. She pressed her nose further into the hollow she found between his shirt collar and the neckerchief he wore over his face. She felt his damp bristly skin prickle her cheek. His Adam's apple jumped up and down on her lips.

While she should be concerned about her brothers, her mind wrapped only to the man holding her close. Was he married, old, ugly? Her heart said no. A married man wouldn't hold her in the tender embrace she imaged a lover might hold her in one day. The scent of him wasn't anything like her father's, no body odor, smelling old. Ugly had varying degrees. However, the inflexibility of the man felt beautiful, adjacent to the softness of her breasts compressed to him. She felt safe and secure. She reveled in the moment and adhered to him like sap to a tree.

She ached to know his touch. This was the first cowboy she had contact with; his hard torso squished her soft body and he felt like an ideal match to the man she dreamt about.

The horse jolted to a stop. The book she held slipped out of her grasp, and she let it go tumbling down her leg without much thought. She chanced repeating her fit of coughing to peek out from under the cowboy's chin. Her fingers touched the tip of the red cloth dangling in the form of a veil from his lower face. Instantly, his gloved hand wrapped hers as if to stop her. Instead, he pulled the

neckerchief down keeping her fingers encased in his black, leather covered palm.

“Turn them north and find out who the hell started this stampede!” he shouted from over the edge of the cloth.

Danika glanced at the man he yelled to and saw only a shadowy figure in the billowing furls of dust. Her interest remained more in the man holding her around the waist. His angry voice created a shiver to slip up her back. She believed he sensed her tenseness when his arm tightened with a quiet comforting. He wasn’t old...not like her father, but he had a maturity that commanded her full attention.

Her breasts began to ache with a strange tingling that either started or ended in her sore nipples chaffing through the thinness of her dress. She pressed tighter to stop them from gliding up and down. She could feel the thump of his heartbeat close to hers. She wondered why his pulse hammered so fast. She already knew hers tried to crack her ribcage from the build up of fear.

Her head turned to the ruckus surrounding them. Cattle littered her family’s cornfield. All over, big and little, fat and fast, the dirty beasts ran in a mass of dust. They were the cause of the fretful storm, and it passed as fast as it came.

They rode out of the herd and headed for the trees. A new nervousness settled into her thoughts. As the sheltered daughter of a man with three large, overprotective sons, her brothers hardly let her out of their sight. They would not approve of her indulging in a snuggling embrace with a stranger. She on the other hand, could think of no better place to be than in a cowboy’s strong arms.

* * * *

Alex cursed the day he ever listened to Reed Banagher. He had taken the man's word and that of his men that the land was open. If he had half a brain, he would have sent his own men to scout the trail. He really should have double-checked that the open range hadn't sprung up new settlers. Everywhere he turned in the past months, farmers came to the area. They sprouted like weeds, so it was hard to find enough pasture for his cattle on government lands.

He looked at the group of people lined along the trees. They gazed back, stunned no doubt. There, out across the layers of dusty air, cattle had trampled their hard work into a disaster. They had to believe the child in his arms surely must lay dead in the field.

Alex pulled up on the reins of his horse, short of the two dozen eyes trained on him. He didn't see any weapons, but chances were someone in the bunch might have a revolver tucked in their britches. It wouldn't be the first problem farmers had with cattlemen and it wouldn't be the last.

"You ought to be safe here." He pried the girl away from her frightened hold on him.

She shook like a willow branch on a stormy day. He didn't have a whole lot of experience with children or anyone in shock. The sooner he set her free, the better off she'd be with the people hurrying toward them.

"Ouch!" she cried when he moved to get her off the horse. "I think my arm is broken," she whimpered.

Alex lowered her carefully and dropped down next to her.

"Where?"

He tugged his neckerchief off his face and looked to where she pointed. He touched the ball of her shoulder and could feel the small, deformed separation of the joint.

"It's dislocated." He frowned.

She looked from where he had examined her arm and up to him. Tears brimmed and fell in a slow stream coursing a path through the dirt on her face. She bravely tried not to cry.

He knew her pain was a good deal greater than she let on simply by the fact he'd had a dislocated shoulder himself once before.

"I don't know what that means," she said.

He followed her brilliant, cornflower blue eyes as they quizzically gazed at him, waiting for an explanation. Her face was as filthy as his felt, especially the rings around her eyes and mouth where the dirt cracked away. His lower face wouldn't be nearly as bad. He studied the delicate lines beneath the prairie's earth, powdering her cheeks. He didn't see a child. By far, her beautiful features outshined the grime, and an attractive young woman emerged. If she had been coated in pig's swill or cow dung, he'd see her angelic loveliness.

The big blue eyes, fringed with golden lashes, blinked more tears. The heart-shaped, pink lips made his mouth water to taste them. He stood up straighter and shook free his reverie as if he were shaking the loose pebbles from his muddled head.

"Your shoulder is dislocated," he repeated not remembering what she had asked.

"You said that."

She shifted to hold her elbow, and Alex put his hands under her arm to help.

“Does that mean it’s broken?”

“No.” He brushed the tears from her muddied cheeks.

Women crying always disturbed him. He never knew what to say or do. For this one, he worked hard at coming up with solutions.

“I can fix it for you in about ten seconds, but it’ll hurt like hell.”

“Fix it,” she mimicked the words.

Alex picked up her hand, wrenched, and jerked it so sharply, he wondered if maybe he hadn’t busted it for real. She had a delicate framework of small bones beneath her slenderness. She shrieked like a wounded hog when her arm popped into place. If she were a man, he would have slapped her on the back and told her to walk it off. He couldn’t do that with a woman. He’d never do that with her.

Her legs buckled, and he caught hold, pulling her petite body against him. His hand at her back steadied while the hand he had on her bottom drew her even tighter into the lower region of his aching body.

“Easy does it, honey.”

His cock came ready to burst forth and find his mate like an animal. It made him consider a dog’s instincts and habits—they didn’t merely go by a pretty face or a succulent cunt, they went by smell. He inhaled and accepted the woman’s scent for his reason to be on the verge of grinding his hips to hers. Right there in the middle of a pasture with onlookers, he felt an impossibly hard erection fight to exit his denims.

He cupped her face and lifted it up to look at her. The tears had caked mud in her lashes. He could see how it stung her eyes when she blinked. When her head bobbed back and her nose wrinkled, he brought her face against his chest. She sneezed profusely three times into the front of his shirt. His hand cradled the back of her head to support the violent shudder causing her to dig at his arm. His other hand remained on the curve of her ass with reason to feel her shuddering tease, torment his cock into believing he had a chance.

“God bless you,” he whispered hoarsely.

The dirt had coated his throat, and the woman nestling tighter than she ought to be, made him hard with desire. The part of him throbbing the most snaked down his tight pant leg. Even coated by the dust, she smelled good. It was shameful. They were strangers, she was hurt, and he had a cock, rock hard, all set to poke it to her.

“Here, it’s dirty.” He held the red neckerchief in her face. “But then so are you.”

She laughed and took the offering. “Thank you.”

She used it to wipe her face and then gave it back. Tears still swirled down her face and she sniffled.

Alex held her longer than necessary. He was such a sucker for a lady in distress. She put her face upon his chest, and he couldn’t pry the warmth of her away. She fit to him like his clothes. Her petite length nestled to his taller one, so tailored, he had trouble breathing.

She sneezed again. The vibration rubbed him wrong; it rubbed him right. His hips involuntarily pressed in return for relief. It embarrassed him enough to pull away and look for the shock on her face. She coughed and at the same

time, a natural separation followed. She didn't seem to take notice how his body sought to connect to hers. The only place he still touched her was the arm he held in place. When she took over the holding, it gave him free reign to slap himself and knock the crazy thoughts from between his ears.

He didn't hit himself and paid the consequences. A blinding solitary moment of madness hit him. He gripped the back of her head and held it to stare down into the wet-eyed minx's face. One kiss and maybe he could halt the searing pain in his groin. The pressure of impending pleasure mentally incapacitated him. She melted his brain cells into mush with the dreamy gaze and the sputter of sobs. If he never had another chance to steal her breath, he'd relish this minute.

"Would you stop crying so I can kiss you?" he asked, a little aggravated by not knowing how to swoop in on a woman's sputtering sobs.

He couldn't believe his words or the fact she hiccupped to a complete silence. It deafened the way his brain went out of control. He heard nothing, when she should protest or do something to stop him.

Her face tipped up with what seemed like an accepting twinkling in her misty eyes.

He bowed slowly, watching, waiting, and actually ready for her to come to her senses and say no. Instead, her lashes lowered. Big crescent fans drifted shyly downwards to her soiled cheeks. Her face went so still and serene, he wanted to cry for all the hurt she had gone through.

He licked his lips to wash away the gritty dirt. His head cocked to fit her face beneath the brim of his felt hat. With

his mouth inches from sealing to hers, the sweetness of her expression drove his pulse faster. He could feel his straining veins ready to explode. With sweaty palms, he pulled her closer in anticipation.

Then her eyes snapped open. She stared at him, and it seemed she remained in shock. It had to be shock, for what woman would allow a stranger to kiss her? The blue of her eyes invited him to a heaven he'd never seen before. As their lips neared, he inhaled the very air she exhaled. He took a moment to imagine the brush of his dry lips over hers. Would they be soft and wondrous, or rough with dirt? Did he even care? Would she?

If Alex hadn't taken the time for so much pondering, he would have been more prepared for the surprise of his lifetime. He went flying backwards from the jerk to his shoulder and crashed with the unyielding ground. He landed hard on his backside. His bottom, already sore from riding in the saddle all day, protested the abuse. His crotch didn't have a whole lot of fun either since rapid movements didn't agree with an erection the size of a bat wedged in his pants.

The beautiful woman had put him in danger of not knowing what went on around him. It had been the first time he ignored his own unconscious warnings.

"What'd he do to you?" a towering man demanded her to answer and grabbed her arm. "Why was he touching you?"

"Ouch!" she cried out.

It put Alex instantly on his feet to stop the tall burly brute from pulling on her. Husband or not, he'd have to

step into something clearly not his business to save her from pain.

“Hey, leave her alone,” Alex ordered, grabbing the fellow’s shirt sleeve to move him from her.

The man whirled about and punched him. Again, Alex flattened out on the ground. The connection the big man’s knuckles made with his mouth split his lip. He immediately turned his head and spit the taste of blood to the ground. The gob of red liquid landed with a splat in the dirt. He got back to his feet.

Either too slow or too dazed by the pretty girl, Alex didn’t see the second swing the man took. The man thrashed him with another punch by his big fist, this time catching the side of his jaw.

“Damn.” Alex sputtered and wiggled his jaw to see if it broke.

He didn’t fight much, but he never backed down from one either. The problem he had was his position left him sorely disadvantaged. Blindsided twice, he couldn’t let the man get in another shot. His hand went to a very well crafted equalizer, his gun. He drew fast and aimed the colt revolver at the man’s chest.

“All right, that’s enough of you using me like some punching bag. Just get back and let go of her arm!” he ordered. “It’s hurt and you ain’t making it any less painful.”

He glanced at the girl. She managed to get the man to stop holding her arm. She continued to cradle it against her chest and remained standing next to the giant with the mean-eyed glare. He couldn’t blame the man for being protective of his wife, but he wasn’t about to take a pounding for helping her either. While he saw the fawn-haired angel wasted on the wrong man, he thanked his

lucky stars he hadn't really kissed her. He figured the man could kill him with his bare hands if need be.

Cautiously he got back to his feet.

* * * *

Danika stared at the man holding the gun. Her feelings flip-flopped with a rising fear that her distraction would get Vladimir killed. She stepped in front of him believing the man didn't want to hurt either of them.

"No, please stop, don't shoot him."

The stranger tipped the gun back. It spun in his hand and dropped into his holster.

"I ain't going to kill him," he said, rubbing his jaw. "But if you don't tell him right quick how I helped you, I might not be able to keep to that notion if he comes at me again."

She turned to her brother. She had never seen him hit anyone before. He could be stern, he could be severely demanding. She just didn't expect him to punch someone without hearing an explanation first.

"Vladimir, he saved me from the cow. I fell and twisted my arm the wrong way. The cowboy fixed it, so it doesn't hurt so much." It still hurt a great deal, yet the lie seemed more of a soothing choice for the tension surrounding her.

She put her good arm around her brother's waist and leaned her face against him.

"He was the cause of that stampede," Vladimir grumbled. "He and the other cowmen drove those animals through our land and ruined our crop."

Danika wanted to defend the stranger, but how? Her brother was right. They rightfully purchased forty acres of good farmland, and The Sage Creek Cattleman's Association had done their best to try and force them off. Several times, men had come to the house arguing with her father about the fences. Some of their workers had their

own farms but were afraid to put up the fences to keep the cattle out. Some farmers didn't even bother to stay. They just let the cattlemen run them off their land. Stories had a way of spreading. While they only had their fences cut once in the past, and now a herd of cattle plowed across one of their best pastures, others had faced death and homes burned.

"You can't go putting up fences," the stranger said. "We have a right to get to the government grazing lands, and barbwire isn't going to stop us."

He sounded angry. Still, Danika breathed easier when he put his gun away.

"Papa paid for this land," she challenged. "We left Russia for American freedom and you say we cannot farm what is rightfully ours?"

"No, I said your fences are in the way." He narrowed his velvet brown eyes at her. "You think I don't know this country needs farms? I like potatoes and carrots as much as the next man, but this ain't no place to be growing them."

"We grow corn." She pursed her lips with growing agitation.

Her arm ached, and she didn't want to fight. Not with the man that heroically saved her from the stampeding animals. Beneath the dust, he had a handsome face. His brown eyes held a mixture of feelings she didn't have time to sort through.

"Corn, beans, whatever...you got to take down your fences." He pushed his hat back off his forehead showing a crease of sweat dampened brown hair plastered to his skin.

"No. We leave fence, and you keep cattle off our land." Vladimir's adamancy was firm.

No one had a stubborn streak like her brother.

“Vladimir, Danika, come quickly,” her youngest brother, Anton, yelled to them.

He panted heavily as he ran up to them. His face flushed beneath a layer of dirt and his blonde hair went askew from sweat and wind. It made her self-conscious of what she might look like. Her fingers touched her skin. She rubbed and dirt scraped away.

“It’s Chesna,” Anton wheezed. “She was hurt by a big cow, and she is dying.”

Danika’s heart about stopped. Devastation would come to them threefold. She hated to think of the phrase someone once used. It would jinx them.

Everyone hurried to follow Anton. She tried to rush over the rough terrain. She stopped because the furrows caused her arm to jar. The pain made her cringe and more tears fell. Vladimir, in his hurry, left her behind with the stranger. She could have laughed any other day at the irony. His oversight, however, did put her in a position to be alone with her hero again.

His arm went around her back and came up under her elbow. Nestled to his side, he guided her along toward the others.

“Keep it tight against your body to prevent the motion from making it hurt,” he told her.

She nodded with understanding and walked in the circle of his care. The trouble she caused him appeared in no way to prevent him from offering more assistance. She appreciated everything about him with more than a mild acceptance. She couldn’t dismiss the attraction. He smelled good beneath the daily stench. He treated her with pure kindness. Best of all, he looked at her with some happiness she could feel warming her insides.

He stopped short of the group. His arm began retracting from her. She didn't give up the comfort easily. She went to him with an insect's compulsion as if drawn to a glowing light.

"I have to let go of you," he explained. "Just hold your arm tight to your body."

She watched him leave her for the crowd of her family. From the rise of her mother's sobs and murmuring voices, she heard the stranger's muttered, "Damn".

He pushed through the others and knelt down next to Nicholai's wife, Chesna. Everyone surrounded the girl lying face down on the ground. They held wads of blood-soaked rags against her back.

"Let me see." The stranger fought the hands on Chesna's back.

"Who are you?" Nicholai's angry voice demanded.

"Alex McClaric." He took the cloth away from Chesna's back.

Danika cringed. The big gash oozed and bubbled with blood. She wanted to close her eyes and not watch Alex's fingers reach beneath the fabric, except closing her eyes would not block out the horror she'd already seen or the sounds of Chesna dying.

She knew the stranger's name and had to believe Alex could do something to help. He tore open the blue calico dress and the chemise beneath. The ragged flesh left a hole the size of her fist. Her knees buckled, and she dropped behind to the ground between Alex and Nicholai.

"What can we do?" she asked Alex.

He didn't answer her. She knew why; she just didn't want her brother to lose hope. She held onto Nicholai's arm. "It'll be all right."

In numbed silence, she watched Alex press folded strips of cloth against the wound. She didn't think it looked good at all, but she tried to pray and be as hopeful as possible for her brother's sake.

Everyone around them stood silent.

Chesna's breathing gurgled. Sounds hissed and sputtered. When it stopped, her brother slumped over his dead wife and wept. Danika turned away and pressed her face into the back of Alex's shoulder.

Vladimir jerked her up. She cradled her arm and watched Alex get to his feet. He turned to her and her brother. His blood-covered hands hung out away from his body. His face held a sad expression, as if he had lost someone. His apologetic gaze shifted from her to those around him. His eyes went to a darker brown and wary coldness.

"Murderer!" Vladimir accused.

"I tried to help her," Alex said. "She was gored too deep."

The others turned, and he stepped back. Danika saw her family and friends all look at Alex as if he were solely to blame. The same blaming hatred they had developed for all cattleman narrowed to just this one.

"Your cattle have killed Nicholai's wife. You are responsible."

Vladimir, as well as several of the other men that worked for him, closed in on Alex.

"Sorry, but I don't think I'm going to go along with that conclusion." Alex whipped out both his revolvers and slowly swept them at the crowd. "Now just back off, and I'll be going. I'm sorry about the woman, but it was an accident and nothing more."

“Please.” Danika rushed to stop another death from happening.

She put herself between Alex’s guns and her brothers.

“My brother’s mind is not clear. Please go before something terrible happens...to you,” she pleaded.

Alex continued to walk backwards until he got to his horse. She followed in the wake of air sweeping her along. Like a bee chasing pollen or a bear tracking honey, Danika couldn’t stop her advance.

“They’re upset,” she apologized.

His eyes went from hers to the crowd behind her.

Selfishly, she wanted to be kissed. Her mind burst with the horror of her thoughts. She just stood staring at him, praying he’d think of a reason to hold her.

He mounted his horse, and the idea vanished. He holstered the guns, and the threat of violence disappeared. His dark eyes were not the same. The curious concern for her also disappeared. She could only see nervous pools of distrust. Danika took pity into her considerations. She tried to see guilt in his long hypnotic hold on her, but she simply saw a man mixed up in a tragedy.

“Come, Danika.” Anton took her hand. “We’re taking Chesna home now.”

She lowered her lashes to break the spell with Alex. He turned his horse and rode away.

Mixed emotions coursed through her. Rapids of gratitude for her own wellbeing, danced hand in hand with the blame trying to build against the emotions she had for the stranger. She loved Chesna very much. Because of Alex McClaric, Chesna was dead. Her dear brother Nicholai’s heart would suffer greatly by the shattering loss.

Danika went with Anton to follow the others to the house. She stopped when she saw Alex in the distance

riding parallel to her. His gait went smooth and easy. Then he stopped on the knoll and looked in her direction.

Her breath caught at his pause. His horse danced in place as if eager to move even though Alex held him reined to stand still. She stood for as long as he remained atop the hill. Something magical had happened to her that day. The pain in her arm was a mere pinprick compared to the one in her heart.

She had met a man she could fall in love with, not knowing anything about him. It seemed the saddest moment in her day. For that, she took the guilt of Chesna's death on her shoulders.

Chapter 2

Alex nodded at the people he passed in town without so much as a hesitation to see who they were. During the whole ride back from driving the herd north into summer pastures, he thought long and hard over what he'd be willing to say at the *Cattlemen's Club*. He was a small voice, but a loud one when he needed to be. The bigger ranchers would have to listen to some reason, if not, they'd surely fall into an all out war with the farmers.

"Ladies." He tipped his hat to women walking along the plank walk.

No one nodded more than an acknowledgement, but Emma Jamison's younger sister Charlotte was a ray of sunshine.

"Hello, Alex." Charlotte smiled warmly. "We haven't seen you out at the ranch in a while, and I do miss our play at checkers."

"Then I'll have to remedy that oversight the best I can by inviting you to supper this evening."

He looked at the door of the *Cattlemen's Club*. It hadn't moved, but those who waited inside might wish they had left when he got done with them.

"What have you done here?" She put a finger to his swollen lip.

“Nothing, a little accident. I’m in a hurry, so how about I meet you in an hour?”

“That would be good. Emma and I were just on our way to the dressmaker and it takes her ever so long to decide on anything.” Charlotte leaned and put her gloved fingers on his arm. “Is something wrong, Alex?”

“No. Why?”

“You look upset, and Heath barely said a word about his day, before disappearing in there.” She nodded to the *Cattlemen’s Club* door.

“You don’t go worrying about what goes on in there. You know how men get riled about glitches in their business affairs.” He patted her hand. “I’ll see you later.”

He forced a smile and waited until Charlotte rejoined her sister, who stood ten feet away with an impatient tap of her shoe to the board beneath. He saw no reason to upset her evening with talk about a death the *Cattlemen’s Club* was responsible for.

The door opened without a sound, yet everyone turned to his entrance. Charlotte’s brother Heath would have already informed them of the day’s events. The tragedy that took place would not affect their swaggering. After all, it was just a farmer’s loss. There had been a growing number of underhanded attacks on the sodbusters, and he wanted no part of them. Unfortunately, his alliance with the cattlemen continued to be instrumental in his growing wealth. Without them, a smaller rancher would go under. He wasn’t about to cut his own throat. Over the past two years, since his invite to join their tight, private group, he had sat back and let everyone else make decisions. Where a vote was called for, he sided with the

majority. When something a bit unsavory would take place, he declined to be involved. When something tragic ensued, he went home and put it out of his head. He had his own life to lead. He couldn't be the conscience or the cure to a rivalry that had yet to affect him personally.

"Howdy, McClaric." Elias Gannon was first to greet him.

It was done with an air of cunning that Alex had never known Elias Gannon to implement. He scanned the room and surmised swiftly, Elias was their stooge. He was to allay anything Alex might say in anger. Unfortunate for all, it was not going to keep him quiet.

"Reed," Alex said the name with a moderate hold on his rage.

The man wasn't the oldest of the group, but he was the one who seemed hell-bent on making things difficult.

"McClaric." Reed scratched a match to the sole of his boot and lit a cigar. "All go well moving our cattle to the upper pastures?"

"You said the way was clear. You told everyone here you sent men on that very trail to make sure there wouldn't be any problems."

Alex never liked the man. He had his reasons, and the list seemed to grow.

"It was a week ago." His nonchalance irritated Alex. "My men rode the whole route and saw nary a homesteader in sight. Any fences left behind from the ones they vacated, they cut down."

"Then you have a sorry bunch of ranch hands working for you. The lazy, good-for-nothing hired guns aren't worth working up the saliva it would take to hit a spittoon." He

picked up the whiskey on the open bar and poured a shot. "I'll tell you all, right now, we're going to take up a collection and pay that family for their loss."

"What, for some dead immigrant girl who would have ended up in a whorehouse? That's where they always wind up working when their family can't make a go of a farm." Reed ground the stub of his cigar on the heel of his boot. "If you hadn't noticed, we're trying to get rid of the sodbusters."

Alex punched the man soundly in the face. He grabbed him by the scuff of his shirt and lifted him off the floor as he bent over him.

"That girl didn't have to die." He growled. "But then women who die by your actions don't mean nothing, do they?"

He slung Reed back to the floor and returned to the bar. His fingers latched onto his glass to dump whiskey down his gullet. The smooth liquid flames barely touched the inside of his throat. The sting to the cut on his lip was minimal compared to that of the one in his heart for a lady he didn't know. She suffered too many different kinds of pain in one day.

He poured another shot as he took a seat.

He heard Reed get off the floor and grumble about him being naïve, yet he had no worry that Reed would retaliate. He gave him his back as he poured another shot in his glass.

"You can't ruffle them too much," Heath tipped his head toward him and whispered. "They'll bury you and never bat an eye. I know it and so do you."

"Yeah and if we were smart, we'd pull out of this pack of demons before they take us to hell with them. Though, I

reckon I'm already one step closer after today." He pushed the bottle and the shot glass away. "I best not drink too much of this, or your sister will tar and feather me."

"Ah, you're going to see Charlotte." Heath clapped him on the shoulder. "When are you going to marry her and move her on over to your house?"

"I'm not looking for a wife." He reached unconsciously for the bottle.

The thought disturbed him more than it ever did. Not because of Charlotte, but because of something he didn't want his mind to even touch on. He poured the shot and watched the liquid swirl in the bottom of the glass as he tipped it up. The amber color was a shade or two darker than the girl's face, and he smiled thinking of her.

"Danika," her name whispered from his lips.

She captivated his senses. The sight and scent of her coiled around him, drew his mind back to her cornflower blue eyes. His mother had a garden full of the vivid blue flowers. They still came up in the weedy patch near the house, yet his memories remained uncluttered. Every day that he sat down to breakfast, his mother had a canning jar sitting on the table packed with flowers. Pretty blossoms of all shades stared at him, none as impressive as the blue cornflowers. He thought of Danika like that, extraordinary. She could have shrieked much louder about her dislocated shoulder, but she didn't.

Alex blinked a few times before he took notice of Heath nudging him.

"What's got you in a stupor and what's a danika?" Heath asked with a puzzled expression.

"It's nothing." He swallowed the drink he held.

“You can’t go letting what happened today eat at your conscience. We didn’t know there was a farm or people out on the plains. Besides, it wasn’t like they were anybody we know.”

Alex pushed the bottle back and got up. Even his friend had no empathy. Maybe if he was there and had seen the pain in everyone’s face or got the blood of the dead girl all over him, Heath too might just take a step back to figure out they were still human beings as well as neighbors.

“Hey, Alex, remember what I said. My sister is looking for a husband, and I don’t think she’ll turn you down.”

Alex walked away from Heath’s laughter. Priorities seemed all screwed up for everyone. The heated debates; the angry ranchers; the obstinate farmers; a bloody war seemed eminent. Other areas of the country had outbreaks, and he could see things building toward a heated climax. Getting married, starting a family, having a life outside of cattle seemed too far down the line to think of and yet...he laughed at his fanciful ponderings, Danika and marriage linked together so perfectly, it scared him.

* * * *

Charlotte stood outside *Mindy’s Restaurant*, their favorite place and a good thing since he never said where they should meet for supper.

He could love her. They’d been friends a long time, every bit as sweet as anyone he had ever met, yet something kept them apart. It wouldn’t be intelligence, because he never saw a woman so smart. Nor would it be the fact she told him the truth even if it hurt, she gave him her honest opinion about everything. Sometimes, when he agreed, he took her advice.

The problem lay with the lack of a romantic spark between them. He had only considered one woman in the past, and she married Reed Banagher. Rebecca had been something so special, he really thought hard on asking her to marry him on several occasions. If only he felt more like they could be lovers instead of friends, she may not have had to die.

"Hello there, pretty lady." Alex took Charlotte's arm. "You wouldn't happen to be looking for a right nice man to have supper with, would you?"

"Everyday of my life," she teased. "Are you proposing, Alex McClaric?"

Alex's heart stalled. His feet stopped moving. It no longer seemed as comfortable to joke about as it used to be. The cold brass doorknob stuck in his hand. He wondered if he had misled her with too much attention.

"Alex, I was just teasing you." She put a finger up and rubbed the wrinkle he knew would be between his eyebrows. "I don't expect you to ask me to marry you."

"Are you so sure? Heath made a similar joke. And, Charlotte, I don't want to hurt you." He moved aside when someone pushed at the door to leave.

"Oh, don't be silly. We're friends, I know that. You've always been like a brother to me, though I do have enough already. With Heath and Keaton always treating me like I'm ten and you as if I'm twelve, I haven't any notion in my head you'll ever feel the same way about me as...well as I want a man to feel about me."

"You know there was only one girl...I..."

"Rebecca. I remember. I recall seeing the two of you together at some of the barbeques." She smiled and pulled

his face toward hers. "I would never think to kiss any man in public that I intended on marrying," she said.

Alex held still as Charlotte pressed her thin cool lips to his. She pulled away and he looked into her eyes. He saw the stark reality of her adoration. He could see through all her protests. She did love him. He didn't know a way to explain his feelings toward her any better than he had already. He didn't think he'd ever get married and let the sentiments of love cloud him so much he regretted knowing a woman. He really never loved Rebecca the way she should have been loved, and he could see the situation no differently between him and Charlotte. He had grown close to them both, but not enough to make the 'forever' kind of commitments.

"If you ever have a mind to get a wife and I'm available, I'd be honored. But I was kind of hoping for a man who loved me like I only existed for him." She dropped back on her heels.

"Tell you what, in another five, or ten years, if I haven't up and married, and neither have you, we'll get hitched."

"Ten years!" she exclaimed. "If I haven't found me a man by then, I better marry you because I'll be an old maid like my sister, Emma, where no one wants me."

"I never welsh on my bets, nor go back on my promises, Miss Jamison. Now what do you say to that supper I promised?"

He snatched the handle and opened the heavy door. He could see she took it to heart as she did everything he said. Sure, she'd laugh and say she knew it to be a joke when need be. It didn't mean he liked the way it made him feel

like some lowdown skunk always jesting with her as he did with one of the fellows. It had been okay when she was younger, a child. Now that she was a full-grown, beautiful, young woman, he thought maybe he should curb his flippant attitude around her.

“Ladylike or not, I’m ordering the biggest darn steak this place is offering,” she chirped while moving through the room to a table she always liked near the windows.

“You’d better, or you’ll offend this cattle rancher. Not to mention, get yourself run out of town if you order up chicken.” He chuckled.

Their food came over the din of conversations around them. He hadn’t realized how quiet he’d been until Charlotte’s hand stroked his on the table.

“Tell me what’s wrong. I know something happened today. I do wish I wasn’t left out of it.”

“We took the cattle up to the north to graze on the government lands...” he started.

“I know. Keaton came back looking like he rode drag. He was so filthy, I don’t think a week of baths will get him clean.”

She didn’t laugh, and he appreciated she could see he wasn’t in a mood for humor.

“Reed had some men check the trail last week. They came back and said no one would be in the way. They had all the fences cleared out, and it was going to be a clean and easy run.”

He sat back and pushed his plate away. The steak, only half finished, no longer appealed to him. The rare meat oozed with uncooked blood. It reminded him of the girl’s blood which had soaked his hands not so long ago. It made

him look at his fingers, checking for traces, places he might have missed when he scrubbed up in a creek before returning to town.

“What happened?” Charlotte pressed him to continue.

“Homesteaders, they’ve been there for a while. Had a good five acres plowed and worked. Corn was already coming up, and they were in the field working. We took the cattle across the creek, and someone shot off their gun. It got the cattle spooked and started them running. I hadn’t considered it a big deal, a clean run to wear them down would be good to settle them into the north pastures. Less of the stock would wander off and head home.”

He lifted up his cup and took a swallow of the black coffee. His dry throat had a lump caught in it from the disgust he couldn’t express easily.

“Alex?” Charlotte’s expression turned to worry.

“They didn’t know what was coming. I saw people running. When I saw someone fall, I cut the cattle off and got to her before she could be trampled. She came out of it with a dislocated shoulder.” He smiled. “Brave lady, let out a shriek of pain that could cut a man’s heart out, but then she shook it off almost like it didn’t happen.”

“Well there, all was fine. You were a mighty hero and saved the day.” Charlotte picked up her cup and sipped the cream and sugar laden brew.

“Another girl wasn’t so lucky,” he blurted out. “She was gored and suffered a slow, agonizing death. I tried to save her, but I couldn’t, and I don’t ever think I’ll forget the sound of gurgling blood in her throat as she slipped away.”

Charlotte sat her cup down, and her fingers trembled as they gripped his hand.

“Oh, Alex, how awful, they must be devastated by what happened.”

“That and out for blood...mine.” He pulled away from her comfort. He didn’t want to be soothed into forgetting. “They blame me, and while I didn’t know, I should have guessed Reed wasn’t honest about the trail being clear. It doesn’t matter how many farmers are chased off their land, another family is willing to take their place.”

“We should do something for those people. Jamison cattle were part of that herd and it’s everyone’s responsibility for that accident.” She placed her napkin on the table and stood up. “Tomorrow, I’m going to get Heath or Keaton to drive me over there so I can offer my condolences. I’ll take a basket of preserves and some fresh bread and...and why don’t you come with us? It would be good for them to see you’re not the devil as you think you are.”

“Not me. I did my time there. That mob wanted retribution out of my hide. I could see the rope as if it were hanging from an old oak tree. The one fellow called me a murderer, and he meant it.” He took out his billfold and tossed money on the table for their meal. “If you were smart, you’d stay away.”

“Alex, we must be neighborly. They would do the same, I’m sure.”

“Doubt it. Foreigners tend to stick together within their own group.”

“That’s because people are too stubborn to show compassion.”

“You can be too stubborn for words, Charlotte, so I reckon the best advice I can offer is go only as a sympathetic neighbor. You don’t need to go spilling out your heart about being responsible. They might believe you and string you up.”

“Oh nonsense, I’m sure they’re nice, hard-working people, and would appreciate my good will.” She poked him in the ribs. “Now as for another matter, it seems my only offers for a date to this Saturday’s Fourth of July celebration are Reed Banagher or my brothers. None of those appeal to my sense of fun.”

“First you’re fishing for a marriage proposal and now an escort to a party. Miss Jamison, there is something wicked in the way your mind works.” He wrapped her arm around his. “I’d be happy to take you, Charlotte.”

“Just meet me here. Ten o’clock and don’t be late.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He helped her up into her buggy. “You’re not going home alone, are you? I can ride along.”

“No, Keaton and Heath are at the *Cattlemen’s Club*, and they’ll go with me.” She lifted the reins.

“And what of that lovely sister of yours, where is she hiding, or is it possible she has a gentlemen caller?”

“The prude is probably doing her needlepoint and thinking up new ways to torture me with her lectures on the evils of sin and...” she leaned out of the carriage to whisper, “...fornication.”

“Now I know you’re wicked to be talking of such things.” He stepped back chuckling.

“One of these days, I’ll get a man, and then all talk of it is over.” She laughed. “Goodnight, Alex, I’ll see you Saturday.”

“Goodnight, Charlotte.”

She snapped the reins and set the horse off toward the *Cattlemen’s Club*.

He rubbed discreetly at the front of his denims and cursed the vixen for bringing up such matters of the flesh. It had been a good long while since he visited *Cora’s Boarding House*. There it sat at the far end of town where everyone could pretend it didn’t exist.

He looked at the old house, all fixed up with flowers, and a picket fence. He could do with a visit. Marilee was a right good conversationalist, and as much as he had neglected visiting Charlotte in the last several months, he had neglected seeing Marilee even longer.

Walking in that direction, he closed his eyes to imagine the slender gal all dressed in her finery, the long, silky hair touching his chin. He drew an image of Marilee and Danika’s honey curls jumped at him just as they had when she held him. That short, but snug hold put her fawn-colored hair under his chin. The clean fragrance wafted quite pleasantly up his nose.

The invading reflection on Danika’s beauty changed his course. All desires to be with a woman, except the inaccessible one, faded. She had cursed his hide by a forgiving sweetness. All he could selfishly think about was how good it would feel to hump her as if she were a bitch in heat.

Her family may have been right to look at him as someone evil. His thoughts alone were wicked for the ways in which he wanted to violate that beautiful woman. If he went with Charlotte, he would at least get the chance to see Danika again.

Chapter 3

Danika ran to the window and back to her father.

“Papa, there’s a carriage coming with a man and a lady.” She helped her father up from his chair. “Now please be nice. If we are to fit in with the town’s people, we must get to know our neighbors and be neighborly,” she insisted.

“Where are Nicholai and Vladimir?” He limped to the door.

Her father hadn’t been well. His gout kept movement limited some days. Today, he was at least out of bed.

“In the field with everyone else, thank goodness. You know Vladimir believes we can do without anyone’s friendship, and that’s not true, especially if I or even he should hope to marry one day.” She opened the door and put a hand to shield her eyes from the bright, morning sun.

“Good morning,” the woman called as the man jumped from the buggy and helped her down. “I’m Charlotte Jamison, and this is my brother, Keaton.”

“Hello. I am Danika Stanislaus and this is my papa, Boris Stanislaus.” She left her father at the foot of the porch, so she could hurry to greet the strangers as they climbed down from their carriage.

She hadn’t seen anything as beautiful as the gold tufted seats and the polished wood since leaving the city and

coming west. Their modest wagon had no finery. Made of simple wood, it did the job of transporting them or whatever they moved.

"I heard about what happened and wanted to pay my respects." Charlotte pushed Keaton to hand her the basket from the carriage. "I would have come before now to welcome you to Sage Creek, but I had no idea anyone lived way out here."

"We've been here for three months. We have no need of the town or its people," Vladimir announced coldly from behind.

Danika cringed at his voice. It had seemed too good to be true that her brother would stay away. She turned around feeling the visit would end quickly with him present if she didn't do something.

"Forgive my brother, he is rude." Danika quickly apologized. "Miss Jamison, Mr. Jamison, my brother, Vladimir Stanislaus."

"What do you want?" Vladimir asked, his thin moustache twisted with suspicion.

She knew her brother thought everyone hated them. They'd had trouble in the past because they were immigrants.

"They've come to pay their respects. It is a very nice thing, and you are not to say another rude word, or you can go back to the field." She clenched her teeth and let the words hiss through them.

Vladimir gave her his normal unaffected stare.

"Won't you please come in for tea, maybe?" Danika took the basket Charlotte offered. She had not considered her sore shoulder would protest and winced at the weight.

“Keaton, please take this.” Charlotte quickly retrieved the basket. “I’m sorry. You were also hurt, I understand. Is your arm okay now?”

“Yes, it is mending well. Sore, but I think it should be as good as new in a few days.” She led them in the house and pointed to the table for Keaton to set the basket down.

“More like two or three weeks unless Alex was being a baby when he did the same thing.” Charlotte smiled and sat down.

“Alex McClaric?” Danika didn’t think anything could lift her spirits more than that one name.

She had thought about nothing else other than that man. To hear and learn more about him filled part of her fantasies. He had inundated her dreams. Even when she stood at the gravesite of her sister-in-law, her mind drew him into her thoughts.

“Yes.” Charlotte took the cup Danika offered. “He told me what happened, and I do feel as bad for your loss...as does Alex. He would have come with us, but he has it in his head he wouldn’t be welcome.”

“Oh no, I would more than...” Her cheeks heated with a blush for the way her enthusiasm rushed out. “I mean my family would be happy to have him in our home. Yesterday, they were in shock. Once I explained how he saved me from the same sort of death, they were sorry for their inhospitable attitudes. Papa wasn’t there, and he’s already told my brothers they were wrong, especially Vladimir for hitting Mr. McClaric.

“Alex hadn’t mentioned a fight.” Charlotte set her cup down.

“Oh, there was no fight. Alex...Mr. McClaric had fixed my arm, and he helped me hold it close because of the pain in my shoulder. Vladimir misunderstood.” She glanced up at Vladimir still sulking in the doorway.

“So, you gave him the fat lip!” Keaton exclaimed, slapping Vladimir on the shoulder. “Bet he didn’t like that none. Him and his pretty face don’t rightly get the short end of a wallop.”

“Keaton!” Charlotte gave him a scolding with her eyes.

“He’s not hurt very much, is he?” Danika fidgeted with the napkin in her hand.

She didn’t want Alex to avoid her because of what Vladimir did, though she had little hope of ever seeing him again. She thought Alex the handsomest man she’d ever seen. Under the dirt, she saw beautiful contours to his jaw. His lovely, velvet brown eyes had just enough sparkles to make her think of the brilliance of stars on a clear night.

“He’s as fit as a bull in the heifer pen.” Keaton smiled.

Danika smiled and made a more conscious attempt to push Alex from her mind, at least while she had company. Soon she found it possible to turn their conversation from Alex and onto other areas of their lives. It was a good thing too, since her brother hadn’t really stopped fuming about the fact Alex held her like a man holds his wife in private. Too old-fashioned for her temperament, she felt Vladimir was wrong. She’d never see the comfort Alex gave her as anything more than an endearing gesture of kindness. The fact he wanted to kiss her posed another matter entirely. She had welcomed it with an open and a very foolish heart.

“Will you and your family come to town Saturday?” Charlotte asked. “There’s a Fourth of July celebration.”

“Will Alex...Mr. McClaric be there?” Danika sat on the edge of her chair.

“Yes, he will, and I bet he’d love to see you. He felt very bad at supper last night about the death of your brother’s wife and of course, you getting hurt.”

“Oh, you two had supper together. I’m sorry, I didn’t know that you and he...have you and he been...” Danika’s flustered breath caught, and she couldn’t think.

“Alex and I are just friends.” Charlotte smiled. “I would like more, but I’m not what he has in mind. You, on the other hand, I think you interest him a good deal more than he’d like to admit.”

“Me?” She looked over at Vladimir hoping he didn’t hear. She leaned toward Charlotte some and whispered, “He doesn’t know me.”

“I can’t say for sure how Alex feels about anything when he won’t come right out with his feelings, but when he mentioned you, his eyes lit up, just like yours are now. I think he would indeed like to get to know you.”

Danika smiled broadly. Her skin tingled and her heart soared with happiness. She had a chance to see, to speak, and maybe to kiss Alex McClaric. She didn’t even consider what her family would say.

“I think we will come to town Saturday. It would be good for my family to meet our neighbors. It is so very nice of you to invite us, Charlotte.”

“It’s a town celebration, and you didn’t need an invite.”

“Well I thank you anyway, and I thank you for coming to visit.”

She looked at her brother. Vladimir would be the only one she had to convince it would be good for them to go to town. She'd promise him anything, just so she could see Alex. If the devil rose up and wanted her soul, she'd give it gladly so she might talk to the man of her dreams.

* * * *

The town was a mass of red, white, and blue. From streamers, to bunting, and everything in between, Sage Creek did up an Independence Day Celebration like no other. At least so Alex believed, but then he'd been to any other town on the Fourth of July. His loyalties had always been to his growing town.

"Isn't everything simply beautiful?" Charlotte exclaimed.

Alex opened his mouth to speak. "Beautiful," came out and nothing more.

Mid-thought, the sight of Danika stole his very next words. He couldn't recall what Charlotte asked or commented on. He went blind to everything around him. He swallowed feeling a heated rise in his body's temperature. Spotless and looking more stunning than he could ever have imagined once she cleaned up, Danika had him spellbound.

The child playing at her skirts drove a wedge into his happiness.

"Isn't Danika's nephew, John, simply precious?" Charlotte held his arm.

He watched the boy running around Danika's dark green skirt.

"Her nephew?" The breath he held exhaled swiftly. "I thought maybe it was her son."

His gaze never left her twirling dance with the boy.

“No, Alex. She’s not even married. So here’s your chance to get a wife and not get stuck with me.” Charlotte’s voice stopped.

Alex looked at her and blinked trying to recall if she asked a question. Marriage, she had talked about marriage, and he didn’t want to get into that touchy subject again. Her eyes were lifted and waiting.

“What was that?” His gaze bounced from her to Danika with some uncontrolled spring to his neck muscles.

Danika’s play with the child stopped. She looked up and their eyes locked. He couldn’t breathe. She smiled so the radiance of her gorgeous big blue eyes mesmerized him in some trance.

“A certain young lady has caught your eye, I see.”

Charlotte put a hand to his face and pulled it around so his attention had to be solely directed at her.

“Hasn’t she, Alex?”

“No I was...I didn’t think about it much one way or the other,” he said quickly. “Besides, the big galoot standing next to her has already laid claim.”

“Alex, you’re not paying attention. She’s not married or spoken for, and that big and rather handsome fellow is her very overly protective brother.” She laughed.

Once Alex heard ‘not married,’ his feet moved him across the street. Something magical might have made him float over the expanse, but he didn’t notice and certainly didn’t care.

“Hello,” he said, stopping in front of Danika.

“Hello, Mr. McClaric.” She put a hand on her nephew’s head.

“Chase me more, Dani.” The boy jumped up and down obviously eager to continue their play.

Alex smiled at her.

“In a minute,” she told the boy, John.

“Your shoulder?” Alex pointed and scratched his jaw wondering why he hadn’t shaved.

“It’s fine, thank you.” She smiled shyly.

He noticed she didn’t look away while her fingers nervously raked over the little boy’s head. Silence kept them at a distance, and he didn’t know how to talk to her. He had tried for days not to think about her or envision the way her face tipped up when he told her he wanted to kiss her. He hadn’t been mistaken in seeing the same desire in her eyes. He saw it now, in the middle of town. He wanted to hold her in his arms and kiss her to make the ache inside him go away. Yet, they were standing there, in the center of the street, and he couldn’t do anything so forward. Besides, the big guy’s fist had made a powerful impact on just how wicked he’d be in front of him.

“Charlotte was very nice to come to our home and bring a gift of friendship.” Danika spoke first.

“Charlotte’s a very nice...oh no, Charlotte!” He spun around to see her right where he abandoned her. “Would you excuse me a moment?”

Danika nodded and after a few steps, he turned, and went back. “Don’t leave, okay. I just need to take care of something.”

She nodded again with a wider smile.

“I’ll be only a minute,” he looked to Charlotte, “well maybe two.”

How could he get out of his date with his friend? She'd understand, wouldn't she? He started toward her and looked back to be sure Danika hadn't run off like a terrified rabbit.

"Danika has got your complete attention, I see." Charlotte smiled. "Should I be jealous? She's been here for ten minutes and has you and Keaton drooling like big dogs hungry for a bone. I had meant to tell you she would be here, except I like to see you surprised."

Alex looked over at Keaton with Danika.

"What's he doing talking to her?"

He studied their movements. Danika's laughter was muted by distance, but he imagined hearing it as she looked behind her with Keaton's directing arm.

"He went with me the other day. They hit it off quite well, I should think. When we were leaving, he asked to be her escort today." She rubbed Alex's arm. "I think he's as smitten as you, only I feel quite sorry for him."

"Why's that?" He looked down, kicking the dirt with the toe of his boot.

"Because she can't keep her eyes off of you, and I fear Keaton hasn't a chance at gaining her affections unless you plan on rejecting that lovely woman." She hugged his arm. "Go on, Alex, spend some time getting to know her."

"But, Keaton, if he's—"

"Her brother told him no. Keaton has no foot in the door where she's concerned, now go." She pushed him.

"But today, you know I hadn't planned, well, if I'd known...come with me." He took her hand.

"I don't want to be a victim of your distraction, but maybe I can attract my own stud." She cocked her head.

“Vladimir is quite an impressive and very protective man. I bet the woman he marries will feel very special.”

“Yes, well as Danika’s guard dog, I doubt he’ll let me near her again.” He watched the hand movements, the heads shaking, nodding and finally Keaton’s shrug before he walked away.”

“Come on. Maybe I can distract Vladimir with my womanly wiles.” She pinched him in the side to move.

“Ouch, cut that out, Charlotte.”

He led her over to Danika. His heart thumped wildly against his ribs. His stomach balled up into a nervous tangle. His palms were sweaty with the anxiety Danika presented when he tried to think of what he might talk to her about. He’d used up the only topic he knew, her shoulder. The loss of a member of her family didn’t seem appropriate. If ever there were a day he felt afraid of something, it was this one rendering him stupid.

“Hello, Charlotte.” Danika smiled warmly.

“Danika, it’s so nice you could come today, so soon after the funeral.” Charlotte hugged her. “Did Nicholai come, too?”

“No, he stayed with the baby and Papa. I brought John with me.”

She elbowed Vladimir and Alex saw the brass of the woman emerge.

“Say hello, or I’ll tell Mama you were rude,” she whispered none too softly to her brother.

“Hello, Miss Charlotte.”

While Vladimir’s words were spoken to Charlotte, his gaze went nowhere but on him. Alex felt the tension grow. He only glanced at Danika when she bent down to the little

boy and whispered in his ear. A second later, the boy took off running.

“Oh, Vladimir, get him.” Danika gave a push, and her brother hurried away.

“I’ll go help.” Charlotte laughed rubbing Alex’s arm.

Alex and Danika were left alone. He stood before the angel and still didn’t know what to say. She dropped her eyes several times as well to avoid the awkward moment. He kept glancing over his shoulder looking for her brother’s return and each time, he stepped closer to Danika. Her eyes twinkled; her milky skin glowed. He experienced a humbleness he couldn’t get past, and her hand reached out to touch his.

“Maybe we can go somewhere else to talk before Vladimir comes back?” she quietly suggested.

He knew the perfect place and took her arm before something changed her mind, or Vladimir came back to stop them. Her whimper stopped him dead in his tracks.

“I’m sorry.” He lightly touched her shoulder, and then his hand went to her cheek. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s okay.” She shifted around him and took his other arm.

He covered her fingers with his hand as if she might get away. He had ideas of all sorts running through his head, and they began with kissing her.

Chapter 4

Across the square and around the corner of a booth set up for selling beverages, Alex took long strides. She hoped he had every intention of finding a private place for the two of them to get better acquainted. Her willingness made the blood flow through her veins like burning lamp oil. She didn't want to imagine just what he would do, or what she would let him do.

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"The livery, it'll be quiet in there."

She took quick steps to keep up. It never occurred to her not to go with him. The brevity of their first meeting bonded her to him quicker than a year's courting. She clung to his arm, ready to open her heart to the passionate way she fanaticized about him in her nightly dreams.

He opened the large wood-slatted door, and Danika went into the dark barn first. The strong smell of leather and animals assailed her nose, making it wrinkle automatically.

"It smells funny in here."

Alex pulled the door shut and drew her deep into the shadows. His finger slid down her nose and landed on her lips. "You spend a lot of time outside."

"Fresh air is much better."

She looked at the harnesses and other equipment hanging on the walls. Suddenly, she felt strange. Her belly tumbled like rushing waters over a cliff. Her skin perspired with an unnatural heat flash.

“Do you want to leave?” His hand slipped to her shoulder.

She surveyed her surroundings. Her loose hair caught under his fingers, and he played with a lock while waiting for her to answer.

“No,” she whispered.

Her heart beat faster. She lifted her face and stared up at him.

“Just the answer I was hoping for.” He cupped her cheek, circled his thumb over her hot skin making it hotter.

Then his head dipped down to her level. She leaned into the aim of his mouth. Her parted lips accepted his breath. The short peck he gave didn’t satisfy her, and she stayed puckered for another taste of his sweet breath mingling with hers.

“Heaven help me,” he uttered the words while falling back into her eager inhale.

Heaven help them both, she thought. She didn’t want to feel so strongly for him. Her emotions sometimes just got in the way of reality. She didn’t want to believe Alex would be the sort of man to toy with her. Nor did she want to be the sort of person her brother warned she’d be considered if she were even seen with a man.

Alex slowly crushed her to him. Every ounce of his body drew her in, and she melted to him like a soft layer of clothing. She crowded into the strength and security surrounding her. His thick, muscled arms encased her with

a powerful gentleness. She had dreamed of his kiss and the doing went beyond what she could imagine. His mouth had both the firmness of a man and the softness of affection. His hold remained a temperate restraint she could choose to leave or cling to with wanton desire.

Whatever thoughts she had of stopping him were greatly overruled by her body's hungering quest to join his. She knew little about coupling with a man, but what she did know was not like anything she could ever have dreamed.

"This isn't right," he whispered.

"I know," she gasped.

Thankfully, he didn't stop kissing her to tell her the evils they ventured toward.

"I shouldn't be holding you so close." His lips brushed at hers before traveling to her cheeks. "I shouldn't hold you at all."

"I like you holding me," she confessed.

She didn't have a worry in her that would separate her from all his attention. Including the fact that his hands were moving, from her back, to her bottom, and around to her breast. He stopped kissing her. Guilt reflected in his eyes. Her nipple burned with the heat of his palm. It remained sensitized even as his hand slipped up and stroked her neck. He held her head and kissed her harder. He attacked her mouth, and she hummed with the lustful adoration she had for his attention.

"Oh, Alex," she moaned.

She clutched at his sides and his back, wishing he would do all the things she could only wish for from a man. She pressed herself to him to feel the hardness of his body

throbbing to the same points of hers, aching with quick pulses.

His kisses ricocheted from place to place on her face and down her neck. He caught her in a moment of pure weakness, and she couldn't let go. Instead, she participated like a mosquito attacking flesh. She kissed him back with a rapacious hunger. Her lips grazed his face and his jaw. She would pay for her indulgence later. When they separated and she went home never to see him again, she would cry over the memory.

Every one of her curves fit to his lean frame. He exhausted her with his tongue curling over hers and bathing the inside of her mouth. She turned her head slightly to lie upon his collarbone, and he kissed her deeper. He held her so securely, she could have passed out, and remained upright.

Heaven came in the form of his arms.

Hell raised an angry voice from behind. "Danika!" Vladimir rushed at them like a bullet.

She separated from Alex in total shock.

Alex reacted with his guns flying swiftly from his holster.

"Stop!" Danika screamed before something awful happened.

Her heart still fluttered with the madness she and Alex had engaged in.

"You'll marry her," Vladimir ordered.

Danika thought she'd faint with the desirable prospect.

The expression on Alex's face reflected how he thought her brother's rant was that of a crazy man.

Where moment's ago, Alex made her feel he had an emotional attachment to her, he now looked on in total denial of having even an inkling of affection for her.

"You've defiled her so she is not fit for another man!" Vladimir's face glowed red.

"I'm not going to marry her," Alex countered with swift adamancy. "It was just a kiss, nothing more."

"No man will want her, knowing she's been touched."

"There are a lot of men you can get to marry her, whether she's a virgin or not."

Danika's gasp turned Alex's gaze toward her. An instant humiliation shook her.

"I ain't in the market for no wife," he said quieter, and it seemed more aimed at her than her brother.

"You marry her, or she will never get a husband after today."

Vladimir's broken accent thickened as he spoke, and Danika felt sick.

"There are a dozen men in this town that would marry her, I tell you," Alex argued with certainty. "Look, I don't want any trouble. Me kissing her was no big deal."

The mortification only got worse, and she couldn't stand another minute of it.

"I wouldn't marry him if he were the last man in this town," she cried.

Then wheeling about, she ran from the barn. She ran as fast as she could make her feet take her away from the embarrassment. She had trusted him from the start, knowing it to be the wrong thing to do. She didn't need to be slapped with the fact she had foolish dreams.

* * * *

“Danika!” Alex shouted to stop her.

She didn’t listen or wouldn’t, and how could he blame her? His last statement was so far from the truth, it even pained him to say it, but he had no choice. He wasn’t getting married...to her, to Charlotte, to no one. That was how it was going to be, and they could all get used to it in whatever fashion they liked.

Vladimir stood his ground, unarmed, and apparently determined to get some of his hide.

Alex holstered the guns and readied for a fistfight. He didn’t feel the odds were solely in favor of the big guy, but it didn’t look especially good since he remembered the last punches he took from the man.

“Why don’t you just get out of here?” Alex suggested.

“Not until you agree to marry her.”

“I don’t get it. You don’t like what I did, yet instead of telling me to stay away from Danika, you want me to live with her. You’d rather I did everything you think I was about to do and...”

Alex realized too late his words came out wrong. As much as he wanted to strip Danika down naked and enjoy every sweet ounce of her flesh, he wouldn’t have. His pawing of her had limits. Whores were his outlet, not decent women.

Vladimir charged him, and they went tumbling back over crates landing in the hay. Alex had the advantage and the opportunity to hit the man. The glimmer of a resemblance to Danika made him push away and jump back on his feet. He held his hands up, palms out.

“Can’t we talk this out a little more rational like, maybe a compromise?”

Vladimir got to his feet and looked at Alex warily.

“What kind of compromise?” he asked.

“If you agree to let me see Danika, get to know her better, you know, like what makes her smile and what her favorite color is, I’ll agree to consider marrying her.”

Alex didn’t think the fella gave many things much thought. The idea however, must have had the right word in the mix because Vladimir took a minute to mull over the plan.

“She smiles all the time and she likes blue,” Vladimir informed him.

“I like blue as well.” Alex extended his arm toward the man. “So, we got a deal?”

“What if you still say no?”

“Then I’ll let you try to whip the tar out of me. I don’t know. I kissed her, that’s all. No one ever has to know. It can stay a secret.”

Vladimir’s hesitancy should have made him pull his hand back, but he didn’t. He might not really consider marrying Danika, but he did want to see her again. Whether she’d give him a chance to make amends would be something else entirely.

Vladimir’s hand came out and then froze midway. “No more kissing her until married.”

Alex deemed the lie necessary to keep peace, and he nodded. They shook hands, and he felt guilty. He should have called the whole thing off, except Danika had him under a spell. He couldn’t shake her from his thoughts night or day.

As soon as Vladimir left, he pushed the palms of his hands against his eyes to hold his head. His hat fell back and

dropped to the floor. He'd sunk to the lowest possible level a man could without being truly evil. Picking up his hat, he dusted it off and set it on his head. He'd find Danika and smooth things over. He had always been a good talker.

Out in the sunlight, things looked much different. Keaton had Danika corralled by a fence. He saw her face looking anxious to get away. He walked straight for her.

"Danika, can we talk?" he asked, thinking she'd be glad to have an excuse to leave Keaton behind.

"No." She turned away.

"Danika, it's important."

"Not to me." She touched Keaton's arm. "I must go now, would you keep him from following me?"

She drew her shoulders back, lifted her chin, and strolled away from them both.

"What did you do to her?" Keaton asked.

"I kissed her."

"She's that easy?"

Alex grabbed the front of Keaton's shirt.

"If I hear of any man touching her, I'll kill him. Do you understand?"

"All right, already." He pushed Alex's hand away. "All you had to say was you've staked your claim on her."

"I'm not going to marry her!"

Keaton's brows lifted.

Alex strode away angry that she could make him so crazy. After all the hours of piecing together his memory of Danika, he had the ultimate victory, her in his arms. Then as quick as it all happened, she was gone and it was his undoing. All it would have taken was for him to say yes.

Range War Bride

'Yes, I'll marry the angel who has awoken something in me I thought was gone.'

Chapter 5

Danika hurried away. She didn't want to give Alex another chance at making the deep burning in her chest worse. She had trouble breathing, thinking, and now walking. She stumbled over her own feet and kept going toward her family's wagon.

Vladimir had spoiled her happiness. Alex ground it under the heel of his boot. She climbed in the old, worn-out wagon and waited. She wanted to go home. She had held back the tears so Keaton wouldn't ask why she cried. Now they were hot torrents coursing down her inflamed cheeks. The back of her hand became a weapon upon the floods. In the lull of the currents, she sniffed angrily, hating the way she cried. Eventually, the inaudible sobbing stopped.

The sky had a nice clearness, not one puffy white cloud in sight. The town, in all its splendid color, should have been a cheerful sight. She wished she could enjoy everything. She felt so low, she didn't even want to lift her head. Her fingers wandered to the frays of her clothes. It didn't take long before the loose strings in her shawl became victims of her agitation. The threads came free and she dropped them over the side of the buckboard as if she were dropping petals from a flower.

“That’s not anyway to treat that pretty shawl,” a man’s voice drew her face up. “I’m Reed Banagher and you are?”

She lifted her head and stared at the man.

“Danika Stanislaus.”

She didn’t feel like smiling, but his wide grin provoked one from her.

“Well, Miss Danika, what has you sitting here looking so gloomy when all the county is dancing and whooping it up?” He touched her arm lightly.

She didn’t mean to flinch from the nice gesture. Alex had spoiled her trust in people, especially handsome men. He removed his hand and leaned on the side of the wagon as if he didn’t notice her reluctance.

She gave a shrug and immediately her eyes flitted around to find Vladimir. He would ruin her American life. She didn’t know what to do to make him understand things were done differently than in the old country. The west was open, free, and wildly uninhibited. It was the thing she liked best, since she fit in so much better than in a city or the country in which she was born.

She didn’t see her brother anywhere. She scooted to the end of the wagon and took Reed’s hand for assistance.

“Maybe I could show you around a bit and put the sparkle back into those pretty blue eyes. And I don’t think you should even try using the word ‘no’. I don’t cotton to it at all.”

“I’d like it very much if you’d show me the town, Mr. Banagher.”

Danika swallowed the dryness in her throat. She touched her face wondering what he could possibly like about her seeing that she had less than frilly attire and red-

rimmed eyes. She hopped off the tail end of the wagon not caring to know. Alex could kiss his boots for all she cared to think of him now. Reed had her attention, and she twined her arm snugly to his.

“That’s what I like to see.” Reed smiled and wrapped her fingers around his arm. “A lady willing to dust off her troubles.”

Danika scanned the town like a hawk searching for its unsuspecting prey. Two objects were her target...Vladimir, so she could avoid him, and Alex, so she could rub his nose in the fact that she’d found another cowboy equally as handsome. If she prayed real hard, maybe Alex would be a whole lot nicer where her feelings were concerned.

“This is my first time coming to town, do you live here?” She lifted her chin and watched his black eyes twinkle merrily as if he were happy about something only he knew.

“About ten miles northeast on my ranch, *Banagher’s Cross*.” He readjusted his hat and she saw the sheen of black curls beneath.

“Banagher, I understand for your name, but why the cross? Are you a religious man?” She stopped walking when his thunderous roll of laughter disturbed her thoughts. She didn’t believe religion was something a man would laugh about.

“Sorry, but I haven’t seen the inside of a church since the day I got married.”

“Married?” Danika’s ivy entwined hold on him immediately came free.

“Oh, I’m not married any longer. My wife died a couple of years ago,” he replied with a low and almost unsteady voice.

“I’m sorry. Was it an illness?” Her heart rushed to comfort him.

Always too free with her feelings, she knew her disagreement with Alex wouldn’t change her.

“An accident, she was thrown from a horse and killed.” He took her elbow and began walking. “She had a heart of gold and unfortunately, she tried to please me too much.”

“How can you think that? When a person is in love, I don’t think there is anything they could do for another that would be too much.”

“Maybe you’re right. I loved my wife more than I think even she was aware of and given time, I would have made her happy again.” His smile widened. “So what would you like to see first?”

Danika looked around at the hand-painted signs offering everything from lemonade to kisses for a dollar. She could just imagine Vladimir’s face as he passed by that one. No one was in the booth, and she didn’t know exactly who was doing the offering, but she thought of Alex and the way he kissed her. For that sweetness, he could be a wealthy man at such a game.

“How ‘bout I buy you some ice cream?” He waved a hand at the booth set up for such a thing.

“I like ice cream. I had some once in New York, and it was delicious. They called it vanilla.”

“Ah, a plain sort of folk, were they?” I bet we can get you something a little more flavorful.” He guided her across the street and looked at the tubs packed in barrels of huge

chunks of ice. "Peach, strawberry and of course vanilla, what would you like, Miss Danika?"

"I love strawberries." She leaned to look in the tub.

"We'll have two servings of strawberry," he told the gentlemen standing ready to scoop it up.

Danika took the bowl and the spoon and waited for Reed to pay the man and take his. He was the first to take a bite.

"Mmmm....mmmm, that's delicious."

His announcement inspired her to quickly taste hers.

"It has strawberries in it and makes it taste just like them." She smiled.

She took a larger spoonful and put the cold creamy iced dessert in her mouth. She squeezed her eyes shut as the roof of her mouth froze with a sudden numbing that shot up between her eyes.

"Not too fast. It'll give you a headache." He lifted a napkin off the table and handed to her.

"I think it already has." She dabbed the corners of her mouth and held the cloth up to his face. "You have it in your moustache."

"It catches everything." He bent so she could wipe it away.

He had a nice face, and she found herself interested in getting to know him. She wondered what it would be like to have him kiss her with the same fire Alex had put into doing so. Then she wondered if all men kissed alike, and she just hadn't been informed. As they ate the ice cream, she listened to him tell her about town and the ranch he owned. Her gaze wandered at the same time. She looked at

people differently and made a close observation of how couples acted.

Her glimpse of Alex talking to Charlotte had to have changed the expression on her face somewhat, because Reed noticed right away.

"Is something wrong?" He looked over her head. "McClaric?" he said as if he knew Alex would be her problem.

"Nothing's wrong." She painted a smile on her lips. "You said you raise horses as well as cows. I've never learned to ride a horse, and the closest I've been to one is when they're tied up to a wagon. Do you have a horse here in town I can pet?"

"My horse is in the livery, and I'd be happy to show him to you... Teach you to ride him if you'd like."

"Really? I've love to learn, but I'm afraid I have two brothers who don't let me do what I like very often. I do thank you for offering."

"It's an open invitation. Any time you get a hankering to have a lesson and can escape your family's watchful eye, you let me know."

"I will. Thank you." Danika couldn't help the smile she had.

* * * *

Alex had watched Reed talking to Danika with the distrust of a canary around a cat. If ever there were a man he trusted less to be within an inch of her, it was Reed Banagher, the bane of his life in more ways than he liked to think about.

His feet shuffled with an anxious need to intervene, and yet he couldn't go barreling across the road like he had

a say over whom Danika associated with. They didn't know each other any more than a bumblebee knew a flower it sucked the nectar from. The girl's sweet saliva ignited flames of desire in him, and if he didn't watch out, he probably would be agreeing to marry her just to satisfy an itch in his britches.

When she climbed out of the wagon, he pretended it meant nothing; she meant nothing. He followed anyway. Where was her ever-protective brother? If there was a time to get between Danika and a man, it was now. A heartless villain like Reed would someday pay his dues to the devil, but until then, women had to be guarded.

When they stopped at the ice cream stand, he leaned on the porch post of the general store. He'd seen Reed court Rebecca, and he had all the earmarks of a suitor now. He handed her the small bowl and then took her to a bench to sit and eat. The delightful smile she had ground away at his determination to stay clear of her. His foot went forward when they began wiping each other's face. He didn't want to draw his gun and kill the man, but the exception loomed closer.

"Why is Reed with Danika?" Charlotte sidled into position next to him.

"Because I'm a horse's ass. I thought you were going to distract her brother?" He flexed his right hand with an instinctive need to stretch in preparation to shoot Reed. He wouldn't really gun the man down without proper cause. But it didn't hurt to enjoy the fantasy.

"That doesn't quite explain." She frowned.

"Vladimir caught me kissing her."

“So the bad boy emerges. You just met her, Alex. How could you go trying to seduce her?”

“I wasn’t going to go any farther. It was a kiss. She has such a wonderful shaped mouth and...well she wanted me to.”

“Every woman wants a handsome man to kiss her. It doesn’t mean you should go and oblige so fast. It complicates things. She’s young, naïve, and from a different country. She would expect a commitment.”

Alex laughed. “I could have used that information beforehand.”

“Why?”

“Seems you do know a little something about foreigners. Her brother is under the impression that my kiss warrants a bona fide marriage proposal. I refused, Danika got upset, and I’m following her around like some lovesick puppy.”

“Well, if you care so much, why didn’t you just agree to marry her?”

“Because I don’t know her, and I’m not about to let what’s in my pants rule my mouth.” He straightened his stance and took out a paper and tobacco. His agile fingers quickly rolled the cigarette. He put it in his mouth and lit a match. “What’s he up to?”

“Reed likes pretty girls,” Charlotte commented. “You two are a lot alike. Maybe he figures on kissing her as well.”

“Why her? He’s so dead set on running them farmers off their land. What does he think? Some charm might help his plan?” He drew in a long draw on the cigarette and let the smoke out slowly. “He’s not all that good looking.”

Charlotte laughed, and he looked back at her.

“Your vanity is showing, Alex. I think Reed is quite easy on the eyes,” she said wistfully. “And he’s nice when he wants to be.”

“Don’t tell me you’re sweet on Banagher?”

“What if I am? This town only has so many unmarried men in it, and I’m not talking about old Breen Kilpatrick, the blacksmith, or Harold Johnston, the snake oil salesman. I’m referring to young, strong men, willing to get married. I can’t wait forever for you to ask me, Alex McClaric. It could be maybe Danika has even less patience.”

“He killed Rebecca.” He spit tobacco on the ground and flicked the cigarette away. “I shouldn’t let Danika anywhere near him.”

“Oh? And what makes you think you have any say over what she does?” She wrapped her fingers over his upper arm. “I could use some ice cream. What say you take me over and then you can spy on them right up close?”

Alex stepped off the porch at Charlotte’s request. She gave him the excuse he needed. Reed levied a glare as black as thunder his way, and Alex again stretched his hand. He’d not draw on the man as long as there were women present, but give him an open range, and he thought he might consider killing him.

“Hello, Danika, Reed.” Charlotte smiled. “It’s a lovely day we’ve had for this party, isn’t it, Reed?”

“Why yes it is, Miss Charlotte, and you’ve only added more beauty to it by your presence.”

“Why thank you, Reed.” She nudged Alex.

“Banagher.” He tipped his head and went back to looking at Danika.

"I hear you'll be heading up the calf roping for the young men, McClaric. Shouldn't you be heading that way?" Banagher asked.

Danika nibbled the melting ice cream from the spoon. She averted her gaze from him to anything that didn't require her to see he was sorry. She had trusted him, felt safe going in the livery alone with him. What did he do, dismiss kissing her as nothing more than something to do. If shooting himself in the foot were a practical solution to proving to her how stupid he acted, he'd take his gun out.

"Yeah, I should get them calves rounded up." He put a hand to the back of his head and rubbed the tension in his neck. "Is your younger brother going to come give it a try, Danika?"

"Give what a try?" She looked up at him.

He recognized the discomfort she felt in looking at him. He experienced the same. He overstepped some bounds of convention, and she had as well by her participation. She locked gazes with him, and for a minute, he forgot the question.

"He wanted to know if Anton wanted to try and rope a calf in a game," Charlotte answered for him.

"He looked to be about thirteen or fourteen," Alex added.

"Anton is fifteen."

"Young enough." He tested a smile and got the turn of her head.

"Reed, I'm finished, could we walk some more?" she said.

"My pleasure." Reed tipped his hat to Charlotte as he took Danika's arm and they strolled away.

“Huh, would you look at her, gave you nothing but a cold shoulder.” Charlotte snickered sarcastically. “Good for her. I sort of thought the girl might have been a little weak in the knees for you. Seems she has the constitution of a bull...just like someone else I know.”

“Come on. I’ve got that calf roping,” he grumbled.

“But I didn’t get any ice cream.”

“Well, maybe you can get Banagher to buy you some.” He dropped the hold on her elbow.

“Oh, Alex, you’ve lost a battle, not the war. Danika’s affections won’t be swayed quite as quickly as you think.” She latched back onto his arm.

“He didn’t have much trouble with getting Rebecca’s attention in a short time.”

“I didn’t know Rebecca, but I doubt she made the choice lightly. Now where are we going? I thought the calf roping would be done in the stockyard holding pen?” She tripped and jerked on his hold. “Alex?”

“I’m going to ask her brother...what’s his name?”

“Anton,” Charlotte replied.

“Right, Anton. I’m going to ask him if he’d care to give roping a try.”

“In with one, in with them all.” She laughed. “Smart move, Mr. McClaric, how can a girl resist a man her family likes?”

“You know, Charlotte. I could leave you stranded on the outskirts of town if you don’t stop joking about my problem.”

He waved to the Stanislaus family and Vladimir didn’t appear at all happy upon seeing him.

“Where’s Danika?” he asked immediately.

"I don't know. Maybe kissing another man so she can get a husband." He cringed at the poke in the ribs Charlotte gave him. He shouldn't have said anything but the man dug into a raw spot.

"What more do you want?" Vladimir asked.

"I came to invite Anton to try his hand at calf roping. There are three age groups. Thirteen to fifteen is the oldest. Each group gets some instruction on what to do, and the one with the fastest time wins the calf. I donate them for different events throughout the year, and it's mighty fine beef. I thought maybe you could use a steer to fatten."

"We don't want your charity." Vladimir folded his arms over his chest.

"It ain't charity. It's a contest...but if you're not up to a challenge, I can't blame you. It's a tough sport." Alex watched the dare make Vladimir's expression turn to anger.

"It's what the men do around here for fun, Mr. Stanislaus." Charlotte smiled at him and put her hand to his arm.

Alex knew firsthand the wiles of Charlotte when she hankered to get something, and Vladimir didn't appear impervious to her charming smile. Alex nodded to Anton to go with him, and they set out for the stockyard. He couldn't see Danika, and it worried him. Reed would use her inexperience against her. Each thought of her boiled a silent rage he couldn't release. She had to go and be so damn pretty. It turned his head and every man's who met her. Trouble brewed, and he hoped he was ready.

People greeted him on his way to the stockyard. His glance met with the sight of Danika and his heart stopped.

Reed led her into the horse barn. Privacy, comfortable hay, and Reed were not a good mix.

“Hey, Joe!” He called to a man leaning against the corral. “Get everyone ready, and I’ll be along shortly. Take especially good care of Anton here. This will be his first time handling a calf.”

“Right, boss.” Joe shook Anton’s hand and took him away with Vladimir following close behind.

Alex was sort of glad to see it wasn’t only Danika the giant protected. “Wait here, Charlotte.”

“But—”

“Just stay here,” he insisted.

His worn leather boots took steps of precision. He dodged the talkers, ducked around pretty ladies wishing for his attention, and skirted anyone else who looked like they might latch onto him to jaw with over the falling cattle prices.

“No, I can’t.” Danika’s musical voice had a fallen sound of defeat.

“Get away from her, Reed.” Alex’s hand hovered steady and ready at his side.

Chapter 6

Danika walked out of the stall holding a halter. Elation hammered in her chest.

“Alex?” She hadn’t meant to mislead him and at the same time, couldn’t resist. Her observance of him following her and Reed had a twofold blend of happiness and disconcertion. He had her more confused now with his gunslinger’s stance and a cold icy stare at Reed.

“What are you doing in here with him?”

“I asked Reed to show me his horse. He was teaching me how to put a bridle on. I’ve never been closer to one than inside a carriage...or...or when I was on one with you.”

“You sounded disturbed about something when I came in.”

“My shoulder, I couldn’t reach because it’s too sore,” she replied.

“Your brother is looking for you, so come on, and I’ll take you to him,” Alex spoke to her, but his steady concentration stayed with Reed.

Jealousy had a way of making people do things they didn’t want to, and Danika felt horrible for bringing the worst out in Alex. It didn’t stop her from also feeling the delight from his concern.

“Thank you for introducing me to your horse, Reed. He’s a beautiful animal.” She handed Reed the bridle before walking to Alex.

She could have argued, but she didn’t. In more ways than she’d admit, Alex had a power over her freewill. He commanded her heart, and where it went, she followed. Besides, she couldn’t stand there and instigate a fight by her stubbornness. Someone could get hurt. They both had guns and at the ice cream stand, she sensed the animosity between Alex and Reed had been there for a long time.

“It was a pleasure, Miss Danika, and I hope I’ll see more of you in the future.” Reed tipped his hat. “And don’t forget my offer, because it would be a right nice sight to have you out at my ranch.”

“I won’t forget, Reed,” she replied over her shoulder. “Goodbye.”

Alex towed her out of the barn like he dragged a mule. To that, she had to protest.

“Stop tugging on me like I belong to you.”

“What kind of offer did he make you? I hardly think the ten minutes you’ve talked would constitute enough reason to consider marrying him.”

She wanted to laugh. He made her feel better by demanding she go with him. He made her ecstatic knowing he did give marrying her more consideration. Instead of allowing him to get away with his arrogant handling, she decided to challenge his ego and learn more of what he hid in affection for her.

“I don’t know. It may be the best offer I get,” she replied with her very deserved and deceptive answer.

She stared directly into his eyes. Coffee beans popped to mind. His velvet brown irises had shrunk to very small dots, which he narrowed on her.

"I think you should wait and see if you get another proposal. It could be there are lots of men who would like the chance."

"I suppose you're right, but I don't want to wait too long. It seems like it might be fun."

"Fun? Ha! How can you think it would be any such thing? He'd make you a slave in his house, cooking, cleaning, and mending things he ought not to make you do."

"It does sound rather tiresome, but I do all that now, and if that's what he'd like me to do in exchange for teaching me to ride a horse, I see no reason to wait for another offer. If I could ride a—"

"A horse?" He stared at her. "What are you talking about?"

"Reed, he said he'd teach me to ride."

"He didn't ask you to marry him?"

"No, why on earth would he do that? We just met, and he hasn't even tried to kiss me. He was only being friendly, and when I said I was never around a horse to learn to ride, he said he'd teach me."

"The hell he will. His wife didn't know how to ride either, yet she was killed on a horse. No doubt by his bad ways of teaching."

"That's awful!" Danika pulled away.

"Exactly!"

"I mean you. That's an awful thing to say about him and his wife. He told me a little about her, and he loved her very much. An emotion maybe you'll never understand."

His fingers held tight to her elbow, even though she didn't try to pull away from him.

"Don't ever go anywhere alone with Reed Banagher again," he ordered. "For that matter, I don't want you to go near him for any reason."

He steered her through the crowd gathering at the corral.

"I already have a father and a couple of brothers to give me orders. I'll not take more orders from you." She twisted around in front of him as his fingers loosened. "Just because you saved me from being trampled to death doesn't mean you own my life."

She didn't know what to expect from Alex anymore. He wanted to kiss her but didn't want to marry her. He didn't want her to marry anyone else, nor did he want her to kiss anybody. She shrugged free of his hold and walked away.

"Vladimir!" she called to her brother.

He came at her straight away, his long legs covering ground too quickly, so she hardly had time to construct a thought or an answer to the questions she knew would be forthcoming.

"Where have you been? Papa and Mama have taken John home so they can be with Nicholai."

"I was—"

"Did he kiss you again?"

"No!" she wailed. "No one kissed me!"

She decided telling her brother about another man would not get him to calm down.

"I found her at the barn looking at the horses," Alex answered.

She felt his finger glide discreetly down the center of her back. He had such a damnable way of rescuing her even when it wasn't necessary. It made it hard to stay angry or upset with him

"I told her you were concerned, so I made her come back," Alex added.

"Made me!" Danika shrieked.

"Too much trouble for you to get into on your own," Alex told her while his light touch swept in the opposite direction up her spine.

She wrapped her arms around her body to hold in the shiver he caused. The heat of his palm came next. He moved closer. He put his hand on the lower part of her back and held it there while he talked to her brother.

"Vlad, what do you say to me and you coming to an understanding? You had every right to think I should marry your sister after letting her kiss me. I'm bigger and stronger and should have stopped her."

"Stopped *me*!" She fumed again, surprised by his choice of words.

"I propose you let me escort Danika about town and the countryside. I'll keep her from kissing any other fellas, and then you won't have to worry so much about her loose ways."

"I don't need a guard." She stomped her foot feeling like a child between two men deciding how she should act and what they should let her do.

“And you will respect Danika?”

“You can’t possibly let him be alone with me. He’ll kiss me again, Vladimir, and he won’t marry me. He told you that himself.”

Alex looked away from them for a second. She glanced about as well to see what made him remove his hand from her back, and she saw nothing.

“I’ve got to go, sweetheart.”

His finger slowly glided down her nose. The action drew her gaze inward, cross-eyed, and for some reason made her hold her breath. Everything he did caught her in a whirlwind of emotions.

“You hash this out with Vlad. I’ve got some serious teaching to do so Anton wins that calf. Then we’ll talk more about me showing you a good time.” He jogged off toward the stockyard.

When she looked at Vladimir, his nostrils were flared. Alex vexed her brother with the shortened version of his name. Her brother never cared for any such endearments. For herself, the incident softened the earlier hurt she felt at Alex’s words.

“He’s not like anyone I’ve ever known, Vladimir, and yet, he’s just as protective of me as you are. He wanted to shoot a man for showing me a horse.”

She watched Alex’s hurried gait down the center of the street until he disappear around the corner of a building. Only then did she start for the stockyards to see what Alex talked of regarding her brother Anton winning a calf.

She moved to the rail and peered between the slats of rough wood to see Anton. Only each move of Alex’s arms drew her focus to study him.

“What man?” Vladimir asked.

“Reed Banagher, he came by the wagon and asked me to take a walk.” She ducked down to watch the calf they let out of a chute, and her brother ran after it. “Why is he chasing the baby cow?”

“You went with a man we don’t know?” Vladimir persisted.

“No, I mean yes, but he told me who he is and...oh look, Anton caught the little cow and he’s tying him up.” She laughed when Anton tripped getting up.

His grin was wide and well pleased. Alex ran out and held up Anton’s arm.

“Anton Stanislaus is the winner!” he announced.

“You are too free with your smile,” Vladimir told her. “Alex will need to watch you closely when he comes to call.”

She tried to suppress the grin she felt coming when she heard his unwavering approval to Alex’s offer. She wanted to be with Alex, whether or not he went about things all wrong. Her best reaction to Vladimir’s comment would be not to let her brother know how much she wanted to spend time with a man she fully intended on letting kiss her again.

“Vladimir, what are they doing?” She saw them untie the calf and lead it to the gate.

“It was a game. Alex says Anton wins, he gets to keep the calf.” He stepped on the rail next to her. “We go home now.”

“There’s so much more to see,” she let the full measure of disappointment in her voice show.

“Did you see me, Danika?” Anton excitedly climbed on the rail. “I did everything just as Alex said, and I got the best

time. He says as winner, I can come work for him. Do you hear that, Vladimir, I got me a job.”

“You have too much work at farm,” Vladimir replied sternly.

Anton nodded with obedience, and Danika didn’t have it in her to fight Anton’s battles when she had her own to win.

Alex put a hand on Anton’s shoulder. “You come around when you get some free time, and I’ll still put you to work and teach you all about the cattle.”

Danika gave Alex a smile for his thoughtfulness.

“We go now,” Vladimir announced again.

His hesitation came as an odd surprise to her, especially when he held his hand out to Alex.

“Thank you. The animal will be appreciated.”

“Anton did all the work. He’s a quick learner, and your family should be proud.” Alex picked up the calf and climbed over the railing with ease. “I’ll help you get him tied in your wagon.”

Vladimir nodded. “Miss Jamison wished me to pass information to you.”

“Charlotte?” Alex looked around.

“She said she tried to tell you she was needed at the church.”

“Dang it. It’s a wonder that woman puts up with me.” He handed the rope tied to the calf to Anton. “Here, I have to go. I promised Charlotte to ah...sell cakes.”

“Vladimir, please.” Danika squeezed his arm. She wanted to stay, and she wished to stay with Alex. Not that she thought he should know. She just didn’t see a way around it. “I could go with Alex and help Charlotte.”

“What about getting home?” Vladimir held her fingers, and she watched them vanish in his large hands.

She saw her brother’s blue-green eyes soften toward her. He rarely let anyone see how much he loved those in his family. As the only girl, she knew she had the favored place in his heart over her brothers. It was also a disadvantage because he guarded her too well at times. However, there were times when he looked at her and could read when something had more importance than a whim. He could see how much she wanted to be with Alex. She sensed that he too felt an instant trust of Alex, even though he acted otherwise in regard to Alex’s lack of restraint in kissing her.

“I’ll bring her home,” Alex offered.

“She needs watched.”

“I can do that as well, Vlad. Not a moment will I let her out of my sight.” He came forward and took her arm.

“I’m not two years old,” she grumbled. “It won’t be necessary to hang onto me like I’ll run off.”

“Danika will behave?” Vladimir narrowed his eyes at her.

“As always,” she conceded.

She’d be the same no matter what her brother or anyone else had to say. The fact Alex’s arrogance wore thin, gave no hindrance to her trust in him.

* * * *

Alex put a hand to the small of Danika’s back. The bend of her waist and hip drew his fingers around it. She had all the right curves of a woman’s shape he liked to explore. It would be hard not to attempt to peel the layers from her.

The practical cotton dress she wore had an extra softness from many washings. It had thinned, so when she turned to look at something, the twist of her body rolled against his palm.

"This morning..." he started to explain his reason for saying he didn't want to marry her.

"Is over and I've got no wish to discuss it further."

She stopped to watch the children running around. One with a blindfold had her fascinated.

"Is it a game?" She looked up at him.

He rubbed her side and drew her closer. The scent of lavender drifted up his nose.

"Tag." He smiled. "The one who can't see has to touch someone else, and when he does, it's their turn to wear the blindfold."

"They have so much energy." She rubbed her shoulder unconsciously.

Alex wove his fingers beneath hers and gently stroked her shoulder. She'd have an ache there for a very long time.

"We work from sunup until sundown." She sighed.

"You and Anton speak English very well, hardly a trace of an accent. Have you been in this country a long time?" He took her elbow to resume their direction.

"Six years. We lived in Philadelphia." She curled her fingers into the crook of his elbow. "Anton and I went to school while others worked. I practiced very hard to sound like other children, just so I'd fit in."

"How long have you been living here?" He waved to Charlotte and then stopped to have one more minute alone with Danika.

"Since the start of spring."

"I would have thought I might have seen you here in town before now."

A wisp of her fawn-colored hair snatched by the breeze, fluttered, and Alex swiftly captured it to push it out of her face. The curve of her ear, the silky side of her neck, each took him forever to stop touching.

"We have no reason to come to town. When we arrived, Papa had already acquired tools and seeds. We only need to work the ground, plant the seeds, and harvest. Once the crop is ready to sell, then maybe we have a need of places to spend money. We have none and there is no reason to look at things which we cannot have."

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

"Why? Because I haven't a penny to even buy a piece of candy or that you brought it up and feel guilty for having more than my family?"

She lifted her skirt and went to Charlotte.

Yes to all she said. He didn't like the fact that she would ever want for anything. He wasn't wealthy, but he always had enough of everything to feel rich.

"You're late, Alex." Charlotte handed him the cake knife. "You handle the customers while Danika and I go for cider."

"How about Danika cuts and serves up the cake? You take a break, and I'll fetch us all some cider." He glanced at Danika and hated the fact that she probably knew he offered only because of money. When she looked away, he reckoned she'd have to live with his generosity or explain her lack of finances on more than one occasion.

Alex didn't take long to get the cider. However, it appeared long enough when he returned and saw Keaton

took the opportunity to insinuate himself back into the picture.

“Keaton?” Alex’s tone questioned.

“I’m going. I was just getting a piece of cake,” he said.

“See you later, Danika.”

“Bye.”

Alex observed her smile following Keaton.

“What did he mean he’ll see you later?”

“I assume he meant just what he said.”

“Did you two make plans?”

“Plans?” She handed him a plate. “We made no plans.”

He looked at the slice of chocolate cake.

“Are you sure?”

“Are you jealous?” She slid her finger through the icing on his plate and put it up to his lips. “Try this, it’s delicious. Charlotte said she’d get me the recipe from the woman who made it.”

He took her finger in his mouth and sucked on the sweet confection. He savored every second she let him lick up to her knuckles.

“Isn’t it scrumptious?”

“Very tasty.” He leaned over the table and held her face in the palm of his hand. One quick kiss would set the flames in him higher, but he didn’t care. “Danika...”

“All right, you two, Danika, drink your cider while it’s cold.” Charlotte tugged her away from him. “Alex, eat your cake.”

He didn’t argue. The cake could have been mud for all he thought about it. He watched Danika sip the cider. Her face wrinkled to the tart taste. Her pink lips came away

from the cup puckered, and he turned away to rub the crotch of his denims.

“What’s wrong, Alex?” Charlotte whispered over his shoulder.

“Ah, nothing, I’m...”

“You’re not just smitten, are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve hardly known the woman long enough to feel anything more than...” he glanced over at Danika serving cake to another man. “I like her, that’s all.”

“All right, Alex, no reason to get testy. I can handle things here, so why don’t you take her around town?”

“Are you sure?”

“Just stay out of the livery.” She shoved him in Danika’s direction.

He waited until the man she talked to left. He enjoyed watching her when she didn’t know it. Charlotte said they were about the same age. Yet, Charlotte appeared older with her hair pinned up and her fancy store bought clothes.

“Danika.” He reached over the table and took her hand. “Come with me for a walk.”

He pulled her around the end of the concession.

“But the cakes and Charlotte.”

“She said we could go.”

“All right.”

Her arm threaded around his. He kept a hand over her fingers in the crook of his elbow. For hours, they walked, they talked, and he couldn’t find one thing wrong with her. Charlotte had pegged it right. He did have feelings for Danika. They were impulsive and rather wonderful since she responded to him with such open adoration.

"I should get you home, but..." He took her hand and pulled her close. "I wish tonight wouldn't end."

"Why?"

He could feel the heat of her sweet breath on his face. He had resisted kissing her all afternoon to prove to them both he wasn't an animal.

"Because I'm enjoying myself too much, I hate to think it's soon over. Tomorrow the town will get cleaned up. I'll be out on my ranch doing what needs done." He lowered his face more. "And you, you'll be back to your regular day of chores."

"I get the idea, Alex. I shouldn't have asked." Her lashes fluttered as he drew nearer. "You're depressing me."

"I wouldn't want to do that." He caught her mouth easily and kissed her firmly.

The shadows of the buildings obscured them in the night's darkness and people busied themselves with other activities. When he released her mouth, he put his forehead against hers for a second. The tender moment spoke to his heart, and he couldn't let go of the feelings twisting his arms around her.

"I shouldn't do that out here on the open street. People could get the wrong idea," he whispered.

"How can it be so wrong?"

Other than breaking his promise to her brother, he couldn't think of another reason for him not to enjoy every second with her. He really had trouble thinking of reasons not to marry her. One day seemed liked a lifetime of knowing her.

Chapter 7

Danika held him. She held him as a woman offering suggestions she hardly understood.

“Danika...”

Her hand came from behind and went to his cheek. She rose on her toes to kiss him just as he had kissed her. The unbridled passion swept her away. Or it could have been the way Alex lifted her enough that her toes broke free of the ground. He turned her from all eyes and drove her mind deeper into the kiss.

His tongue curled and thrust against hers. She mimicked his moves liking the way his saliva tasted of the peppermint candy he bought them earlier. His sweet mouth sucked and pulled at hers until she could hardly breathe.

“You taste so good,” he rasped low and reattached to her lips.

She giggled finding the delight in his thoughts matching her own.

“What?” he asked, hardly letting her speak between the slurping kisses he kept taking at her lips.

“It’s the candy.” She laughed again.

She dipped her head down feeling shy. His heavy breathing made her shiver with excitement. His hard body rubbed hers, and his hands stroked her with indecency. She

loved every second, yet she had to pull from his touch. She had to show some modest restraint.

She bit her bottom lip, and turned away. Alex didn't say anything. He rested his hands on her shoulders and smoothed them down her arms.

She shivered involuntarily.

"Are you cold?" He slid his arms around her so she backed to his warmth.

"No, just nervous."

"Why's that?" He put his face next to hers.

"I don't know. Everything is so wonderful and I, too, don't want the night to end."

She turned her face and kissed his cheek. The unshaven stubble prickled her lips. Then her whole body rotated in his arms, and she had his mouth over hers again. His soft, moist lips soothed the tingling while creating a fire.

"I'm going to wear out your mouth." He drew his head back. "Do you like fireworks?"

"I've never seen fireworks." She gazed up at his handsome face.

"Then come on." He wrapped her arm around his and led her outside of town.

The crowds that had been in the streets had gathered in a clearing away from structures, corrals, and trees. She gasped when the first burst of light littered the dark sky. It rained like fireflies to the ground.

"Oh, it's beautiful," she exclaimed and inhaled when another and then another popped and gave similar displays.

Alex stood behind her and put his hands on her shoulders. He brushed a finger along the side of her neck.

"Very beautiful," he replied low.

Without thinking, Danika leaned her head back to look up at the sparklers high in the sky. Her head fell against Alex's chest. His hand caught her chin and pulled her face up to his. "I've never seen anything more beautiful."

She spun around in his embrace and kissed him with all the pent-up passion she wanted to continue to explore.

"Alex, can we go somewhere else?"

He leaned his head back and stared at her. She knew he wanted the same thing. She could tell, if not by his kiss, then by the swollen hardness pressing her lower belly.

"Are you asking me to..."

"I've embarrassed you. I'm sorry." She backed up.

His strong fingers curled her upper arms and tugged her close until their noses came within inches of touching. His head dipped lower so his mouth could slant over hers.

Danika slumped forward into Alex's embrace. She thrust her tongue inside his mouth to taste the peppermint. She liked the way he teased her by pushing his tongue against hers—swirling, licking, and poking at the inside of her mouth while she did the same to his. She didn't know when the temperature had risen. Her body perspired and her thighs dampened with moisture rolling down to her knees. She weakened with tiny tremors making her vagina ache.

Alex squeezed her harder in response to her fingers digging into his back and bunching his vest in her palms.

"Alex," she breathed in small gasps.

He lifted his head and held her face. His thumb rubbing at her kiss-swollen lips made her suck on his finger with pleasure. Her pores glistened with enthusiasm every time he wiped her skin.

“You’re so beautiful; it hurts to not touch you.”

“You are touching me.”

He laughed, and she didn’t know if she understood or not. He didn’t make a lot of sense.

“I think I better get you home before you get me in big trouble with that brother of yours. I bet he’s already fixing up a noose in a tree for me.”

“He likes you.”

“Oh?” He rubbed his jaw obviously recalling the solid impact Vladimir made.

“He shook your hand. He would only do so with someone he likes and trusts.”

Alex’s brows shot up, and she laughed.

“Now I know I better get you home.”

* * * *

Alex snapped the reins to start the team of horses. “Did you have a good time today?”

“I had a wonderful time. The fireworks were so pretty. I should like to see them every year.”

“You will.”

The conversation rambled from one topic to another and time passed quickly. He felt really good with his choice. A little sad he wouldn’t get what he wanted, but good nonetheless. Then all his willpower began to diminish under the weight of Danika’s hand carelessly perched on his thigh. He held his breath hoping she’d remove her slender fingers. Unfortunately, he didn’t have the resolve to ask her to take them away. It made things extremely difficult to ignore when her mindless stroke aroused him. Every third brush, she went further toward the inside of his leg. The tie down on his holster seemed to be the attraction to her

course. A bump of the carriage dropped the wheel into a rut and her delicate hand plunged into his crotch. The contact with his engorged, denim-encased cock, stung.

“Oh,” he groaned with a cringe folding his shoulders inward.

“I’m sorry.” She looked up at him.

Those beautiful, blue eyes weren’t only not apologetic, they were filled with all the same desires he had, making his blood rush to the center of his loins. He lifted her hand, kissed her palm, and closed his eyes to savor the taste of her milky skin.

“Alex, please stop the wagon.” She leaned close.

He jerked up on the reins. “Whoa,” he commanded the horses.

The silence ruled the moment. She sighed and stared at the sky. The twinkle of stars reflected in her eyes. Choices hung heavy in his mind, and he thought maybe hers as well. Far from the type of girl he messed around with, he couldn’t deny something about her had wound to his soul.

“Can we get down?” she asked.

“Sure.”

He tied off the reins and hopped down. His hands went to her waist and he lifted her off the carriage. Her light slender frame slid down into his arms. Her softness leaned to his hardened state. He bowed his head and hesitated in kissing her. If he did, there would be no turning back.

“Is something wrong?” Her fingers scratched at his sides.

He had no intentions of making her nervous or anxious. If he was going to make love to her, then he had to do it without worrying her.

“Alex, please kiss me.”

He liked her boldness. It took pressure off him. It actually made him calmer knowing she wanted the very thing he did.

“Wait.” He tossed his hat in the carriage and then went to the back.

With it being Charlotte’s rig, he suspected he might find a blanket, which he did. He spread it out on a soft patch of ground away from the horses. Danika waited with an unreal quietness. He wondered if she had second thoughts.

“I’m sure,” she whispered the answer to a question he tried to formulate.

He pulled her up against him and fit his mouth over hers. Unlike the times when hurried or in public, they stood alone in the dark. Nothing needed to be rushed, nor would it be. He devoted time to tasting her pink lips, her silky cheeks, and her delicate jaw. Every place he hunted, she offered up with a pleased hum. Her fingers moved around him and held tight. He felt her tension, and he did everything to relieve it.

“I could kiss you all night.”

She pulled her head back and looked up at him. “Is that all you want to do?”

“No, but...” his breath caught in his throat.

How could one woman exude such sweetness? How could he ever think he wouldn’t do anything to make her his?

Danika’s hand came around to his chest, and she began to unfasten his gun belt.

"This isn't...I mean...jeez, girl." he took the holster and dropped it away from them.

Her hand went to his denims. He allowed her to unfasten his pants, because he didn't want her to see him shake. Her small hand pushed inside his waistband. She didn't touch anything of importance, but it was enough forwardness for him to know what came next.

"I guess you are sure." He laughed.

She stiffened.

"It's all right." He held her face. "You can be just as bold as you want. It'll keep me from asking if you're sure."

"Shouldn't I be?"

"Only if you plan on putting that hand further into my britches."

Her soft cool velvet fingers slid around his hot cock.

"Damn, woman, you really know how to get a man's full attention."

He pulled her mouth up to savor, to devour, to make her more his than he should want or had a right to since he vowed not to marry her.

"Danika." He breathed heavily.

"I'm still sure." She hummed kisses to his face with a reassuring steadiness.

She went to the ground braced by his arms. With him lowering to his knees and she to hers, he passed the point of no return. He kissed over her cheek and down the side of her neck. She turned her head and gave him access to everything. He brushed his hand over her bodice of thin calico, caressing the splendid shape of her breast. Carefully unbuttoning the garment, his deviant mind reminded him not to leave traces for her brother to notice.

“I promise I’ll be ever so gentle with you, honey.”

“I know you will.” She folded an arm around his neck, and her kisses pressed under his jaw. “Ever since the other day on the horse, I’ve wanted to be with you this way.”

“Well, isn’t it a good thing I can be so accommodating, my wicked seductress?”

He slipped his hand inside her dress. His last barrier, a chemise, gave him no trouble. He pushed it and her dress from her shoulder.

She giggled at his first touch. The sound died inside him. He sucked on her lips pulling them into his mouth until she panted out of breath.

“Lord, you’re about as sweet as fresh honey.”

Her fingers combed through his hair, agitated strokes over his head and down his back, until she tugged his collar away from his neck. He moved from her lips to other parts he could feel, places he wanted to see, and the exquisite flavor of her flesh. His traveling landed him for a moment on the pulse along the slender column of her milky white throat. The warm beat thumped against his tongue.

“Alex,” she moaned softly.

He sucked harder on the beating vein beneath her delicate flesh, leaving her with a purple love bite. He shouldn’t have, and yet he did. He nibbled her dainty earlobe and then retreated down to her shoulder.

“You’re delicious all over.” He slurped over her pert breast.

The bead of her nipple softened in his lips. He stretched it up and let it snap loose as if he were testing its elasticity. He sucked on it hard making the bloom of her

areola spread a pink stain wider on the peak of her perfect skin.

“Alex,” she whimpered.

He kissed on top of her dress, over her stomach, and gathered up the hem to expose her legs. He didn’t bother to remove her underdrawers. He wanted to tease her with everything possible. She trembled the second his mouth landed on the crotch of cotton. His saliva wet the fabric he sucked on, while his tongue tinkled her through the diaphanous cloth.

With his hands aiding the three-quarter length drawers off her hips, he looked at the fawn colored ringlets glistening in the moonlight. He swiped a tongue into the nest of curls.

“Alex!” she squealed.

“I want to taste this part of you, too.” He thrust his tongue into the hot pink folds of skin.

“Oh my!” she whined. “Oh my, Alex, please!”

He slurped at her juicy cunt until the tremors rocked her hips and her legs tried to close. His head prevented her from sealing off access. He wrapped his arms around her thighs and pulled her into his face.

The whimpers stuttered. She began climaxing. He tortured her enlarged clit, tickling it alternately with her narrow channel twitching rapidly. She came heavy, rearing up, and forcing the curly hair up his nose. The fragrance of her sex drove him crazy. His cock couldn’t stand the wait to plunge into her moisten core.

He worked his cock free from his open denims and shoved the britches down over his ass.

“Hello there, beautiful.” He rose over her.

He kissed her and watched her nose crinkle.

“That’s what you taste like, sweetheart.”

She curled her fingers into his vest and pulled him down. Her mouth sought his with aggressive determination. He lowered and fit the head of his cock against the wet entrance. Her legs spread for his hips.

“This is going to hurt a little,” he warned. “It’s natural.”

He pushed into her small opening. Her lips ground against his mouth. It made him lust for the newness of her experience and his own. He’d only ever bedded whores. The idea of hurting Danika stung him by her muted cry.

He held still, stroking a hand over her head. “We’ll just wait a minute.”

He kissed at her tears; salty droplets, he made her shed.

Her fingers lifted to his face. She had a fascinating way of touching his skin so it tingled with warmth. She moved slightly, adjusting to some of his weight, though he tried to keep most of it off her slender frame. He pushed up on his hands.

“No, don’t leave.” She held his shoulders, her hips lifted with his.

“Oh, I’m not leaving you, sweetheart, just trying to keep from squishing you.” He sank into her and her body reacted with a shudder.

Her nipples pressed against his chest. Rock hard beads on soft mounds of beautiful skin flattened against his shirt each time he lowered. Her fawn-colored hair spread on the blanket, reflected the moonlight so it sparkled.

She picked up her legs and folded them over his ass. It forced him into her as she undulated beneath him. Her

breath fanned his face in hot puffs. Her fingers gripped with periodic soothing passes from his shoulders to his back.

"You fit me," she said, then kissed his neck. "I like the way you feel inside me."

He kissed her hard. The sentiments were real, heartfelt, and he ate them up.

"I like it too, honey."

His body throbbed in search of release. He had choices, not hard to make, just not what he wanted. He couldn't let her risk a pregnancy and yet, he felt the swell of his cock. The time had come to withdraw or fill her with his sperm. Her face glistened. Her lashes lay down on her cheeks in wet spikes from the perspiration of her activity. She surged with beautiful precision and he couldn't leave. The clenching muscles of her vagina began to massage his shaft. The center of her became slick with her orgasm.

He wouldn't leave. That determination drove him into her. He made his plunges deep. Her arms wound around him so he didn't think he could pull back even if he tried.

Danika's body writhed with her climax. He would have preferred to have their clothes off so he could feel the naked length of her thrashing under him. The impetuous, impulsive decision came without plans. It came as a beautiful moment he not only wanted to cherish but wished to relive many more times.

"Alex." Her hands rubbed up and down his back.

She hugged him with a sob.

He hammered his hips into hers. His energy rushed into the vein spurting his juices. He filled her with the essence of his sex and his adoration. It changed him and his way of thinking. The idea of marriage became a reality he

anticipated. Bedding Danika had made him appreciate what he would get in exchange for his hasty actions.

"This wasn't right." He leaned on his elbows looking into her glistening blue eyes. He saw no regret. Rapture made them twinkle and shine. He wallowed in the adoration and let it consume his better sense.

His cock softened once her insides stopped squeezing the life out of it. His thumbs stroked her temple. She blinked and tears spilled to her cheeks.

"You didn't like—"

"Oh no, honey, I highly liked it. I meant I had no right to do it. I knew it was wrong and went right ahead anyway. I'm sorry."

"I'm not," she whispered.

The sparkle, the glow of her passion faded. Her lower lip began to tremble and she took it between her teeth. The tears bubbled up into one large splash falling from her stare.

"Don't cry. I'm the one to blame in all this, and I'll make it right." Reluctantly, he withdrew from the warmth of her body.

He got up and fastened his britches while Danika fixed her clothes. Pretty, pert breasts disappeared under the thin layer of calico. Slender, milky-white legs vanished under the hem.

"I don't understand." She sniffled.

He sat down next to her and put an arm around her. His lips couldn't stop finding places to land, her temple, her forehead, the top of her hair. He pulled her into his arms. His emotions tangled with burrs.

"Please don't cry, honey. You're about as perfect as any man could hope for in these circumstances. I don't

want you to think there is anything wrong with what you did, okay?"

She nodded and rubbed her wet face against his shirt and then her head tilted back to look up at him. He smiled, kissed her forehead, and resumed his watch of the starry sky. It wasn't right for everything they shared to seem so wrong, when he felt so wonderful. However, guilt, shame, and regret, all stuck in his craw for the selfish way he seduced her. He had never had sex with a woman who didn't accept payment for it, and he could hardly offer Danika money. It required a lot more for her virtue, and he knew what he had to do, what he actually wanted to do.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

"Oh, mostly how I'm going to have to eat crow when I tell your brother I'll be marrying you."

"You don't have to marry me."

"It's one thing to kiss a girl. That's a man's prerogative to test the waters so to speak, but what we just did, well, that pretty much is a binding contract to a marriage deal."

"I'm not anyone's deal."

"You're mine. I take responsibility for my actions. I don't reckon it can be all that bad having a wife." He slid his hand to her stomach thinking how he liked children and having one or a bunch with her would be good. "Besides, someone to cook my meals and wash my clothes will free my time up to do more on the ranch."

"And maybe I don't want to be your wife." She pushed his hand away and slid away from him.

"There don't seem to be much choice now." He watched her get up to walk a few feet away.

“There’s my choice, and I’m not going to marry you.”
She fixed her clothes.

“I think Vlad will have something to say about that after I tell him—”

“Tell him what?” She spun around. “You wouldn’t tell anybody about this, would you?”

What he and Danika did was personal, very intimate, and out of respect, he’d never tell a soul. How could he, after she had sweetly lain with him offering up her virginity with a bucketful of affection?

“No, I wouldn’t tell anyone. It ain’t anybody’s business what we do in private.”

“Fine, then we can forget all of this nonsense. We’ve hardly known each other long enough to make lifelong decisions in a matter of minutes.”

In a way, relief set in so he couldn’t argue. Marriage hadn’t ever been a plan and he let the matter drop. She didn’t want to be married, and it took him off the hook. Logically, he could see all that. Emotionally, he had already grown attached to her. From the second he looked into her eyes, he had felt she belonged to him. Maybe to save a life, was to own a life.

“I should get home. Nicholai will need help with the baby.”

He buckled on his gun belt. She had left him with a lot more to think about on the terms of marriage. The possibility never sounded good to him until now, when he had a woman refusing his proposal. Danika fit him quite nicely.

Chapter 8

Danika tried not to let the matter of Alex's proposal upset her. Out of stubborn principle, she had to refuse. In her head, she went over ways to get back to the conversation and leave him with at least a maybe. In the livery, he had been so adamant. She didn't want their night of passion to end as a burden for him. They had equally gone beyond the bounds of courting, but it didn't mean she had to make him suffer. Besides, her hand encased in his on his lap as they rode off from their love field made her outlook hopeful.

"You won't mind if I come around to see you?" he asked.

"I'd like that very much."

He put the back of her hand against his lips. "Thank you for today and tonight, Danika." He kissed her skin and a thousand sparks skittered up her arm.

She leaned toward him wanting to feel the magic of his mouth on hers. The prickle of his unshaven face made her skin tingle. He had kissed her until the perimeter of her lips felt chafed. She'd suffer it a thousand times to taste the flavor of his tongue mated to hers.

“Woman, you keep kissing me like that and you may not get home tonight.” He lifted his arm over her head, and she cuddled against him.

In her heart, she didn’t want to go home. She regretted telling him she wouldn’t marry him. A cowboy with strong arms holding her had always been her dream.

“When I ride out tomorrow, be prepared to take your first riding lesson,” he told her.

“I’m not so sure Vladimir will approve. He’s very work minded.”

“I promise he’ll approve of my being around everyday.”

“Everyday?” her voice sang with the happiness she felt.

“Won’t it be far for you to come?”

“You won’t mind, will you?”

“I won’t mind, Alex.”

She cocked her head against him and rode quiet in his hold. They had gone miles from town, but a scent caught her nose.

“Do you smell smoke?” She sniffed the air. “Can the bonfire they have in town reach this far?” She looked behind her.

“If the wind is right, I reckon it can.” His nose lifted too, and he snapped the reins a little sharper. “Giddyup.” He coaxed the horses.

They went much faster, and Danika didn’t say anything. Her heart already pounded in fear.

“You think it could be my farm?”

“Smoke can travel a long way. It could be com...ing...from...”

He slowed the horse. Danika's eyes followed his to shadows of a large tree, the swaying outline, and the shape, which couldn't be real.

"Stay here." Alex tied off the lead lines and climbed down.

They were close to her home, too close for it to be a stranger swinging from a noose. She hurried out of the buggy to see for herself. The size fit her father, her two older brothers, or maybe, she exaggerated the length in her mind, her mother...no, she couldn't speculate. She secretly prayed it was a stranger, a cattle rustler deserving of a lynching, dangling from the fat oak limb.

Alex had joked of his own neck stuck inside a loop of rope. It made her shudder with the irony of his jest.

"I told you to stay put." He rushed up and grabbed her.

She didn't realize the scream she heard had poured from her mouth until her throat went raw. Alex held her tight and shielded her from the sight of her brother Nicholai hanging from a frayed rope.

"Danika." Alex rubbed hard at her back.

"Shhhh...someone could still be out here."

Her body heaved with each shuddering sob as she worked at gaining control. He kissed the side of her head, and squeezed her as if he could squish all the pain from her. She felt his tension, and her eyes wandered around. For some reason, she couldn't see as well as before, and that's when she noticed the moon hid partially behind a cloud.

The darkness closed in on them. The possibility the killer could be lurking behind the very tree her brother swung on gave her a horrendous fear.

Alex took her back to the carriage.

“Why would someone do this?” She choked. “Nicholai was a sweet and caring man.”

“I don’t know, sweetheart.”

If it were achievable, Danika would have crawled inside Alex’s clothes to hide and to be as close as she possibly could be to the comforting embrace.

“Sweetheart, we need to go.”

A gentle breeze caught the body and swung it so the limb creaked.

She couldn’t help gasp thinking of the pain Nicholai suffered before his death.

“I’ll cut him down and then come back.”

“No, Alex, please, please don’t leave him here. I don’t want any animals to...” She couldn’t bring herself to say anymore and buried her face in her hands.

“All right, I suppose I can get him on the back of the buggy.” He took a step and her fingers latched onto his arm. “Do you think the rest of my family is all right?”

She knew it didn’t look good. The smoky air gave every indication her home had suffered a different sort of death.

“I don’t know, honey. Now let go, so I can get your brother.”

She watched Alex, even though he had left her turned away from the sight. She felt it necessary to keep lookout just in case they weren’t alone. There wouldn’t be much she could do other than shout a warning.

Alex toted Nicholai from the tree on his shoulder. She hardly saw him strain with the weight. He had a special strength in him in so many ways, she felt proud to be around him.

“Please cover him.” She handed him the blanket.

His hand covered hers on the folded wool. Their lovemaking had been beautiful. She had felt loved and cherished. Now they used their temporary bedding as a shroud for her dead brother. Something seemed terribly wrong with life to have so much joy suddenly overshadowed by sorrow.

“Okay, we’re all set.” He helped her up into the buggy.

She sat close to him with his arm around her shoulders. It didn’t stop the shiver coming from a combination of the chilly night air and the shock. It didn’t take long to get closer to the farmhouse. Her head swiveled to survey the darkness. The clouds had made visibility impossible.

“Alex?” She hiccupped a sob.

It broke into a flood of tears when she saw the wisps of smoke and charred remains of her home.

Alex hopped to the ground and pulled his gun from his holster. He used one hand under her arm to get her down.

“Stay close, sweetheart.”

No sooner said than the wail of a baby seized her heart. Alex put an arm out to stop her, but she pushed it aside to run toward the sound. A second later, she stopped. Someone abruptly silenced the cry.

“Tell them who you are?” Alex said.

“Vladimir? Mama? Papa? Anybody? It’s Danika.” She wheeled about looking, waiting for someone to emerge. She needed to see them.

“Danika!” Anton raced up to her and hugged her tightly. “Oh, Danika, there was nothing we could do. They burned the house, the barn, and poor Chesna’s grave

marker. Nicholai went crazy and attacked one. He took the horse and went after the men.

She turned from Anton and went to Alex. She buried her face into his already tear-soaked shirt.

* * * *

“They hung Nicholai, boy. What about the rest of your family?” Alex put his gun away so he could put both arms around Danika.

“This way, they went to the woods to hide. Well, all except Papa and Vladimir.”

“Where did they go?”

He looked at Danika’s mother sitting by a tree with a baby and the little boy named John playing with a stick beside her.

Anton’s eyes told him what he knew Danika didn’t want to hear.

“In the confusion, Papa could not get out of the house. Vladimir tried to help him but the house...the house fell. They’re dead.”

Alex scooped Danika up as he felt her slipping down. Each piece of the news stabbed him for the pain it caused her. “I’ve got you, honey.”

Her face burrowed under his chin and it took him back to when he picked her up out of the middle of a stampede. This time she didn’t remain calm and quiet, she cried softly against his neck. Her warm tears angled beneath his collar, descending to his chest.

“The men who came, they’ll be back?” Anton’s worry cracked in his voice.

“It won’t matter if they do. They’ve accomplished what they set out to do. Your men folk are gone and

women and children aren't a threat. They just wanted you to leave."

Danika pushed to get out of his arms. He dropped her when she kicked her legs.

"We're not leaving," she charged. "No one is running us off our land."

She jerked her arm out of his grasp, and he watched her grab her sore shoulder.

"Get some firewood, Anton. I'll hitch the horses to the hay wagon, and we'll pack up what we can find." He ignored her craziness.

"We'll not run from our home," Danika stated again.

"You can't stay here." He tried not to sound so harsh. "You, your mother, and three children, what are you thinking?"

"Hey," Anton protested picking up pieces of wood. "I'm not a child."

"Two children and a young man," Alex corrected. "There's no house, no barn, and I'm guessing no food. You can't be so pigheaded not to see your family would starve under those circumstances."

"We have no money to go anywhere," she shot back.

He heard the deflation in her pride announcing such a thing.

"You don't need money to come stay at my ranch."

He bent down and picked up the little boy tugging on his holster. "Hey there, little buckaroo, you're too young to carry a gun."

"His name is John," Anton told him.

"Yes, I remember. He likes to be chased." Alex walked over and hunched down near Danika's mother. "I'm Alex

McClaric, Mrs. Stanislaus, I'm going to take you and your family to my ranch, so don't you worry about the little ones."

"Thank you, Mr. McClaric. It is generous of you to marry my daughter and take in her family. We will make you no trouble."

"You're going to marry, Danika?" Anton asked. "That means I'll still get to learn to work cattle?"

Alex stood John on the ground. "Here you go. Don't want to be chasing this fellow in the dark."

He didn't know what to say to the woman. *No, I just humped the hell out of your daughter, but I won't marry her.* He stood back up and looked around for Danika hoping she didn't blurt out something equally as embarrassing. It seemed unlikely since she'd been adamant about no one finding out.

"Danika?"

Shock had settled in deeper. He looked at her vacant, lifeless, blue eyes, the nonresponsive stare void of tears. Her two brothers and father were gone in a matter of hours of her last seeing them. He couldn't imagine the pain and the fear she had for herself and her family.

"Come sit over here with your mother and the children."

* * * *

Danika walked where he walked and sat where he lowered her. John crawled on her lap and she rocked him until he fell asleep. Alex talked to Anton. They discussed getting what the rain might damage. She understood everything around them. She just felt outside the circle of realism.

“Hey.” Alex squatted down and cupped her chin. “Are you all right?”

She nodded and tried not to blink. The reflex happened regardless and tears spilled. His thumb swished right over her cheek as if he could chase away the sadness from which they formed.

He didn’t hesitate to lean in and kiss her numb lips.

“I’m going to go dig some holes. I’ll be gone for a short time.”

“You’ll fix Chesna’s marker and put Nicholai next to her?”

“Yes.”

“Take Anton to help.” She held his hand on her cheek.

“I told him to stay here to look after you and your mother.”

“We’ll be all right, please take him. He’s strong and can dig.”

“Are you sure?” He lifted John from her arms.

She arranged a blanket on the ground between her and her mother so Alex could lay John down to sleep. Then getting to her feet, she took the baby so her mother could stretch. Alex moved with her while she walked. He hovered close and every so often, his arms slipped under hers to help support the weight of the baby.

“She’s so small not to have a mother or father anymore.” She looked over at her mother fussing over John, even while he slept. “She does so much, and now she has to worry alone, without Papa, Nicholai, or Vladimir.”

She looked up at Alex. His silence left her at a loss for words. She couldn’t ask for his help. Her family never accepted charity before, and she wouldn’t start. When Alex

drew her into his arms with a hand under the baby, she leaned against him willingly.

The conversation her mother started with Alex, where she assumed he would marry her, didn't end once he left with Anton. Her mother's goal in life was to marry off her children.

"He's a good man." Her mother patted her arm. "He will make a good husband for you."

"Mama, I just met Alex. I don't know how he feels about me or marriage. He said he wouldn't. Then he said he would."

Danika couldn't be sure if she wanted to say yes, even if he were to bring the subject up again.

"Your Papa and me not know each other when we marry. Our fathers decide and we were introduced two days before wedding."

"Did you love Papa when you met him?"

"I like him all right. He was hard worker and a woman wants a man not lazy." Her mother took little Vanessa from her. "We need a strong man."

"Mother, I can't marry Alex just so we'll have a place to live or a strong man to help us."

"Still, you want to marry this man?"

"Maybe." She sat down on the blanket next to John and waited for Alex to come back. She missed him. The events of the day had gone in strange directions, and it didn't seem to be over. She closed her eyes to shut out the horrors overshadowing her wondrous time with Alex. It wasn't right she couldn't enjoy her happiness longer. Yet, with her eyes shut, she could not block seeing Nicholai hanging from the tree.

Danika jumped at Anton's sudden, startling return when he rushed from the dark night.

"Isn't it great that we're going to live with Alex?" Anton said excitedly. "I'll get to learn the cattle business."

She looked up at him in disbelief.

"It's no time to be selfish. Our father and brothers are dead."

"Papa always said we look onwards to the best times."

"Not now, Anton. Not this very minute while we can still smell the smoldering stench of our home."

"What's wrong with being a little happy? I'll miss them, but we can't change anything. Aren't you even a little excited? You'll get to learn to ride a horse. Alex said he has lots of horses. And once you're his wife, we'll be rich."

Blink. Blink and everything will be normal.

"Where's Alex?" she finally asked, finding no reason to make Anton as depressed as she felt about the tragedy.

"He's coming. We got the graves done, but he said there was something else he had to do."

She drew her knees up so her head could rest on them. She didn't want to marry Alex for money, nor for convention. She participated in their lovemaking with an open heart and a clean conscience. She'd not hold him responsible because her emotions carried her better sense away so easily. She questioned what attracted her to Alex and Anton's mention of money upset her. She wondered if an underlying greediness she didn't recognize caused her to want him.

"Everyone into the wagon," Alex called out, driving the team of horses up near them.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Forcing herself to keep a positive outlook, such as Anton did, couldn't hurt.

"Anton, put out the fire." Alex hopped down from the wagon. "Danika, please help your mother and the children into the back. We'll come back tomorrow at first light for what we can salvage."

When he took her arm, she assumed it was for more orders. Instead, his hand lifted and his knuckles grazed her cheek.

"You look exhausted." His sadness drew her closer.

She nuzzled her face into the caress of his hand, wishing he wouldn't take it away. Her body ached in places she couldn't let him touch, so she settled for her memories.

Chapter 9

Alex sat staring at the drink in his hand. Four days of Danika in his house had not been easy. Every time he looked at her, he wanted to strip her naked. Once was not enough where she was concerned. Yet, opportunity didn't play the only part in his hesitancy. Her mother, her brother, and two little ones occupied a lot of her time.

He went to town hoping to get a quiet moment to think. *The Sage Creek Cattle Company's Club* seemed as good a place as any on a weekday afternoon. Until he looked up from his shot of whiskey to see Banagher taking a seat on a stool next to him.

"I'm going to offer that little lady you've got staying at your place more money than she'll know what to do with." Reed bragged.

"And if she don't want to sell?" Alex leaned back in his chair crossing his arms. "What if Danika decides to keep the land, keep the fences, and keep farming? What then, Reed, kill her like you killed her kin?"

"I haven't killed anyone. We're all in agreement. We have no idea who hung that man, and burned those people out."

"Yeah, and pigs fly. You forget I know the men in your company."

“We aren’t the only ones wanting the farmers out of here, McClaric. I gave no order for anyone to be killed or burned out. Money usually works easily with those kinds of folks if you wave enough in their faces.”

Alex slung the shot of whiskey down his throat. He didn’t feel the liquid-heat scorch his insides. He didn’t have time. The best way he reasoned to keep Danika safe was to marry her himself.

He stood up and sat his hat on his head.

“Tell the little lady she has my condolences, McClaric.”

Alex ignored Reed and left the *Cattlemen’s Club*. He shoved his foot in a stirrup and swung his leg over the saddle. Danika had to agree to become his wife. It would be best for her, her family, and himself. The more he thought about her leaving his house, the worse the lump in his chest made it hard to breathe.

His gallop across the prairie took him home swiftly.

His heart pounded with the excitement ready to erupt from his smile as he burst through the front door of his house. He didn’t think he could back out of the room when Danika standing on a chair in her undergarments surprised him.

Beautifully shaped calves ended at the ruffle of eyelet circling below her knee on the ends of her pantalets. The white chemise had a blue ribbon crisscrossing the center so it cinched loose but still outlined the contours of her slender frame.

Had his eyes taken so long to get to hers? Had he really stood examining her like a prized heifer? She smiled and not an ounce of her tried to hide from him. The innocence

scared him with bright cornflower blue. He suddenly couldn't think of one reason he shouldn't marry her.

"Alex." Charlotte's voice was in the room.

He hadn't noticed her until her hands pushed him toward the door.

"Excuse me, ladies," he muttered.

Heat flamed up his neck to his cheeks. He spun away, out to the porch. He couldn't remember the last time he felt embarrassed looking over a woman.

"She'll be dressed in a minute." Charlotte stepped out on the porch with him. Her hand floated up and touched his hot face. "A blush?"

"I'm not blushing. I just rode hard to get here, that's all. Reed won't let up about the Stanislaus farm. He intends on asking Danika to sell it, and if she doesn't, I'm afraid she'll become another victim on his list of poor misfortunates."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, help however I can. Keep Danika and what's left of her family safe."

"You've got a big heart in there." She patted his chest. "I hope you're not doing this as some means to get her land and justifying it as help."

"I'm doing this because I don't like how things have been turning out. Maybe we're wrong in taking cattle across the open range. Farmers should have more rights to the land they buy rather than what we use without paying for."

"Alex, the fences are trouble. Naturally, I don't want anyone to get hurt. However, that land has always been open for grazing and moving cattle. The government selling

it can't change what has been going on for a good number of years. Even the Indians couldn't keep it, and they didn't have barbwire."

"Something has to change and face it, the farmers are the ones doing the shooting. It makes them the victims and that will be our downfall if we don't work something out that mutually satisfies both sides."

The door opened, and Alex turned to the familiar creak of hinges.

"There you are." Alex grabbed Danika's hand. "Excuse us, Charlotte."

"Oh, I've got to go anyway. I'll see you tomorrow." Charlotte stepped off the porch.

"Thank you for helping with the dresses." Danika smiled.

Alex pulled her close but when he tried to put his arm around her, she pulled away.

"I've got pies to finish," she said, heading for the door.

"Wait, I want to ask you something." He took a couple of quick steps to catch her hand. She turned and looked at him.

"What?"

"Never mind."

"It's the house. We've put you out, and you're tired of us being underfoot. Here we are invading your home like a swarm of locusts while you're sleeping in the bunkhouse instead of in your own bed.

"No, I wanted to..."

He couldn't do it. He rode all the way home with the plan to ask her to marry him, and he just couldn't do it. The reason was wrong, the timing was inappropriate, and

Danika would refuse. The stubborn, little minx would say no, and he didn't think he was ready to take another rejection.

"We'll go home. Anton is almost a full-grown man, and he'll help me with the children and Mama. Now if that is all, I have pies to finish." She turned to go and stopped. "We'll leave by the end of the week."

"Danika, you don't have to leave." He stepped behind her putting his hands on her small, delicate shoulders. They bore too much responsibility, and he didn't like how it made him feel. "I told you this can be your home for as long as you need it. You can live here forever."

"It's not right for us to take advantage of your hospitality indefinitely. Anton and I can make a shelter on our land. It wouldn't be the first time we slept in the wagon."

She could be sweet, adorably generous, and exasperating.

"You're not leaving and that's my final word on the matter." He threw his hands up in the air. "Those men might come back."

"You can't make us stay here."

Her body rotated, and she faced him with her blue eyes wide. He could swim in her eyes. They were so brilliant sometimes. She made him think of home even though he had always lived in the same place all his life.

She also made him want to paddle her bottom for being so stubborn.

"I can make you, if I marry you," the words blurted out.

It wasn't the way he intended to ask her again.

"I won't marry you for a roof over my head, especially if you think that you can boss me around."

"I will, if I have to hog-tie you and lock you in the barn. You'll not go dragging those babies off to live in the woods because of your foolish pride."

Her nostrils flared, and it reminded him of what she said Vladimir did when he was irritated. Did she know, that while smaller, she had the same expressive features?

"Damn, girl," he muttered, walking away from her to the barn.

She had to make things difficult. He thought he had a terrific solution to her problem. He thought he had the perfect plan for himself. He had never wanted a woman more as a permanent part of his life, than he wanted Danika.

* * * *

He stayed in the barn the rest of the afternoon. He brought up marriage again, maybe not in the best of ways, but she shot him down as if she had no feelings in her. In the evening, when the ranch hands ate in the bunkhouse, he joined them instead of with Danika. He couldn't face her. Distance between them seemed the best resolve to a crummy day and a bad argument.

In the morning, he went out to the pasture with some of the hands, and worked rounding up cattle. Afterwards, he left them at the bunkhouse. He'd gone out early and while his stomach protested the lack of breakfast, he skipped eating with his ranch hands. Danika and her mother would have food cooked. Every morning, they fixed a big hearty breakfast that he usually could hardly finish.

Besides requiring food, he and Danika needed to have a serious discussion. He had to explain to her all the sentimental reasons for him wanting to marry her. Women liked that, and he knew it. In his stupidity and a night's lack of sleep, he came to realize what he did was tell her how good he'd have it, instead of offering her a smidge of his deepest thoughts.

Alex knocked on the door to his own house. No one answered, so he went inside. He went from room to room not finding anyone. He stood in the doorway of his old room and looked at the bureau. Danika's hair ribbons, her brush, and a broken hand mirror lay like testimonials to why she should accept his proposal and why she left the old items behind. He could replace all her worn and broken items so easily.

"Damn woman!"

He threw his hat on what used to be his bed.

She had gone. She packed up her family and what little they had, and she left him. His anger at her foolishness fell by the wayside to his heartache. He sat on the bed to catch his breath, but her scent lingering in the room made inhaling worse. It drove him crazy. He stripped the blanket, the sheets, the pillow from the bed, and threw them out the window.

"Didn't I make your bed right?" Danika's voice drew him around.

She stood in the doorway looking more beautiful than the day before.

"You left," he said, wishing he didn't look as stupid as he felt.

“Mama forgot the baby’s bottle. We only have the one.”

“I’ll get you more.” He stepped forward and stopped. His heart hammered his ribs.

“We’ll manage.”

“I asked you not to leave.” He swiped a hand over his head, hoping to think of something to keep her there.

“You ordered me not to leave, there’s a difference.”

“Danika, please don’t...” He had the power to beg, just not the guts. “It’s not safe for you to live on your farm.”

“Can Anton still work for you? He was afraid you’d be angry because we left.”

“Yes, he can keep working here and I’m not angry.” He rubbed a hand over his face.

“I told him that.” She backed away as he started for her. “I should go. The baby will need to be fed and... Alex, stop.” She held her hand up to prevent him from grabbing her.

“Danika, I don’t know what you want from me.” He dropped down to sit on the trunk at the end of the bed. “You need my help, and you know it. So why be so stubborn?”

“I have to go.”

“Danika!”

Alex’s boots tapped the wood floor, and his spurs jingled.

Her head turned.

“You’ve got your spurs on, in the house again,” she said with disappointment. “They nick the floor up and make splinters.”

Alex leaned on the cold, wood cook-stove and jerked off one boot and then the other. He pitched them out the open window and folded his arms.

“There, not in the house.”

Her eyes widened with the same mesmerizing surprise she managed to hypnotize him with. He glanced down at what she stared at and saw the dingy, ragged socks he had on. She had busied herself at night mending his clothes.

He laughed and smiled at her. “You missed a pair.”

His big toe hung out, and it made her blush. He found it the most attractive thing about her. Even after intimacy, she looked at him as innocent-eyed as a virgin.

“I see.”

She closed her eyes, and when they opened, he saw sadness. A second later, she opened the door and darted outside.

“Come on, woman.” He followed. “You can’t just run like this.”

His mouth dropped open at the sight of Reed helping her up into the buggy.

“Good morning, McClaric.” Reed tipped his hat and climbed in beside Danika.

Alex’s fingers twitched. His jaw began an immediate ache as he clenched and unclenched his jaw. “What are you doing here?”

“I met Reed in town, and he was nice enough to drive me out here so Anton could continue on home with Mama,” Danika answered.

“If he was so nice, then why didn’t he just buy you another bottle for Vanessa?” Alex snapped.

He stared at Reed. His mind whirled in a dozen directions, and they all led to dragging Danika off Reed Banagher's rig.

"Buck has enough men rounded up to separate those calves and brand them. We'd like to start tomorrow if you can find your boots." Reed chuckled.

"I'll be there," Alex replied crisply. "I wouldn't trust your men to know how to count, let alone split them longhorn heifers evenly. I don't need more steers than I do good breeders."

* * * *

Danika kept her eyes straight ahead. Her fingers agitated over the rubber nipple on the bottle, bending it back and forth. She had been wrong in letting Reed bring her. It was like swinging a stick at a hornet's nest, and she knew it. She knew Alex and Reed didn't get along and she couldn't understand why. They were so much alike.

"You shouldn't have said anything about his boots." She scolded Reed when they were far enough away from Alex.

"It was a joke, honey. Alex is a big boy, and he can take some joshing."

She felt his gaze on her and wondered what he thought of Alex's comment regarding the baby bottle. Reed had offered to get her another and she had made a big deal about the old one. She felt silly.

"What's wrong? You want me to take you back, so you can help him find his boots?"

"No, he knows where they are." She sighed. "The spurs were damaging the floor, and when I reminded him, he threw them out the window."

“He took his boots off and tossed them out a window?” Reed laughed heartily.

“It was an irrational, impulsive, and childish thing for him to do.”

“Don’t you see, you’ve got him wrapped around your little finger? He’d do anything for you, so why not stay living at his place?”

“Because he told me I had to.” She dared a peek behind them and saw Alex sitting on the porch putting his boots on.

“Yes, well McClaric never has used a subtle approach to anything.” Reed patted her hand. “Don’t worry, he’ll come around if you’ve got the patience.”

“Come around?” Her brows wrinkled as she looked at him.

“He’s putting up a lot of stink and going through a whole heap of trouble trying to take care of you. I’d guess the man is yours for the asking.”

“I don’t think I understand”

“Alex is in love with you, honey.”

“He is?” She twisted in the seat and looked back again with a longing to change her mind in leaving.

“That or he’s thinking on a way to get your land for his own use.”

Danika froze with the horrible idea that maybe in her blind feelings for him, Alex used her.

“Hey, trust me. The man is a pain in my ass, but he’s as honest as a summer day is long. He’ll get around to asking you to marry him, just give him the time.”

“He’s already said he’d marry me.”

“He has?”

She turned forward when she saw the burl of dust coming their way.

"I don't think he wants to get married, though. He keeps saying it's to help me, but I don't want him marrying me so I have a home."

"You know, some men have trouble expressing the right kind of feelings at the right time. I reckon however, you keep him stewing in his boots long enough, he'll learn how to ask you proper."

Danika closed her eyes as the horse and rider came up along side her.

"Hold up there, Banagher," Alex commanded.

She put her hand on Reed's wrist to have him stop the buggy.

"Danika, I want you to come home. I need you there."

She bit her top lip to keep it from trembling.

"I've gotten used to seeing you in my house, and I like it just fine," he continued.

She watched him lift his chin and eye Reed.

"Shall I turn this rig around?" Reed asked her.

"No."

"Danika, please!"

She stood up knowing just what she wanted. She stretched her arms out toward Alex. She needed to be with him, and she'd been stupid. Alex reached and lifted her to sit in front of him. She felt his enthusiasm when his arms wrapped around her waist, squeezing snugly.

"Reed, could you do me a favor?" she asked.

"I'll send your brother back this way, don't worry," he said without her having to ask.

“Thank you!” she called to Reed around Alex’s shoulder as he turned for home.

“I’m glad you came to your senses.” Alex’s arm tightened.

“My senses, and just what is that supposed to mean?” She stiffened.

“We’ll get married, and you don’t have to worry about all the hard stuff. You can mend my socks, fix my meals, and at night, we can share my room.”

“Is that what you meant by needing me?”

“Some, I reckon there’s other reasons as well.”

“I want another reason now.”

“Can’t I have a day to think on it?”

She sat rigid against him. Reed said to give Alex time. She didn’t think she could bear to wait another day for him to say something more meaningful than he liked her around to do chores.

Chapter 10

Alex had Danika back in the house and all to himself for a while. The idea of ravishing the woman didn't play lightly in his thoughts as she moved around the kitchen making him breakfast.

"What do you think about us throwing a party Saturday?" He swallowed the remainder of his coffee and walked to the stove for a refill.

"A party?" she stared at him perplexed.

"Yes, as in birthday?"

"Oh! Anton's birthday! I had forgotten. I haven't anything for him. And there's so little time for me to make something really special."

"Sixteen, that's a pretty important age to a young man." He leaned against the doorjamb to the bedroom.

"What am I going to do?"

"About what?"

"A present."

"I'll take you to town to get stuff for the party, and you can buy him something. That's not a problem."

"It would be your money and not from me." She sank down onto a wooden chair next to the table.

Alex moved the skillet from the hot burner on the cook stove.

"You do more work around here than some of the hands I have working for me."

He scooped the eggs and bacon out onto a plate and set it in front of Danika. She looked more in need of being waited on than he did.

"I told you whatever you buy on my account is no more than you've earned keeping house," he said. "You think I like cleaning or cooking? If you'd take the money I offered, you'd be the highest paid worker here."

"It's not real work. It's everyday chores. I would have to do them no matter where I lived. My family still has to eat."

He sat down and put a piece of bacon in his mouth. With the fork, he put a bite of the eggs up to Danika's pink lips. She pushed his hand away.

"Very well, don't buy Anton anything. Let all you plan and prepare for a party be your gift to him." He ate the eggs and more bacon.

"But I always give him something."

"I have an old holster that you can have. Needs some fixing and cleaning, but with loving care, a few new pieces of latigo, and some polishing, it would make a nice, first gun belt."

"Anton hasn't a gun."

She split a biscuit on her plate, and Alex poured honey on the way she liked, just a little in the middle.

"He will when he gets my present," he informed her while continuing to eat.

"You're going to give him a gun?"

"And a box of bullets. It's about time he learn to use one, don't you think? This is the west, and a man doesn't go

around naked at the waist unless he's a banker, a barber, or a far...mer." The last reference came without thought.

"Anton is a farmer," she stated.

"Anton is learning to ride, and he's good. He likes working with the cattle. Don't you think maybe Anton should decide his own future?"

Danika wouldn't answer him. He could see in her eyes, everything she knew of her brother had disappeared already. Instead of hoeing dirt, plowing, and planting, Anton would become a rancher.

"Let me see the holster," she said reluctantly.

"It's in the trunk in my...your room."

He dropped his fork on the plate and took her hand, leading her in like a lamb to slaughter. The bed gave him a sudden ache in his loins. He had tried to ignore the tightness in his britches when she looked at him. His fantasies were never ending. She went straight to the trunk, bent over to lift the lid, and he stared at her backside. His fingers itched to grip her hips and plunge his cock into her narrow cunt from that direction.

He shook away the thought and squatted down in front of the large chest with her. On top of a quilt laid a neatly folded neckerchief. He didn't recall putting one in the trunk and picked it up. He put it near his nose finding the scent of lavender enticing. Danika once in a while had that same fragrance around her.

"I didn't know where to put it." Danika snatched it from him.

He noticed she slid it in the pocket of her dress.

"Now let's see if I can find that holster." He rummaged around under the quilt and pulled it out.

Danika reached for it, and he trapped her hands between his and the leather. Electricity flowed through her arms and jolted up his arms. She had to have felt it too by the flood of crimson rushing up her neck and covering her face in the warm tint.

“What’s this?” Alex pulled one hand from hers and cupped her rosy cheek. “Have I ever told you how pretty you are when you blush?”

She shook her head.

“You are.” He lowered his head and studied her mouth. “You’re more beautiful than I could hope to describe.”

“I don’t mind if you try.”

“You are a breath of fresh air on a humid day, Danika.”

He let go of her cheek and her hand, realizing what he unconsciously intended to do and what he couldn’t be sure if she wanted.

“I better get back to the barn. I wouldn’t want Anton showing up trying to force you to marry me.”

“He won’t care if you kiss me.”

Alex turned his head, his body, and in two steps, had her in his arms. She invited it, and she was right, Anton wouldn’t care. He wished at that moment, as his lips crushed hers, that her last brother would come in and insist she had to marry him. It was only right. He would do anything to get her to change her mind.

The gun belt fell to the floor, and Alex kicked it away as he steered her back to the bed. “This could be our room,” he murmured over the honey-flavored puckered mouth.

She made a small whimper, and he tried to decide if it had a ‘yes’ attached.

He fell back on the bed taking Danika with him. She laid on top of the length of his frame.

“Stop, we can’t,” she insisted.

Her fingers splayed over his chest, and she pushed herself up. Her legs straddled his waist as she knelt on the bed.

“No one’s here but us.” He rubbed the sides of her slight waist.

Then miracles of miracles happened. Her fingers floated down the front of her dress. He didn’t look down for fear that breaking from her stare would make her stop. Her body shook and a shrug from one side to the other made the dress fall from her shoulders. Her arm lifted out of one sleeve, and he reached to help with the second.

He glanced. One daring gaze went to the white ribbon tying her chemise. The bow swirled apart at her tug and the fabric fell open for him to see the inside swells of her perfect breasts.

He parted the cloth with a gentle hand. Her eyes closed and her head dropped back. He kneaded the twin globes of pale flesh stretching the pink tips between his thumbs and forefingers.

Danika moaned with a serene sound filling the room. Her hips rocked, and her legs spread wider so her crotch contacted his stomach. He picked his head up and caught the hardening bud of her nipple in his lips.

“Alex,” she hummed his name.

Her fingers burrowed into his hair. He licked over her pert nipple and teased it with swirls of his tongue. His puffs of air over the wet bead made her shiver. He pulled inward

to his mouth. Her soft flesh compressed to his face, and he sucked on her velvet teat. His teeth made it raspberry red.

“Come down here.” His hoarse voice barely sounded audible.

With his fingers folded behind her neck, she wouldn’t need to hear since he had already pulled her face to his. Wrapping his arms around her back, he twisted to put her on the bed. Beneath him, he had all the advantage of devouring her sweet, young body. His mouth hunted and acquired her parted pink lips.

She panted hard. The points of her breasts turned to soft peaks, blushed with a shade of pink capping the gorgeous mounds. Half-naked and heaving with excitement, she made it hard to ignore his stiff cock. But he wanted to make her body sing, before he took his own gratification.

He eased down alongside her.

Her adoring eyes followed every chance he dared stray to look upon her lovely nakedness. He caressed each curve until his blood slammed into the tip of his cock. He throbbed with an exhilarating glory to have her in his bed. No woman had ever been in his bed. Not for any particular reason other than his male needs were met in other pastures.

He fingered her nipple with a twisting pinch until she squirmed, and then he pressed his hand over her smooth belly and dipped beneath the dress bunched at her waist.

Below her cotton underdrawers, he rubbed the dewy mat of ringlets covering her cunt. He stroked deep into the folds and her body lifted to him. It had been almost a week since he had a spectacular night with her under the stars. He

nearly cried at the thought of never having her that way again, sweet and seductive with her inexperience.

He caught her cry as she began to orgasm. A stilted chatter of whines came from her throat.

“I can’t breathe!” she gasped.

* * * *

Alex kissed her again, deeper until she felt faint. The violent spasms twisted her in his hold. He didn’t let up the brutal way he pumped his fingers or took teasing swirls around her clit. Nerves jittered throughout her limbs. Her body wanted to go limp in exhaustion, yet she came alive under his skilled hand. The muscles in her vagina had hardly been given time to heal from the sex they shared once and she couldn’t wait to have him inside her again.

“Alex, I need you.” She gripped his shoulder and flung her head back.

His warm lips kissed her hard on the neck. She whimpered to the biting grip of his teeth raking her skin.

“I know, sweetheart,” he rasped.

He traveled to her breasts, nipping the sore nipples, and tugging them out from her body. His attention to detail had her quaking with memories of his lovemaking.

“Alex,” she moaned his name as if it were a way to consume his passion in one swallow.

She pushed her palms up his neck

“Marry me,” he enticed with voice and caresses.

Danika didn’t want to talk. Her grip twisted at his shirt with the nervous agitation she’d not be able to refuse him if he persisted.

“Oh, Alex, please.”

She tried to pull away and stop the torture to her weeping cunt. Juices flowed freely. Her bottom pressed the wetness into her clothing.

“Say you’ll marry me.”

He sounded desperate.

“Danika,” he whispered over her lips. “Danika, marry me?”

She thrust her hips forcing his fingers in deeper. She couldn’t think and yet her mind seemed all directed to it, how could she say no? She wanted to be his wife. She wanted to be there for every happy or sad moment he had just as he was for her.

The storm of rapture began to pass. Her breathing, while irregular, began to slow and her body wilted. Alex removed his finger inside her to massage the cream spent from her body into her cunt lips. He hovered and looked at her with all the affection he offered in his kisses. If he could just say he loved her, things would be perfect.

“I think I can make the gun belt look very good with some work.” She tried directing the conversation away from marriage.

He tickled her stomach with the light brush of his fingertips.

“You will teach Anton to be careful with a gun, not to point it at people, and not to play around with it.” She held his hand to prevent him from making her laugh. “He is still very much a boy.”

“I’ll make sure he understands all the bad with owning a gun.” He brushed his lips over hers. “Danika, why won’t you marry me?”

"I don't think it's necessary. I agreed to stay and be your housekeeper."

"At no pay," he reminded.

"A roof over our heads and food in our bellies is pay, Alex. We've taken over your house while you sleep in the bunkhouse with your ranch hands. It's not right, but I did agree to that much. Please don't ask me again to marry you. I already take care of your house."

"Did you ever think I might want something a little more in the way of care, something between a man and woman, and I don't mean like this. I don't want to live hoping for stolen minutes with you. I can get that elsewhere."

Alex rolled off the bed to his feet. He paced the room and stopped at the window. His hands perched on his hips best described his aggravated stance.

"Your family is coming up the road." He informed her.

She slid to a sitting position gathering her dress together. Her fingers tried to get the ribbon tied on the chemise, and then Alex's fingers were there taking over. She watched his dexterity in tying the bow and buttoning the bodice of her dress.

"I'll get the buckboard ready to go to town." He took her hand and helped her off the bed.

"Town?" she repeated his last word.

He combed his fingers over her hair, straightened her collar, and sweetly kissed her.

She waited for him to ask her again. Her chest burned with regrets so deep, she couldn't make herself tell him she'd be his wife.

“Yes, so we can pick up stuff for the party? Remember?”

She nodded feeling the shock of his earlier words sinking like a rock in her stomach. If she didn’t marry him, he could find someone else. He couldn’t have meant to marry because he said he didn’t want to get married.

Her brain busily worked on the problem Alex created. She barely acknowledged her family. Anton ranted about the way she kept changing her mind, her mother said nothing and took the children inside.

“Anton, let’s get everything out of the wagon and then if your mother doesn’t need help with the little ones, go back to work on fixing the loft floor,” Alex ordered.

“So, you straighten her out?” Anton asked Alex.

Danika picked things up and walked to the house.

“We’ve got a little more understanding on the matter,” Alex answered.

He couldn’t have been more roundabout in his meaning. She wished she knew what he really wanted from her.

Chapter 11

When they got to town, Danika quickly got down before Alex could help her. “Should I charge everything to your account like usual?” She waited for him to answer as he normally would.

“Of course, but I’ll come in with you.” He looped the lines around the brake handle of the wagon and hopped down.

“No. I can do it myself. You’ll just make me get more than we need,” she informed him. “I’ll get what is necessary and meet you back here in fifteen minutes.

She went through the store in a mechanical daze. She really had everything at the house for making a cake, and lots of food. Alex made sure on their last trip to town she bought plenty of flour, sugar, and whatever she wanted—even the two jars of honey he bought, claiming to eat them, when it was really an expensive treat to her. Only she had never seen him touch the honey.

She took all the packages outside and saw Charlotte talking to Alex.

“Hello, Danika.” Charlotte smiled. “You’ve been shopping?”

“Yes, for Anton’s birthday. We’re having a party. A surprise party I think. Would you like to come out to the ranch for it Saturday?”

Danika liked Charlotte. She liked having someone her age and a female to talk to. She just wished she could ask her about Alex and what she should do.

“I’d love to, thank you for asking. I must go, but I’ll see you Saturday.” Charlotte hurried off down the walk.

Danika stopped next to the buckboard.

“I said I’d help.” Alex took packages from her arms.

“I can manage.” She took one parcel from his hand. “I’ll carry this.” She held the item tightly, afraid he would guess it was something she had purchased for herself. Something very frivolous, nonetheless, appropriate for a special occasion, and he’d get to see it only when she was sure she was ready.

“You get everything we need to have a grand party at the ranch?” he asked.

“I got what was on the list.” She smiled hugging the package a little more dearly.

“And something that wasn’t?” He nodded to the brown paper wrapped item she clutched.

“No, yes, but you’ll not ask me what it is, will you?” She gripped the parcel with her whole hand squeezing it to make it smaller.

“I don’t need to know. I’m actually happy you finally bought something for yourself.” He smiled and snapped the reins.

“It’s just, well it’s not proper to speak of my...my...”

"I'll not mention your unmentionables." He chuckled. "Though, I've seen a good bit of them and what they cover."

"Alex!" she gasped, more upset he knew what she got rather than what they were.

"Danika, what has you all wound up like a newborn filly?"

"I'm just worried."

"About?"

"It's so soon after losing most of our family to think of celebrating and yet, I don't want Anton to dwell on the bad."

Alex patted her leg. "It's all right, sweetheart. Everything will be all right in time."

Yes, she thought so, as well. In a very short time, if her plans went smoothly.

* * * *

The full moon glowed brightly that night. It brought a smile to Danika's lips with the decision she made to go to Alex. Supper had been pleasant. He'd been funny, sweet, and entertaining to John. She knew if anything, he would be a good father. It was then, after spending the day thinking over what he said about needing a woman, she decided she really wanted to be everything Alex needed. Then he'd have no reason to go looking elsewhere.

She approached the barn without hesitation.

"Miss Danika?" Alex's top ranch hand, Milton Taylor, stepped from the shadows of the building.

"Alex said he'd be keeping an eye on the mare tonight." She twisted her hands in the new dress she wore. It wasn't really new, however to her, it felt as if it was since

Charlotte gave it to her and they had finished altering it to fit.

“He is. I was just having a smoke.” He put out his cigarette. “I figured on staying in case he needed help.”

“You can go onto bed, Mr. Taylor. I’ll stay and help Alex.”

“You sure, it might be all night?”

“In that case, could you be sure to keep everyone out of the barn until Alex comes and gets you? I’ll keep the doors closed and maybe by early morning at least, I can get him to sleep some.”

“Yes, ma’am. No one will come a’ knockin’ if we don’t see the door’s open.” He grinned.

Danika had the funny feeling he knew what she planned, but seeing how he didn’t say it outright, then neither would she. The doors closed quietly, not a single creak. She had waited late so everyone in the house would be sleeping and not notice her departure.

Her feet went slowly as she tiptoed down the aisle. Alex would be sitting in the stall watching his mare. She didn’t want to startle him. At the same time, she wanted her presence to be a surprise. Nervous and actually terrified she’d made a mistake in what he wanted, she tried to have confidence that she felt she’d always known his needs.

“Alex?” She looked over the side of the stall and didn’t see him.

“Danika?” Alex jumped to his feet where he sat against the wall.

She giggled backing away. “I didn’t expect you to answer so quickly or so close,” she said, smiling and coming back to the wall. “Do you want anything?”

"Yes." His fingers smoothed over her knuckles as she held the top of the short plank wall.

"Coffee, something to eat?"

"No, nothing like that." He lowered his face.

Her lips parted, ready for a kiss. She liked to be kissed, and he liked doing so.

"I want the horse to have the baby," he announced, pulling away from her abruptly.

"Oh. Can I come in and watch or help?"

Alex opened the stall door and came out into the aisle.

"I'll get a horse blanket for you to sit on."

Danika couldn't think of a sophisticated way to make her wishes known. While he went for the blanket, she unbuttoned the front of her dress. She had it all planned, a dress that came off easy and the least amount of undergarments, which were all new and especially purchased for this very occasion.

Alex came back with the blanket and it dropped from his hand.

"Maybe we could go in the hayloft for a while," she suggested.

He stared and didn't say anything. She wasn't sure what to do.

"Or maybe we shouldn't leave. I thought since she was quiet and you said she'd not likely drop the foal in the next few hours..."

Alex came toward her. Tripping over the blanket, he stumbled up to take her into his arms. "Danika, will you..." He held her tightly. His hands unfettered, roamed over her back.

"What?"

“Never mind.”

“Ask me again, Alex.”

“Will you marry me?”

She picked hay off his shirt. “Yes, but I have one condition.”

“Anything.” He lifted her face up with a finger under her chin.

“I want to keep my farm and farm it.”

“I don’t know anything about farming.”

“I do. Anton does. The people we had working for us do.” She pushed back away from him.

“Honey, I don’t know. Of course you can keep the land.”

“Will you sign a legal paper that says that after we’re married I can still do what I want with it?”

“Honey, you don’t need that. The land is yours and—”

“I want it in writing, or I won’t marry you,” she said it again more forcefully. She hated asking. And if she’d known him a little longer so she could be positive he would do anything for her, she’d have never said anything.

“Danika, if you want to farm that land, I’ll help you hire anybody we need to put in a good crop.” He put his hands on her shoulders. “I’ll sign a paper if that’s what you need.”

She hugged him around the middle.

“Danika, honey?”

She lifted her head still holding firmly, and Alex kissed her. He held her face in the palms of his hands. She stared at his liquid brown eyes and felt badly for not trusting him one hundred percent. She knew in her heart how much he cared for her and how he’d do whatever she wanted.

"I don't believe I'm going to say this, but button up your dress, because we shouldn't do this any more until we're married."

Danika put her arms around Alex's neck. She pulled him down to her kiss. "Tell me why we should wait." She gave him small pecks on his lips.

"Because it's only right, it should have been the right way I did everything with you before now." He brushed his thumb over her smooth cheek.

"So gallant." She sighed. "And so unnecessary."

"I don't want you to change your mind."

"I won't."

She liked the smile she got. Her finger traced the contours of his mouth outlining the beige lips that just kissed her.

He turned his head to the sound of the mare. "Come on, honey, I think we're about to be parents."

A rush of air hit Danika's lungs as she inhaled. Alex was already moving into the stall, and she followed with a dazed happiness. They would get married, have babies, and be parents. It was the most wonderful sensation that burned her lungs with anticipation.

Her fingers worked over the buttons on her dress, feeling a little sad he wasn't going to see her new chemise and pantalets that night.

"Easy does it, girl." He assisted the mare in birthing her foal. "Here, Danika. You wanted to help, take hold and pull gently."

Danika held the foal's legs and slowly brought the animal out on the hay. "It's beautiful."

“They always are.” He kept a hand on the mare’s legs so she didn’t thrash.

Once the foal was out completely, they moved back and watched.

“It’s amazing how quickly they want to get up.” She looked up at Alex.

“A miracle.” He put an arm around her shoulders. “Look, he’s almost got the hang of it.”

They watched and waited as the foal struggled to get up and then collapsed. Her hand rubbed over Alex’s shirt. She moved in circles down to his stomach. Every hard muscle in him attracted her exam.

“Don’t make me wait, Alex.” She pressed her palm to the front of his britches.

She wanted to see his swarthy tanned skin in full length.

* * * *

Alex followed Danika up the ladder to the hay loft. He lost all arguments of waiting until marriage to bed her again the moment her delicate hand massaged his denims. He could smell the hint of perfume, the lavender scent he noticed she had little left of in the bottle on her...his bureau. He sat in the hay and pulled her down with him. His mouth sought hers with urgency.

Danika sat on her knees and pushed him. He fell back into the hay mound and watched her desires build in the twinkle of her eyes. He folded his arms behind his head and smiled up at her.

“You’ve got me up here, so what did you have in mind?” He laughed.

She put a hand on the crotch of his denims. She squeezed the seam but the taut material didn't give.

"I'd like to touch you." Her hand moved up to the buttons on the fly.

"I'll make you a deal. You take all your clothes off so I can see you naked, and I'll let you touch me however you want." He hoped his grin didn't give away the fact she could touch him regardless of whether she agreed or not.

She sucked her bottom lip in between her teeth. Her thoughts played wickedly on her face before she spoke. The glimmer in her eye said she'd one up him.

"I want to see you naked, too."

His arm swung out, and his fingers flew to the buttons on his shirt. Sitting up, he jerked the sleeves down and pulled the vest and shirt off in one motion. He took less time with his britches. Danika scooted back from him. She went slower, with an innocent seduction he knew she wasn't aware of and he wouldn't comment on until later.

The boots stuck to his feet, but a couple of hard yanks and they were off to the side. He didn't bother rising to wiggle out of his pants. His hips lifted, and he rolled them down his ass, thighs, and kicked his feet sending them away.

Danika's cheeks were scarlet. She had the dress to her waist. The chemise still covered her breasts—beautiful, succulent, and rounded. He loved her breasts.

"Need help?" He leaned forward and took her hand.

Her damp palm tasted salty sweet against his tongue. She giggled and let him pull her up.

The dress floated to her feet. Calico lay like a puddle around her ankles. He resisted pulling her into his arms. Instead, he untied the white ribbon on her chemise.

“This is new,” he commented while opening it to expose what he already knew as the most perfect curves he could explore. “This was what you bought, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.” Her whole body flushed with an infusion of pink.

“It’s beautiful on you, but right now, I want it off.” He slid his fingers under the cotton and folded his hands around her ribcage. His thumbs fit under her breasts and circled over the pastel tips. It took only several passes to stimulate the sensitive nerves and make the areolas blush to a darker shade of pink.

“Do you want me to take off my underdrawers?” her words trilled with a sultry purr.

“Yeah.” He stepped back to watch.

She tortured him with hesitant moves, while he could have ripped the cotton pants from her in a second. His breathing escalated with every ounce of exposed flesh. He had been hasty in life and fucked women with some hurried emotion derived all from the brain of his cock.

Danika made a sound. Small and surprised when his maleness danced to a complete, erect salute. He had no control over the blood-pulsed vein of manhood. He couldn’t command it to lie down and behave like a trained puppy. His dog demanded a chance at wildly humping the bitch in heat.

“You’re trembling.” He reached a hand to her.

“You’re staring.” Her fingers took a place in his palm.

“I know. So are you.” He guided her to a fluffy spot on the hay.

From behind, she touched his back. A hand, her lips, and then her breasts compressed forcefully. Her arms

entwined around his torso, and she hugged him. He could feel the thatch of her cunt brush his buttocks. His ass cheeks clenched at the arousal. His back blanketed by her warm skin made him shiver with his eager anticipation.

He twisted, lifted his arm over her head since she loosened her hold instead of letting go. He held her. No kissing, caressing, or words. For a full five minutes, he simply held onto the love of his life. If he didn't feel tears were some unmanly trait, he might have cried since the emotions stung behind his closed eyelids.

"Can I touch you, now?" She lifted her face from under his chin.

"Oh yeah, like I said, any way you want."

She parted from him and her breasts peeled off his sticky skin. She lowered herself, and when he tried, she stopped him. He could have spent himself right there, the way her gaze held his and her fingers gripped his cock.

Something about a naked woman on her knees definitely warmed his blood.

"It's so soft," she said, obviously surprised by the texture of his shaft.

"Yeah, well that's..." His words stuck.

Her tongue went skating from tip to groin. She left his penis to plant kisses on the smooth skin just above his pubic hair. Her breath tickled, yet his laugh wouldn't come because her hand had cupped his balls and massaged the sound right out of his body in the form of a long, agonizing groan.

He ached and not from riding in a saddle. Adrenaline raced through his veins. His senses went wild, and his fingers burrowed into her fawn-colored hair to guide her

mouth lower. She required no instruction. Her senses weren't dulled like his, and he thanked God she could read his mind, because speech seemed an unfamiliar idea at present.

The silky lips formed an exquisite O which she pushed onto his erection. The largeness of his cock stretched her mouth to its limits, and he heard her puffing air through her nose. He tried to hold still and not shove his hips forward. His cock had another plan, and it involved choking her on the bloomed head of his stiff shaft.

Danika gagged, and he pulled out immediately. Her saliva glistened and strung tethered to his skin. He put his hand over it and wiped it around, lubricating the entire length. Holding her chin, he rubbed a thumb over her bottom lip.

Alex knelt down in front of her and framed her face in his hands. "I didn't mean to do that," he said.

Her fingers chased the flutter to his stomach by gliding up to his chest. She rubbed his nipples, bowed her head and licked over one.

"I like tasting you." She giggled.

"Mmmm, and I you." He flopped backwards.

His arms went around her waist at the same time, and he dragged her on top. His throbbing cock lay painfully sandwiched between them. Washing her flushed cheeks with cooling kisses, he tasted her tears. Tendrils of her fawn-colored hair tickled his face. He smoothed them back with the palm of his hand and held them at the sides of her head.

"I need you, Danika. I didn't think there would be a day that I would tell a woman I couldn't live without her."

“Well where else can you get someone to make sure you haven’t any holes in your socks?” She laughed.

The nervous catch made him even more serious because she tried not to be.

“It’s not for chores, or even having you like this.” He lifted his head and kissed her delicate smile. “I need the companionship of your good nature. It surrounds me with peace.”

“You’re just saying that to make me cry.” Tears dripped to his chest.

“No, sweetheart, I never want to make you cry. You’ve had a lot of painful tears. I don’t think you should have to ever cry again.”

He kissed her deeper. His tongue swished around the inside of her mouth and then withdrew to trace her pink lips. He elevated her hips, sat up, and helped lower her slowly and gently onto his unyielding cock. She sank until her smooth ass squished his balls and took his erection into her narrow channel.

He stroked her cheek and looked into the mirrors of her blue eyes. He saw the reflection of himself genuinely happier than he’d been in a long time.

“Do I just sit here?” She tilted her head, and it led his fingers down the side of her neck.

“No, lean back,” he instructed.

He spread his hand over her back and held her weight. His other hand fanned over the center of her chest. She placed a hand on each side of his legs to help hold her arched position. It thrust her rounded breasts up. He cupped one.

Alex spent time making her little pouting nipples harden, putting first pressure to the dimpled bud, and then letting it spring back bigger. She whimpered with pleasure when his tongue joined his fingers in exploring her quivering skin.

“You like that, don’t you?” He sucked the hard nubbin into his mouth and let her breast pop free of his lips.

“Yes, oh yes.” She wheezed.

He gave her other swollen breast equal time, licking, suckling, and kissing. He squeezed and teased with pulls to her flesh. Her nipples stayed soft from his playing. Then he moved to the serious fun. With one finger, he traced a line downwards. One finger, one place to go, and her clit quivered at the first pass.

“Alex.” She gasped.

He circled the fleshy button, rolled it beneath his thumb, and repeated. Danika squirmed, her vaginal muscles worked on his cock, and he slid a hand up between her shoulder blades, to her neck. With fingers burrowed in her hair, he jerked her up to his face. Puffs of air panted out of her. Their tongues charged. Her arms wrapped around his head. Their mouths met.

He didn’t have to show her how to lift and lower. The instinct came naturally. Her body rocked, and the silky canal caressed his shaft. Up and down, she rode him, her breasts raking his chest and their nipples kissing in the passes.

“That’s it, sweetheart.” He groaned.

He nibbled her earlobe and bathed her warm ear with swirls of his tongue.

He held her against him, rose up on his knees, and fell forward, putting her back on the hay. He pumped his cock

into her pulsing cunt, hearing her squeaks of pleasure. On his hands, he levied himself above so he could watch her expression, the muscles in her face contorting in ecstasy.

Her hips met his in a slamming rhythm. Her fingernails dug into his ass where she tried to hold him down.

“Alex.” She practically choked.

He could say nothing. He went harder, faster, deeper. She bucked in her writhing agitation. And then her body convulsed. In short spasms, she jolted. It drove his feral cock into her gushing vagina until he stiffened. Lightning ripped a hot stream from his loins and shot the heated liquid into her core, into her womb.

He attacked her mouth with fevered kisses. She continued to gasp in short breaths. Her fingers twisted in his hair and pulled it practically from the roots. Violent, exalting passion flowed from their fervent bodies twisted together. She whimpered small sounds of adoration. He even thought he heard her say she loved him. It wasn't a lot to hope for, but he understood nothing might ever be that deep. They were strangers with a lot of fire in their sexual encounters. Love could come later during their marriage.

Chapter 12

The party for Anton went on into the night. Charlotte had brought Reed as an escort since her brothers were busy. Alex did not like it one bit. For her, he had kept the peace.

“Hey there, pretty lady,” Reed tapped Danika on the shoulder. “How about a dance? I’ve done worn out Charlotte, and she suggested I trample your toes.”

She looked around and didn’t see Alex and decided one dance couldn’t hurt. She loved dancing and Alex didn’t. She had to believe he would understand.

Reed twirled her around the others, and the music from a fiddle filled the night. Their quick steps eventually turned into slow ones. He pulled her closer.

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you about something important,” he whispered. “Can we take a walk, maybe over by the garden?”

“I don’t know.” She looked around. “Alex will wonder where I’ve disappeared to and—”

“It’s really important.”

She nodded her head and took his arm. She couldn’t imagine what Reed Banagher had to tell her. They had only talked a few times. Everything else she knew came from what Alex tried to tell her of the man. None sounded good.

The old garden had a lot of life in it. Weeds had tried to take over, but she'd come out once a day and pulled some. Alex had a fondness for the patch of ground his mother worked, and she hoped to bring him more memories from the place.

"I've done some slightly shady things in my life. Things I'm not always so proud of, but can't change them."

Danika swallowed, not understanding why Reed would confess to doing anything bad. Or why he would tell her.

"My wife for instance, she was Alex's girl and I thought I had to have her for mine. At first, the courting was more of a planned thing. I'd charm the devil out of the woman and make Alex suffer the loss. Little did I know, she'd enchant the hell out of me. I don't know exactly when things turned serious. I'd like to think from the first dinner I took her to."

"I don't understand. How is this important to me?"

He smiled, sort of seriously, and sort of wistfully, so it made her more nervous.

"You're not going to try and steal me from Alex, are you?"

"No." He laughed. "I just know Alex has been filling your head with all the bad stories about me. What I'm about to tell you is something I know you will believe, but I have to ask you to keep it from Alex."

"I couldn't possibly keep anything from him."

"It's for his own good, Danika."

She didn't know what to say or what to do. She didn't want there to be secrets between her and Alex.

"I know who hung your brother," he blurted out. "I know who is responsible for the other deaths of your other

family members. If Alex finds out, he could go getting himself killed.”

Danika put a hand up to her mouth to stifle her cry.

“He can’t know, all right?”

She nodded in agreement. She may not know everything about Alex, but she did recognize the signs of how he would go after trouble. More so for her, she suspected.

Reed cupped her cheek. “I’ll take care of the people responsible, have no worry on that.”

“Why? Why would you do that? Not for me?”

“Why not for you?”

“You don’t know me, and you said you weren’t trying to steal me from Alex.”

“It’s bad business for us all to have someone think killing is a way to run our cattle. Rebecca loved Alex. How much I don’t know, but she’d want me to do what I could for the woman he loves.”

Danika threw her arms around Reed and hugged him. His hesitant hold of her eventually disappeared. She understood more how Rebecca could love two men. She was glad she didn’t have a problem making a choice between them.

“Don’t tell me a name,” she whispered. “I don’t want to know.”

“You’re going to tell him that I know, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know that I can keep it from him. The best I can do to protect him is not know the information.”

“Get your hands off her!” Alex’s voice bellowed.

Danika jumped back from Reed and spun to see Alex red-faced with anger. She had asked he not wear his guns at

the party. Now fear swelled as she saw his hands hovering near them. The little leather loops already unhitched from the hammers.

Reed's hand went firmly to her upper arm. He pulled her aside.

She couldn't let them shoot each other. They had no reason she could understand. Even Reed had no hate for Alex. If he had, he wouldn't have warned her not to tell Alex.

"This ain't what you're thinking, McClaric."

"I don't need to think, when my eyes can see you're holding what's mine."

"Is she? You thought that about Rebecca once. Didn't turn out so well then for you?"

"Reed, please." She looked back at him goading Alex.

He didn't look; he didn't take his gaze away from the threat Alex presented. She didn't know what to do to stop them from killing each other. Each step Alex took put them closer and at greater risk of hitting what they aimed for when they drew their guns. She hadn't seen either of them shoot anything, yet it wouldn't matter if she were to let them get within ten feet of each other.

"You'll not take Danika from me and then kill her like you did Rebecca. I couldn't stop you before, this time don't be so damned sure."

Danika rushed between the men and pushed Alex away.

"I'm just glad it's a good thing she never gave you a child!" Alex declared, shaking her away.

She couldn't believe the man she loved would be so cruel. She put her hands up and shoved him back.

“Stop saying those things,” she cried.

Reed had confided in her the sadness of his life with Rebecca. Alex made all the pain resurface, and she automatically went to Reed.

“Danika, get away from him,” Alex demanded.

“No, you’re the one who needs to get away. You don’t know anything about Reed and Rebecca’s lives. Not the way you think you do.” She rubbed Reed’s arm and whispered. “Please don’t kill him.”

Reed looked down and stroked her cheek.

She saw his watery eyes assure her he’d not do anything.

“Not that it’s any of your business, McClaric, but a few months after Rebecca and I were married, she found out she was pregnant.”

“Reed,” she whispered his name, hoping her strength could be his.

“She only had a moment’s happiness with that news before she lost the baby,” Reed continued. “Between the loss of our baby and then you and I never getting along, it tore her up. I actually wanted to tell you about the miscarriage so you’d talk to her. I never meant to stop the friendship you shared. She begged me not to tell you. I imagine she was afraid you’d do something stupid like blame me. I loved her, and you damn well should have figured out that she loved me.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“It doesn’t matter. It never mattered to me what you thought. Rebecca was the only person I gave a damn about, and so I let her keep secret she was ever pregnant to begin with. She grieved something awful when the doctor told

her she'd never get pregnant again. As for her accident, it was just that. It's what I'll always make myself believe because I don't want to ever give thought to the fact she got on a green broke stallion with the intention of killing herself."

Danika pressed her fingers harder to her trembling lips. She couldn't see through the tears and before Reed could walk away, she wrapped her arms around him and hugged him tightly. Her heart cried for his pain and hers over people they loved and lost.

"I believe you." She sobbed. "I believe you would never have done anything to hurt Rebecca."

Reed put his head down on her shoulder and held her. She had never been held so gently by anyone other than family or Alex.

"Alex?" Her head lifted with the very thought of him and the pain he too must have felt. "Thank you, sunshine." Reed kissed her forehead. "You best get back to the idiot before he really believes I ever had a chance at stealing you away."

"You never thought you could." She held his sleeves.

"Danika, I saw the way you looked at Alex. The day I came over to you sitting in that wagon all teary-eyed, I wanted only to help you make him see what he'd be giving up by his bullheaded stubbornness. Rebecca told me she and Alex had nothing more than a friendship but seeing how I'm probably the second, thickest-headed fellow in these parts, I didn't want to believe her. It was safer for my heart. I think Alex is trying to take the safe route himself in not letting his feelings show too much for you."

“The problem with you two is you’re so much alike.” She smiled and turned her head. But Alex wasn’t there. The space he occupied in the arch of the garden was empty. She spun around like a whirling top so her eyes could take in all directions. He had vanished like daylight does at sunset.

“Alex?” She lifted her skirts slightly and ran through the arch. “Alex?” she called louder.

She rounded the house and flew across the barnyard. Out of breath and out of her mind with worry that he’d really disappear and never come back, she stopped by the stall with the foal. She couldn’t speak, she panted so hard. Alex brushed the nervous foal and looked over at her.

“Well?”

“Well what?” She managed words.

“Have you come to the conclusion I’m not the man for you?” He scratched his jaw and turned his back.

“If my brothers were alive...” She held the top edge of the stall wall. “Charlotte says it’s called a shotgun wedding.”

“And I’m sorry you don’t have them to protect you anymore, or do for you what I will not.”

“I still have a brother,” she said quietly. “He may not have a shotgun, but I reckon the revolver you gave him will do.”

“Don’t be letting him get in any gun battles just so you can get Reed to marry you.”

“There isn’t much of you that’s husband material. You’re pigheaded, mean, obnoxious, overindulgent, and haven’t a clue as to a woman’s feelings.”

“I told you that before.”

“I said there wasn’t much, but I’d like to try to work with what you do offer.” She smiled when he turned his face

to her. "You make me feel safe; you make me laugh, and I don't know for sure, but I even think you love me."

"And Reed?"

"He makes me laugh too much. And while I trust he would keep me safe, I don't know that for a fact as I do with you."

"And the love part?"

"I think he could love me if he wanted to, but it would take a long time for him to stop loving Rebecca and blaming himself for her death. He never needed you to blame him, Alex."

"Rebecca never really loved me. She told me that before she got married. In a way, it was a relief because I didn't love her the way Charlotte put it once, the way she'd want a man to love her. We connected in a way that a brother and sister do. She married a man who was my rival because I didn't want to give up the friendship. I never allowed the depression she displayed could be for anything other than regrets for marrying Reed. I blamed him, and now I see it's partly my fault."

"It's not your fault."

"Maybe if she had let Reed tell me and I talked to her."

"Don't think like Reed that she did anything to hurt herself. She made a bad choice getting on that horse, that's all an accident is, a bad decision."

"I guess I have some apologizing to do to Reed. That ain't going to be a fun day."

"Can you be friends?"

"Doubt you'd call anything between us a friendship, but I reckon I can be more civil. The rivalry is still there."

We want bigger and better ranches than the other.” He laughed. “It’s a male thing.”

“Yes, so I’m beginning to understand. Now are you still going to marry me, or do I ask Reed?”

“You haven’t asked if I love you.”

“It’s not necessary for me to have everything I want in life, Alex. A good husband, a nice home and . . . and children would make me happier than I can imagine right now.”

* * * *

Alex put the currycomb down and came out of the stall. He took his hat off and held it in his hand nervously afraid he’d waited too long. Danika stood there waiting for him to reaffirm his intentions. He was sure he’d already lost her affections to Reed. He didn’t think he could hold back the one thing he probably wanted to tell her from the moment he met her.

“Even though the faults you listed are fairly accurate, I’d be the best husband you could ever have. There ain’t no one in this world who could love you more than I do.”

“You have faults?” She rushed into his arms and looked up at him. “I may have to rethink my choice.”

“You even try, and I’ll be the one with a shotgun leading you to the preacher.” He bent slightly to grab her around the waist and spin her around. “You won’t regret not being Reed Banagher’s wife? He does have more money than I do.”

“He does this year, but will he next? I’ll have a very ambitious husband who just may show up Mr. Banagher’s bank account if he can get that army contract for beef.”

“True, very true, it’ll mean a trip to Texas, maybe a work and wedding trip combined?”

“I’ll go anywhere with you, Alex, anywhere, anytime. I love you.”

Alex put her on the ground and held a hand at the back of her head and one to her lower back.

“I love you very much,” she whispered again.

“I don’t think anything else matters to me right now.”

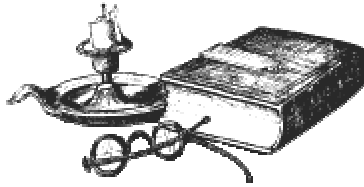
Alex scooped her up and held her close.

“I love you too, honey. I always have.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brenda Williamson lives to write and create stories containing timeless love with sensual, sexy, and spicy themes. Forgoing household chores most of the time, she has a great husband and one son whom put up with her many long hours hidden behind a computer. For contemplation, she sits on the porch swing and watches nature inspire from her country home. Other stories from Whiskey Creek Press Torrid include her novel, *The Witch Stone*, a teaser, *The Clandestiny Ring*, and a short story in the Summer Sizzler's Anthology, *One Hot Kiss*. For more information visit her website:
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