

# **CUTTER'S WOMAN**

by

**Weta Nichols**

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## **Dedication**

To all the Nichols family, north and south. Always especially to my son and his family for their support and love.



## Chapter 1

*Baltimore—1879*

*Good sturdy Christian women wanted—serious minded—willing to relocate to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Need a knowledge of cooking, cleaning, child rearing—room and board, plus handsome compensations provided. Only first 20 applicants considered. Reply to: Ira, c/o May's Boardinghouse, Cheyenne, Wyoming.*

Maggie Ryan read the ad in *The New York Times*, her mind still on the article she had just finished. It told of the many opportunities for women in the West, and of the shortage of women. Teaching, tutoring, boardinghouse, and hotel work was available. It even spoke of how many women were venturing into dental and doctor work, some becoming lawyers, journalists, and office workers.

Would she be considered a complete idiot if she answered an ad like that? Maggie wanted a job with some substance to it. The old judge would never give her a job referral if she quit.

Having been raised in an orphanage, she had nothing: no family and only one close friend. All her life she'd known poverty, hard work, and drudgery. She had been fussed at and treated like nobody.

Maggie paced back and forth across the small room in Judge Benjamin Upshaw's mansion with vast lawns in the better neighborhood of Baltimore. She lived in a big, fine

house on the hill, took care of the judge's invalid wife, cleaned, and tried to outmaneuver judge's lecherous advances. Tired of it, she felt that now was time something good happened in her life. It was up to Maggie to make it happen.

She flung the newspaper, then paced across the room and grabbed it, glaring at the ad again. She would never have a life of her own here. Not having a proper education, or the looks to catch a husband, Maggie was tired of being poor.

"I've got to do this," she told herself. Grabbing her shawl and bonnet, Maggie donned them and went through the kitchen on her way outside.

"Rosemary, I'm going to visit my friend, Elizabeth Cromwell. I'll be back before supper."

Rosemary looked up from the pan of dishes she was washing and smiled, her fat cheeks dimpled. "I'll tell the old battle axe should anyone ask. You deserve to do as you please on your day off."

"Thank you." Maggie pulled her shawl tighter against the cold February air. Slushy gray snow covered the backyard, and Maggie picked her way through the mess. She chose the back way instead of the front door to avoid having to answer questions from her employers. Maggie knew she shouldn't complain—at least she had a roof over her head and plenty to eat. Many people were out of work now because the factories had cut back.

She crossed over two streets, walking by the pharmacy, the small mercantile, and the coffee house. As she walked through the small park, she stopped to watch a group of children ice-skating. Their cheeks were red from the cold; colorful scarves flew and excited screams filled the air. Maggie reveled in the happy situation. She never had a

childhood, no skating in the park or a doll to call her own, no pretty dresses or bonnets. Maggie liked children and wondered if she would ever have one of her own.

Continuing on, she covered the six blocks at a brisk pace. Maggie knocked on the service door of the Rockford Estate. Her friend was lucky indeed to live in such a beautiful place as this, even if she was a maid. Elizabeth was the only girl she'd been close to at the orphanage. They had been like sisters for nearly twenty years, with never a harsh word between them.

Elizabeth answered the door wearing her gray cotton uniform and a frilly white apron, a small starched white cap perched on her blond hair.

"Maggie, how nice." She grinned. "Come in. Your nose is nearly as red as your hair. Must be getting colder."

"I won't stay long, Beth. I just have to get out of that house once in a while, and I want to show you something."

Beth closed the door and started toward the kitchen, talking over her shoulder. "Let me tell Louise I'm taking a half hour, then we'll go to my room and talk. Something serious?"

"Maybe," Maggie replied, her voice soft and low. "I'll wait by the hall door for you."

Returning, Beth smiled at Maggie again. "If I had your looks I'd be out with some nice man this afternoon," said Beth as she guided Maggie to her room. "Why are you so afraid to do anything on your own?"

Maggie shook her head sadly. "I know you've tried to help me overcome my timidity and shyness, but I fall apart around strangers. I've got to do something. I'm getting desperate, Beth. Read this and tell me I'm not crazy." She shoved the paper at Beth, removed her shawl and bonnet, and flung them over the back of a chair.

Her friend read, her eyes growing bigger and rounder by the minute. "Oh, my word! Is this real? They want women...this is crazy."

"I knew you'd think that, but...I'm going. The judge is getting worse all the time. I'll never have the chance for a good job and independence here." Maggie slumped down on the edge of a chair, defeated, her hands cradled in her lap.

Beth dropped down on the end of the small bed. "But this man is a stranger, maybe it's something sinister. Wyoming Territory is so far away. I hear there's Indians and people getting killed all the time."

Maggie raised her gaze to meet Beth's large brown eyes. "What difference does it make? We have no family here. I'm going to answer, Beth, and I hope you'll go with me."

"Oh, Maggie! This is so sudden. I don't know what to do. Give me a day or two to think about this." Beth stood and reached out to Maggie, drawing her close.

Maggie buried her face against Beth's shoulder and hugged her tightly. "Please think about it. This might be the only chance I'll ever have to make something of myself, Beth. I'm twenty-six, far past marriageable age, and you're close. I have to go."

"I know! Don't remind me, big sister."

They both laughed, breaking the seriousness of the moment. Maggie picked up her shawl and wrapped it around her shoulders, pulled on her bonnet, and tied it under her chin. She grabbed up the newspaper from the bed and folded it into her sleeve. "I'm going to take this chance, Beth."

Beth heard the desperation in her quavering voice. "I know. It's been terrible for you, hasn't it?"

“Worse than terrible. It’s a living hell, Beth. I’ve got to go,” she repeated, raising her gaze to meet Beth’s solemn eyes. “The old judge even came into my room the other night, said he’d lost his way.”

Beth blinked back tears and kissed Maggie’s cheek. “Oh, God! Good luck. I’ll talk to you Tuesday afternoon.”

Maggie quickly opened the door and stepped out into the cold, already composing the letter she would write. With or without Beth, she had to go, but she hoped Beth decided to go with her.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter McCallister stood on the front porch of his log ranch house, surveying his sleek Hereford and Longhorn cattle, his horses in another pasture. The windmill whirled behind the house in the early March wind. He reflected briefly on the twelve years he’d been in Wyoming Territory. He and his best friend, Ace Jenkins, had come out of the War Between the States unscathed and found hundreds of cattle running wild on their properties in Texas. Too many men had gone off to war and left their places untended. Many didn’t come back, including three of Cutter’s brothers. He still felt the pain from that terrible loss.

He sighed heavily under his breath and looked toward the bunkhouse. He and Ace had rounded up five hundred head and started north, winding up close to Cheyenne. Only a railroad camp had been set up at that time. Cutter and Ace had staked out their land, each claiming three hundred and twenty acres. Now, his goal was to make it the best ranch in the Cheyenne area. He was proud of what they had built, but he wanted to do better.

Stepping off the porch, Cutter looked toward the bunkhouse. What was keeping the man? He stalked off toward the men's quarters, his long arms swinging.

Cutter was a big man, short on patience at times, and wanting everything to happen at once. "Hell, Ace, what's keeping you?" he bellowed, shoving through the door.

Ace sat on a chair with the cook bent over him and encouraging him to take another sip of medicine. Pedro glanced at Cutter. "He isn't feeling good, *señor*. One of his attacks, I think."

Cutter was afraid for his friend. This was the third attack—shortness of breath, sweating, and hurting in his chest. "That does it, Ace! I'm sending the doctor back out to see you, and I'm not taking no for an answer."

"Yeah! Yeah! You're right!"

"Your whiskey drinking hasn't helped any."

When Ace didn't answer, Cutter glanced at him again. "I'm going then. Pedro, help him lie down, and keep him quiet until I get back."

"Yes sir. I'll take care of him."

\* \* \* \*

All the way into town, Cutter's mind whirled with Ace and his problems, things that he wanted to do at the ranch. Spring was coming. Maybe they'd buy a few more horses and start a good breeding program.

He hurried to the doctor's office first. "Doc Campbell, Ace is ailing again. Same thing, hurting in his chest and shortness of breath. Can you go out to see about him?"

"I'm heading that way, so I'll stop by first. Miz McGuffin finally decided to have that baby." Doc laughed and reached for his coat hanging across a chair.

"Good. I really appreciate this. Sure don't want anything happening to my partner."

"I know how you feel. I'll be there around noon, then."

Cutter lifted his hand in farewell and watched the doctor enter his buggy, ready to start his trip.

When he sauntered into the mercantile store, he wasn't prepared for the deluge of men and their questions bombarding him.

"Where have you been?"

"We thought you'd never come into town."

"We could have found out about our women a week ago, but Ira insisted we had to be fair about this."

"Hooray, the women are coming!"

Cutter looked dazed for a minute, not understanding. "What women? Have you lost your mind, Jake? None of you are making any sense." He swept his gaze over Jake and Ira Swan, owners of the hardware and mercantile, then onto Jacob Ash, livery owner, Alex Murray—banker, and on and on. Every single man in town had assembled and looked at him like he had the key to the mystery.

"Women who answered the ad. We have twenty letters and we're all drawing a number today to see whom we get," Alex answered, crossing his booted feet.

"How does this concern me? I'm ordering supplies and I've been to Doc Campbell's office. Ace had another attack."

"Sorry to hear that." Jake wiped his hands on his apron and stepped forward, holding out a hat. "Draw your number, then you can go. These men have been patient long enough."

"Why would I draw a number? I didn't put my name on any list for a woman."

Jake shoved the hat at him. "Yes, you did, Cutter."

Cutter shook his head, not believing this. "What was I drinking that day? I don't remember putting my name on

any list. Melody Ann needs a mother, but I don't need a woman." He fought that desire every night, wanting a woman, but he didn't have to tell these men everything. He just wasn't ready.

Alex clamped Cutter on the shoulder. "Just draw a number, dammit! I'm anxious to meet my woman. We've got letters to write."

Jake shoved the hat at Cutter again. "You're holding us up. We want a woman."

Cutter cursed under his breath and reached into the hat, drawing a number. He unfolded the slip of paper, and said, "Number fourteen. Does that make you happy?"

Not waiting for their reactions, he plopped his list onto the counter and took the letter that Jake handed him. Without looking at the letter, he shoved it into his shirt pocket and marched outside. This was crazy. He didn't need a wife, only a woman to take care of the baby.

\* \* \* \*

After supper, Cutter read to Melody Ann. She squirmed on his lap and toyed with the letter poking out of his shirt pocket. He gently lifted her hand away, and ran his fingers through her dark hair. Melody Ann painfully reminded him of her mother. He went back to reading.

"Doggie, sweetheart, see the doggie," he told the beautiful eighteen-month-old girl.

Melody Ann smiled up at her father, then touched the picture, saying, "Goggie."

He hugged her, kissing the top of her head. "It's about time for beddie-bye, little girl. You ready?"

Cutter laid the book on the table near him and gathered Melody Ann into his arms. She did need a mother, someone who could give her only what a woman could,

softness and femininity. He didn't want her turning out like the men in the bunkhouse.

He came to his feet slowly. This had been a long, crazy day. He still had things to do and he was worried about Ace. They'd been together a long time, and the doctor hadn't been hopeful about his situation. The problem might be his heart, and the doctor said Ace would have to cut back on work.

Cutter tucked Melody Ann into bed, kissed her again, and blew out the light. Closing the door softly, he walked into his bedroom and stared out the window. He couldn't help thinking of Anna Marie. He blamed himself for her death. She'd already lost two babies in the eight years they'd been married, but she wanted a baby badly. He had let her convince him everything would be all right, and he quit using precaution.

Anna Marie had been a dark-haired, little Texas gal, ready for love and excitement when Cutter returned to Texas because of his father's illness. Naturally he would see Anna Marie, Ace's baby sister, since they were neighbors to his family, and one thing led to another. The first thing Cutter knew he was a married man, and bringing a young wife to a 'rough and ready' place in Wyoming. The ranch house was built just before she lost the first baby. Two years later, the second child was stillborn.

The third baby survived, but Anna Marie hadn't. Cutter stared out the window of his bedroom into the moonlit night, memories flooding over him.

Tall pines and spruce trees stood like sentinels on guard, and Cutter smiled. He loved this country, this life. It wasn't so bad.

He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off, and heard the rustling of the letter in his pocket. Cutter decided to read

*Cutter's Woman*

the damned thing. He lit a candle, pulled the letter from the envelope, sat down on the edge of his bed, and began.

*Baltimore—February 1879.*

*I hope you won't think I'm a foolish or vain woman, because I'm really not. I'm a shy person, an orphan, and I haven't found the chance for a good job here. I long for a different life, a decent life with reliable work and independence, maybe a man someday, and children of my own.*

*I'm five foot-two-inches, with red hair and freckles, and weigh around one hundred ten pounds. I would welcome a place with more sunshine, beautiful flowers and trees, clear air, and a home. I've worked in a boardinghouse, nurse's helper in the orphanage, and companion to an elderly couple. If you desire to write, my name and address are at the bottom.*

*Sincerely—Maggie Ryan.*

Cutter crumpled the letter and threw it across the room. A red-haired Irish woman and a *damned Yankee* at that. Hadn't the Yankees killed his brothers? How did he ever get in a fix like this? He didn't need a woman.

The thought of Melody Ann came back. She deserved a mother.

Wrestling with his problem throughout the night, Cutter felt lousy when he got up. But his decision was made. He was going to forget about the whole damned thing.

\* \* \* \*

After eating ham and eggs, Cutter ambled out to the bunkhouse, hoping Ace was up and feeling better. The

aroma of freshly perked coffee and burning biscuits hit him before he got there.

Rushing through the door, he yelled, "Pedro, where are you?"

Cutter gingerly pulled the pan from the oven. He hurried into the sleeping quarters to find Pedro leaning over Ace. "What happened?"

"I brought coffee for Ace. He's feeling better. Sorry, I forgot about the damned biscuits." Pedro flashed a white-toothed smile, and sauntered toward the kitchen.

Cutter pulled up a chair next to his friend's bunk and sat. "You scared ten years off my life, old man. You've got to quit this. I need you around here. Melody Ann needs her uncle."

The raw-boned man smiled wanly, and pushed his graying hair off his forehead. "Old man! Now, that's friendship for you. I've pulled you outa more scrapes than I like to think about. Why, if it hadn't been for me, back in '63, you...woulda..."

"Yeah, yeah! I know." Cutter shuffled awkwardly in the chair. "Ace, I've got a problem...woman problem."

"Well, it's about time is all I've got to say. That sweet little girl needs a mother." He tasted his coffee and set the tin cup down quickly. "Who is she?"

"You don't understand, Ace. Somehow my name was put on a list. They've sent for twenty women to come and marry us lonely and love-starved men in Cheyenne." When Ace laughed, Cutter gave him a dark look. "Why wasn't your name on that damned list?"

"I don't need a woman. Miz Flossie takes care of me once a month just fine, but that baby needs a mother. Already she's saying bad words and talking Indian talk," Ace answered, frowning.

“So I’ve heard.” Cutter chuckled. “But you’re staying in bed alone today, you hear. What time will the Doc be coming out?”

Ace smiled and tried his coffee again. “Around noon, he said.”

Cutter stood, pushing his chair back in place.

“You need a woman to take some of that orneriness outa you, Cutter. So if you’re getting a woman I’m all for it.”

“Okay, Ace. Already I’ve forgotten about the whole damned thing. I refuse to even think about a woman.”

“But you can’t depend on Annika. She’s going to spend some time with her people. Who you going to leave that sweet baby with then, Pedro?”

Ace gave him a dirty look. Cutter whirled back to Ace. “Did you put my name on that list?”

“I did. I told you that little girl needs a mother, and you need a woman whether you’ll admit it or not. Quit beating yourself up over Anna Marie’s death. It couldn’t be helped.”

Cutter stomped outside. He would go into town and give somebody a piece of his mind. His name on a list wasn’t legal unless he did it, was it? He refused to even think about such damn foolishness.

He had work to do, not coddle some woman. Now, with Ace laid up, his work would increase. Everything would fall onto him.

After being married and enjoying the comforts in his bed at night, he couldn’t stop thinking that it might be nice to have a woman again. But then his grief swamped him, and he didn’t want another woman. He had to quit this see-sawing. Make up his mind. He had drawn the woman’s number so she was probably on her way.

*Cutter's Woman*

Cutter saddled his horse and rode out, hoping to see the beginning of new grass and spring arriving. He'd had enough winter to last for a while.

His mind kept going back to the letter. He'd heard some of the words Melody had picked up from Ace and the men in the bunkhouse. Cutter was careful what he said in front of her, or he tried to be. He knew she needed love, but he wasn't ready for a woman. That was the end of the subject as far as he was concerned.

## Chapter 2

Over and over as the train sped west, Maggie read the one letter from Cutter. He was a big man, and she admired big men. He had a small daughter. Maggie was afraid. Maybe Cutter McCallister wouldn't cotton to her or the way she took care of his child. He might send her back or trade her to someone else if she wasn't to his liking.

She read his letter once again.

*Maggie Ryan—now that's a good Irish name. I was pleased with your letter. You don't seem to put on airs, and you'll have to get over that shyness.*

*I'm a rancher, a big man with a temper sometimes and not long on patience. I have an eighteen-month old daughter, Melody Ann. She's a tiny thing who needs a mother. She has big brown eyes and hair, a lot like me. I have dark hair and brown eyes, too. I'm thirty-two years old and a Texan by birth.*

*You didn't tell me how old you are and what you're doing now. I haven't been in on the planning of this, so I don't know if I'm supposed to send money to bring you out on the train, or what? I'll check with Ira next time I go into town. The ranch is eight miles out of Cheyenne,*

*Cutter's Woman*

*nestled into the foothills. There's a big log house that needs a woman's touch.*

*Sincerely—Cutter McCallister.*

*Oh, I want to like this man. I want the chance to make something of myself.*

The clickety-clack of the train wheels, the talking of the other eighteen women, the new territory they saw, was all wonderful and exciting for Maggie. She squeezed Beth's hand, needing reassurance that she was doing the right thing.

"You're going to be fine, Maggie. Quit worrying about this man. He's going to like you and the way you take care of his little girl."

"But what if he doesn't? Will he send me back?"

"Stop talking nonsense. We'll be close together, and I bet working for Alex Murray will be the answer to my dreams. A banker, just think about it. Who would ever imagine Elizabeth Cromwell would work for a banker?"

"Now, you're glad I talked you into this...aren't you?"

"I'm excited, yes. We're seeing lots of new country. We'll have a home and good jobs. This is the answer to our prayers, Maggie."

Maggie was glad Beth could be so excited about working for a stranger. Maggie's stomach was queasy at even meeting the man who had drawn her number. What if he didn't like her?

In two more days they would arrive. Maggie could imagine herself passing out from the excitement and uncertainty. She didn't want marriage, nor had she really been looking after the sad experience she'd had with a man who lied to her. When she found out he was married, she dropped him flat. He didn't like to be rejected, and kept

pursuing Maggie. She had to threaten to call the police on him.

Josie McKinzie and Summer Acton moved across from Beth and Maggie. Josie spoke up, "I can't believe this. Are you as excited as we are?"

They were both pretty girls in their early twenties, and had made friends fast once on the train. They were going to work for brothers, Ira and Jake Swan. Josie was tall and dark-haired with big brown eyes, and an easy and teasing smile. Summer was petite, a bit on the chubby side and had deep blue eyes, and light chestnut brown hair. She appeared to be more serious minded.

Maggie tried to talk around the lump forming, and then cleared her throat. "Nervous is more like it. What if the men who have drawn our number don't like us? Can they trade us to someone else?"

Summer laughed, pushing at her unbound hair. "Why wouldn't they like us? We're going to take care of their homes and the boardinghouse, be dutiful employees, aren't we?"

Beth frowned and looked from one to the other. "I hope they told the truth. Evidently this Cutter McCallister is the only one who has a child. I wonder how many of us are in for some big surprises?"

Summer brought her hand up to her mouth. "Oh my! You don't suppose..."

Josie smiled, her eyes twinkling. "Can't you just imagine meeting these men for the first time. I hope I don't freeze up and start screaming. Ira said he was a gentle man."

Maggie clenched her hands together. "Surely they'll give us a little time—not expect us to move right in and start to work. That would seem..."

Summer's eyes widened. "God help us. Maybe we should have specified a while to get acquainted, with them paying for our keep, of course."

"Girls, girls, let's not imagine the worst. We expect respect and honesty," Beth said, raising her eyebrows.

Maggie sighed heavily, upset more than ever. She knew they were just talking to ease their nerves. "Let's try to keep in touch and see each other occasionally. We'll need friends."

\* \* \* \*

As the train slowed down late the next evening, the conductor came through the car. "Cheyenne, ladies! Get your things together. End of the run."

"You've been very helpful," Maggie said to the conductor, trying to see out the dirty train window. Would the men meet them? She wished she knew what was expected.

Beth held her valise tightly, her hands sweaty. "My legs are shaking. How are you doing?"

"Okay...I think," Maggie answered. She pinned her nametag to her jacket lapel as they'd been instructed to do. "Will all the men be here to meet us?"

"I don't know. The name tags are a good idea, though, so the wrong man won't claim us." They moved forward behind the other girls. "I can hardly breathe, Maggie."

"Me either," Maggie confessed. She smoothed her hair, making sure it was secure in long curls down her back, but still in rolls and ringlets on top. Looking down at her three-year-old blue Polanaise walking suit with buttons down the front, Maggie hoped she looked all right. This was the only decent piece of clothing she owned, and it had cost a year's salary.

Maggie had never thought of herself as a frivolous woman, but she did want to make a good impression. This might be the most important moment in her life.

She tripped on the lower step, but the conductor caught her hand. "Careful there, ma'am."

"Thank you." She raised her gaze to look into the sea of faces. Two men stepped forward, one tall and lanky, the other medium height with a handle-bar mustache.

"Ladies, we're Ira and Jake Swan. Welcome to Cheyenne. We're taking you over to the Inter Ocean Hotel."

Beth groaned. "I had hoped Mister Alex Murray would be here to meet us."

"Which one are you?" Josie asked, her eyes twinkling.

Dusky shadows were closing in and the man looked the woman over carefully, noting her nametag. "I'm Ira Swan, ma'am. This is Jake. Glad you're here."

Maggie wasn't so sure she could make it to the hotel. She glanced around at the wide dirt street, the sturdy brick buildings and cement sidewalks, but she could only think of the man who waited for her.

"Here's our conveyances," Ira said, pointing to two hacks. "We believe in treating our ladies right."

Maggie breathed a sigh of relief. She wondered what Josie thought of Ira. He wasn't a bad looking man. Lord, she hoped Cutter McCallister was as presentable. She had only the one letter from him. Maggie climbed aboard the hack and took her seat beside Beth.

They passed an imposing brick building. "This is the House of Mirrors," Ira intoned.

His voice was monotone, no excitement showing. Maybe he wasn't too enthused about Josie.

When they were inside the hotel, Ira steered them toward the registration desk. "You'll stay here for a week or so. Give you a chance to get acquainted with the man you're matched with. Two to a room. Please sign in and freshen up if you like. We'll expect you to join us in the dining room in one hour for dinner."

Maggie sucked in her breath. *Goodness, such luxury. This is going to cost someone a pretty penny.* The place was furnished elegantly with Brussels carpets, velvet chairs, and a curved mahogany bar. "Did you ever see anything like this?"

Breathless, Beth looked around. "No, it's beautiful. I wonder what Mister Murray's house will be like?" she asked, stretching her neck to see everything.

Maggie turned and started up the stairs behind the bellman. "Quit worrying. I feel like I have a week's worth of grime on my face. I'm glad we're here."

They washed and changed clothes. Maggie pulled on a plain, navy blue faille dress with a white lace collar, buttoned below the waist. She hoped this was good enough. Smoothing down her hair, she turned in front of the mirror. She looked pale, washed-out, and tired. Maggie applied a bit of rouge to her cheeks and smiled at Beth.

"We look all right, don't you think?"

"You're perfect, Maggie. This Cutter McCallister will see you're an honest and reliable woman."

"You're pretty, too, Beth. Oh, I wish I wasn't so nervous."

"Everything is going to be wonderful. This is a vast and primitive country, and these jobs are going to make all our dreams come true. I feel it, Maggie," Beth said.

Maggie consulted her lapel watch. "It's time to go." She clasped her hands together, trying to still the trembling

throughout her body. "Oh, dear Lord," she whispered, "help me to be strong."

A few minutes later, Maggie looked nervously around the dining room. She walked on trembling legs to where the group of ladies stood.

Josie smiled and said, "We're to wait here a few minutes. Jake is bringing the men. He thought most of them stopped in the bar for fortification."

Maggie wondered if they were as nervous as she was. She brought her gaze up when the troop of men came through the double doors, one man head and shoulders taller than the others. He was clean-shaven, with a dark fuzzy mustache, and his brown eyes glistened in the light. His deep green corduroy jacket, white shirt, and black string tie made him stand out in the crowd. Was this the man she would be working for? Her heart quickened.

Ira looked the group over and explained, "All right. We're here. The men will sit on this side of the table across from the lady whose number they drew. Start with number one and go on down. Your number is on your nametag, ladies. Number one!" he called out.

Maggie held her breath. This was the hardest thing she had ever done in her life. She counted them off one by one, and took three deep breaths. Her pounding heart felt like it would jump right out of her chest it beat so furiously. Her gaze met the dark brown eyes of the tall man when he stepped forward. They moved down the line and took their seats.

So, *this* was Cutter McCallister.

"How are you, Miss Ryan? Did you have a good trip?" Cutter asked, a slow smile encasing his lips.

Maggie clenched her hands together in her lap to still their trembling. The deep voice washed over Maggie, and

she felt a ripple go down her back. "I'm terribly nervous." She smiled shyly, thinking he was the most handsome man she'd ever seen.

"It's been a busy time," he answered, his smile coming quick and easy.

Ira stood, trying to calm everyone. "Thank you, ladies, for coming all this way to marry us lonesome and needy men."

"Marry!" several voices chorused, Maggie's among them.

"Hey, wait a minute! We didn't come to get married, we came for jobs. The ad didn't mention marrying," Josie explained.

Ira continued. "That was our intent, and I'm sure we mentioned marriage, child rearing, cooking...all the things that pertain to making a home."

Several of the women had secret smiles; some had stunned looks on their faces. Maggie hadn't wanted marriage, to give her heart to another man to get it trampled. Determined no one was ever going to hurt her again, Maggie clenched her hands together.

"We'll have time to talk this over tomorrow. Make arrangements with your partner to meet and settle things," Ira went on.

\* \* \* \*

He wanted to reach out and touch Maggie Ryan, to see that she was real. She was pretty, even if she looked scared to death. He wanted to take a big bite out of her, but now was not the time for foolish things.

The conversation he'd had with Ace a month or so ago came back to Cutter. Everything had piled up on him, and he hadn't had time to hardly catch his breath, much less think about a woman coming. He reminded himself once

again that she wasn't going to be a wife to him, but a mother to Melody Ann.

It took only one look at the delicate red-haired woman across from Cutter to know he was in trouble. What good would she be on a ranch? A strong wind would blow her away. Her features were too delicate and refined—her skin would burn to a crisp in the sun. Her walk told him she was all woman and her looks hit him like a flash of lightning. His whole body tightened. Cutter let out his breath in a whoosh and hoped no one noticed.

Her nose was slightly upturned and her lips hinted of passion. The lushness of her lashes, the arch of her light brows against her creamy skin made him restless, wanting to reach out to her, to protect her.

Cutter wanted her with a fervor that he didn't know even existed. She was like a spark of spring on a cold, raw day. He wanted to hate her for making him feel this way, for making his arousal throb with heat.

He sat through dinner a miserable and pulsing heap. Her lilting voice flowed around and over him like she'd ran her hands over his naked body. Naked—he could imagine what her body would look like with firm, uplifted breasts and light-colored hair below. He knew he had to get his mind back to where it ought to be. Again guilt swamped him. Cutter hung his head.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie finished her dinner, apprehensive, afraid to wish, and hesitant to think this man would like her. He had such a pained expression on his face. She watched his big hands, visualizing herself mirrored in his eyes with passion flowing around them. Oh, how she wanted him to like her. What would it be like to be alone with this handsome man?

“Marriage, no way!” she said under her breath.

When dinner was over, Ira stood, clicking his spoon against a glass. "Ladies and gentlemen, it's up to you from now on. Make your own plans, but as we agreed, there'll be no moving in together until the marriage ceremony is performed. Now, shall we say good night to the ladies? They've had a long, arduous trip and must have some rest."

Ira held out his hand to Josie and walked her to the door, kissing her hand. "Good night, my dear. I'll see you tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

Cutter waited his turn at the head of the table and took Maggie's hand when she joined him. "What time shall I pick you up tomorrow? Maybe we could take a ride and get acquainted."

"I'm going to church. Could we make it around noon, that is if you don't mind?" Maggie's mind was still in a whirl. She couldn't believe marriage was what that ad stated.

"No, sounds fine. Where do you go to church?"

"Methodist back home. I'm not sure what's available here."

Cutter laughed, his voice low and husky. "Oh, we're quite civilized. We have one of each, I believe. Maybe I'll see you there."

He felt like kicking himself. Cutter hadn't been in church for regular services since he was a boy. He'd had Anna Marie's services there, but he hadn't felt inclined to go since then.

Slowly bending down, Cutter kissed her hand. Her lilac perfume smelled delicious, and he was sure she would taste better. "Good night, now," he whispered.

Cutter hurried on into the bar. A stiff drink and cold bath would have to suffice for tonight. What would he do when she moved into his house?

“God!” he groaned, joining the others.

“Problems?” someone asked.

Cutter didn't even look around, but ordered his drink. He closed his eyes, trying to get a grip on himself. He hadn't reacted to a woman this way in fifteen years. Was this just a prelude of what was to come? He took his drink and joined the other men.

“Well, what do you think?” Ira asked. “Is she to your liking?”

“Don't know yet. She's a Yankee, isn't she? I sure as hell wasn't ready for this.”

“Quite a pretty Yankee, though. If you want to swap, let me know,” Alex said, sitting next to Cutter. “Mine is a bit tall.”

“She's not as big as a minute. One good wind'll blow her away,” Cutter continued, wanting to find fault with Maggie.

Jake spoke up. “Miz Summer is a bit chubby. We could work out something agreeable, I'm sure.”

“Men!” Ira said to the group. “There'll be no swapping around. You wanted a woman, now you've got one. Maybe we aren't exactly to their liking either. None of us are perfect.”

Alex laughed in a gravelly and hoarse voice. “Hell, you sure know how to deflate a person. I thought I was.”

“Me, too,” Cutter said, smiling. His dark eyes twinkled. “My mama thought I was when I was a little boy.”

Jake looked down at his work-roughened hands. “I pity the woman you marry, Cutter. Your temper reminds me of

an old she-bear with a sore tail.” He looked up and winked at the other men.

“Just you never mind about my temper. You better be grateful I haven’t poked you one before now.” He shoved back his chair and stood. “Good night, gentlemen, and I use the term loosely.” He hurried out.

He had no intention of discussing his personal life with these men. They all wanted a woman to share their bed, a woman to love. He didn’t need or want that, he told himself for the hundredth time. Anna Marie’s death was too new, too raw, and he still blamed himself. If only he hadn’t...

By damn, he wasn’t going to go into that again. Being without a woman for a while was what made him see-saw. He was human—he did need a woman very much. He felt like kicking himself because he got so hard just looking at Maggie.

Cutter figured he’d have to tell Maggie about his feelings tomorrow, and she just might go back to Baltimore. He would still be without a mother for Melody Ann. Would he be tricking her if he waited until after the wedding? Cutter decided he would take that chance. He turned over and slammed his fist into his pillow.

He was not going to get emotionally involved with a woman again, not even if she did have eyes like summer sky and a voice that brushed his nerves like a lover’s caress.

### Chapter 3

The next afternoon Cutter walked off the bunkhouse porch to meet Alex Murray, Jake, and Ira. "Afternoon, fellows. What brings you out? I figured you'd be courting your women."

They stepped down from their horses, and looped the reins over the hitching rail.

Alex grinned. "You asking us in for a cup of coffee?"

"Might as well. Come on to the house. I'll have to make it. Haven't been home long myself."

Jake fell in with Cutter. "Figured as much. Miz Cromwell said you took Miz Ryan for a picnic. You two getting along all right?"

Cutter opened the back door ushered the men into the kitchen. "As well as can be expected, I guess. She was sure surprised about marriage. Said it wasn't in the ad. How could you have left out an important thing like that? She doesn't know the first thing about ranch life and how busy I'll be."

The men pulled out chairs and sat down around the big oak table in the dining room. Cutter filled the coffeepot with water, added the coffee, and built a fire in the stove.

"Sure had some explaining to do, but most of them appear to be relieved," Ira explained.

“Now, what did you really have on your minds? I know you didn't ride out here to pass the time of day.” Cutter's gaze swept over each man.

Ira raised his hand for quiet. “We like our women, and we're ready to go ahead with our wedding,” Ira said. “You want to join us?”

“Miz Ryan and I have already made plans. We'll just have a simple ceremony. I talked to the minister already.”

Ira spoke up again. “Thought maybe we could be moral support for each other.”

“I've made a commitment to this, gentlemen. Would you be getting cold feet?” He smiled and winked at Alex.

“Not me,” Jake quickly replied. “Miz Summer appears to be a fine girl.”

The coffee boiled. Cutter poured each man a cup and sat back down.

Ira cleared his throat. “Since we're planning to be married Tuesday night, didn't know how you felt about leaving Miz Ryan at the hotel by herself.”

Cutter set down his cup. “Everybody getting married Tuesday night?” They nodded. “That's odd. How did you come up with that?”

“We all got together for lunch and agreed. Wondered where you were.” Alex said.

Briefly wondering why he was being the odd-ball, Cutter laughed. “You all trying to tell me something?”

A small chuckle escaped from Ira. “No, we had a few drinks and decided last night. You hurried off to bed and went to church this morning. Couldn't see any reason to pay a hotel bill for a week, when we can get on with this.”

“Miz Ryan and I had a nice talk and a picnic. Thanks a lot, fellows, for remembering me in your plans.”

Alex got up and looked out the window onto the patio. "You're invited anytime you want, but we're ready to take us a wife, not just a sitter. We want flesh and blood women in our beds."

Cutter choked on his coffee, and turned his chair over getting up. "And you're saying Miz Ryan isn't flesh and blood, or a woman?"

Ira whacked Cutter on the back. "Take it easy, man! You had her all afternoon to yourself. We figured you had time to find out."

"None of your damned business what I found out! She's my woman, isn't she?"

Annika came in the back door and set down Melody Ann. "The baby wake up. You bring the woman yet?"

"Not yet, Annika."

Annika's eyes were dark and serious. She looked the other men over coldly and turned back to Cutter. "Make it soon. I go visit my daughter and new baby."

Cutter picked up Melody Ann and pulled the blanket from around her shoulders. He kissed her cheek and placed her in the highchair.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie had a long talk with herself. *Don't get your hopes up. This man is looking for a mother for his baby. Maybe someday I'll have a baby. He only needs a housekeeper* . Even though he hadn't said as much, she suspected he wasn't over his wife yet and didn't think he needed a woman's loving touch.

She hated to think of the dismal years ahead, if she couldn't have love to brighten her life. She had so much to give, and she would hate to go through her days with such a capacity to love and no one special to give that love. Maggie knew she sorely needed to be cherished. Hoping with all

her heart that Cutter McCallister was a kindly man, Maggie faced a new day.

Two more days and her name would be changed. Her whole life would be different. At least she didn't have to outrun or outsmart the lecherous old Judge and listen to his ailing wife talk about her problems.

Wyoming was a big, wild place. She vowed she would find out as much as she could about the territory. It was a fresh and growing community with many new places of business.

When Beth stirred in her bed, Maggie turned from the window. "Sorry I was asleep last night when you came in. Did you get to know Alex better? What is he like?"

"He's all right. We're all getting married Tuesday night at seven o'clock. Are you and this McCallister going to join us?"

"Oh...no, we didn't know about it. We've made our own plans. Won't a mass marriage be kind of impersonal?" Maggie smoothed down her blue-checked gingham dress and sat on the nearest chair, watching Beth wash her face, then arrange her hair.

She peered at Maggie. "A wedding is a wedding. I wish I'd had time to look for a fitting wedding dress."

"We can still look. I'm going to spend the last cent I have on a dress. I figure I'll only have one marriage and I would like to look decent. Why is everyone rushing into marriage? I thought we had a week here."

"Alex suggested it. I kind of have the feeling he's tight with his money." Beth pushed her mouth into a pout, and then stuck out her tongue at herself while looking into the mirror.

"Are you having second thoughts, Beth? You don't sound like a new bride should."

Beth adjusted her blouse and looked at herself again. "What's to get excited about? I hardly know the man, and I figure he'll be as good as the rest. We'll just have to see, won't we?"

Maggie came to her feet and reached for her shawl. "Are we meeting the others for breakfast? You know I'm not much of a mixer, Beth."

"No, we didn't decide on that. Some may be sleeping late. Are you ready? I'm starving."

Maggie nodded and reached for the doorknob, not exactly understanding Beth's lack of enthusiasm. Something must have happened.

"I think I like Cutter McCallister," Maggie said. "He was polite and interesting. He drove me out toward his ranch, and it's a lovely place. I guess I'll be the only one living in the country."

They walked down the stairway before Beth answered. "I hope this is right, Maggie. I sure have butterflies in my stomach. One little kiss last night didn't exactly make me melt."

Maggie stopped with her mouth open. "What did you expect? At least you won't be working your fingers to the bone for some high-faluting family. You'll be your own boss and have your own home, won't you?"

"Alex said he's still renting rooms. We'll have to find something else. Summer and Josie will be living above the stores. I don't know about the others."

\* \* \* \*

After going from store to store, Maggie found the dress she wanted, a peach moire taffeta, trimmed at the heart-shaped neckline and sleeves with ecru lace. Also, she bought two pieces of material, and had two dollars left in

her purse. She hoped no other expenses came up before the wedding.

She and Beth walked from one end of town to the other, taking in all the sights. From across the street, they studied the First National Bank where Alex worked, the newest building in town. As they walked back to the hotel, Maggie wondered why her friend was so subdued.

Inside their room, Maggie held her dress up and admired herself in the mirror. Would her mother have approved of this wedding and her dress? Had she wanted love and happiness for her only child?

Beth flopped onto the bed.

"All right, Beth. What is it? I know something is bothering you."

"I'm scared to death. This feels like going to a hangman's noose instead of to a wedding. What if I don't please him? Will he send me back?"

Maggie laid her dress aside, walked to the bed, and sat down, her hand on Beth's shoulder. "Have you talked to Alex about any of this?"

"We never had a moment alone. Everyone else was around."

"Then I'm glad Mister McCallister and I went by ourselves. We did get to talk a bit. I'm sure Alex will be patient with you and give you time. How do you feel when he touches your hand?"

Beth sighed heavily. "I didn't feel anything. That's why I'm so scared. What if I can't tolerate the man? This is a long way from nowhere."

Maggie hugged her friend. "Hey, you've always been there for me, given me a shoulder to lean on. Now, maybe it's my turn. I'll always be your friend, but I have a feeling you and Alex are going to be wonderful together. Now,

show me your dress. I want to see how beautiful you'll look."

Beth smiled and hugged Maggie quickly. "I'm so glad you're here, Maggie. I'd be lost without you."

"Then let's make up our minds, we're going to make the best of this. We're going to love these men like they've never been loved before." Maggie closed her eyes for just a moment, hoping she could live up to those words.

\* \* \* \*

Tuesday, Maggie spent most of the day trying to keep up Beth's spirits. But her own enthusiasm was beginning to falter. She was glad when they finally walked to the church and the ceremony got under way. Beth was a beautiful bride, and maybe she didn't have stars in her eyes, but her dress far outshone the others. Her mouth curved into a smile. Alex could hardly keep his eyes off her.

When Maggie walked back to the hotel, she thought of her own wedding for the next night. Who would be there to help her get through her wedding, to bolster her spirits? She would soon know what it was all about as the other girls were finding out tonight. Maggie had declined on going to dinner with them, wanting this time to herself.

Upon reaching her room, she was surprised to see a bouquet of pale peach roses in a vase on the dresser. She walked toward them slowly, wondering if someone had made a mistake. She had never received flowers in her life.

She picked up the small card and read:

*Just so you won't feel so left out, Maggie. I hope you don't mind. I prefer the way we're doing it, a small ceremony. Cutter McCallister.*

Maggie smiled. So did she. The ceremony tonight had

appeared to be mass confusion. The minister even had mixed up some of the names. She inhaled deeply of the delicate scent of the roses. They were lovely and would be perfect with her dress. She would fashion a bouquet from them to carry for her wedding.

Later, when she slid into bed, Maggie was still smiling. She bet she was the only one of the twenty who had received roses. She might be the only one of the group who was going to a nice home. And she knew she was the only one with a ready-made family. God, how she hoped she wouldn't disappoint this man.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter retied his string tie three times. He couldn't believe he was so nervous. He'd been nervous all day. Hadn't he nearly cut his foot splitting kindling for the stove? Just missed his toes by a mere fraction of an inch, all because his mind was on tonight. Then he'd gotten tangled up in the barbed wire, and Shorty and Rusty had to come to his rescue. He'd finally given up and gone to the house, knowing he wasn't likely to do anything right.

*It wouldn't hurt to get to town a little early,* he told himself. He would have time for a stiff drink and to calm down before the wedding.

Still not understanding his nervous state, Cutter whipped the horse into a trot, making the dust boil up behind him. It wasn't even five o'clock when he arrived. Leaving the mare and buggy in front of the hotel, Cutter started up the boardwalk, telling himself he would walk off some of his agitation, then have a quick drink.

He found himself in front of a jewelry store staring at the display. Hell, he'd forgotten. Every woman ought to have a ring, he reasoned. Sauntering inside, Cutter asked to see the wedding rings. The clerk set a tray in front of him.

Then it hit Cutter: he didn't know her size or what Maggie would prefer.

Scanning the rings carefully, Cutter finally selected one, a wide gold band with three rubies in it. "I'll take this one in the smallest size you have. She's a tiny woman."

The clerk studied Cutter carefully, then asked, "Why weren't you in the ceremony with the others last night? Made quite a stir, I understand."

"Don't like doing things that way. This is probably the most important step I'll take in a long time. I'd like it to have a little meaning, not a circus."

"Guess there was a crowd and the minister got the names all mixed up. My wife said it was quite hilarious. Oh, if the ring doesn't fit, just bring it right back and we'll take care of it. I bet your bride will like this one." He picked up the money Cutter lay on the counter and shoved it into the till. He carefully placed the ring in a small box and handed it to Cutter.

"Much obliged. See you." Cutter waved and turned toward the door.

"Good luck to you and the missus," the clerk called after him.

Cutter glanced at his pocket watch and hurried back to the hotel. He still had time for that drink, but somehow he wasn't quite so nervous now.

"Whiskey, straight!" he told the bartender.

"Coming up. You should have seen the men last night. Quite an event, I hear. Did you ever see eighteen or nineteen couples all get married at the same time?"

Cutter frowned and took a swallow of his drink. "No, and don't reckon I ever will."

“Must have been something. Everyone in town’s talking about it today. I hope they wound up married to the right woman,” the bartender said, smiling big.

“So do I,” Cutter replied, and downed the last of his whiskey. Now, more than ever, he was glad he and Maggie hadn’t been in the group. He didn’t want everyone in town laughing and talking about them. Still intent on being the best rancher in the territory and a well-respected man, he smiled to himself. Marriage wasn’t something to be mocked.

Cutter hoped this worked out for his friends, and that they had sense enough to get to know the women they married. Drawing a deep breath, he started up the stairs to find Maggie Ryan. It was time.

With shaking hands, Cutter knocked on the door. He hoped she was ready.

He raised his hand to knock again when the door opened. “Come in. Will we take my valises now?”

Catching his breath quickly, Cutter held onto the door. “You’re lovely, Miz Ryan. We’ll pick that up later. Shall we come back here for dinner?”

Maggie met his gaze, her eyes softening. “Yes, if you like. I’m trying not to be nervous, and thanks for the lovely roses. I made them into a bouquet to carry tonight.”

“Good. Better get a wrap of some kind.” He wanted to touch her, but he didn’t dare. He knew he wouldn’t want to stop with a mere touch.

Maggie wrapped a cream-colored woolen shawl around her shoulders and picked up her bouquet. “I’m ready.”

She tried not to stare at him, but she loved his hair. His dark hair was combed to perfection, and he twirled his deep chestnut Stetson in his hands. He wore deep brown cord trousers, a cream colored shirt, and a tan and brown tweed

jacket. He was the most handsome man she had ever known, but she also saw strength and compassion in his eyes. A tingle of awareness raced down her backbone.

Cutter offered his arm to Maggie, and they walked down the stairs side by side. Several people in the lobby looked up at them and smiled.

Quiet as they rode to the church, Cutter helped Maggie from the buggy. They walked inside to find the minister waiting.

“Evening, folks. This must be the lovely bride, huh? Good to meet you.” He smiled and shook hands with both of them. “Shall we begin?”

A woman sat at the piano and played a few chords, then all was quiet. Maggie didn't look at Cutter, but stared straight ahead, holding tightly to the roses. Her lower lip trembled and she clamped down on it with her teeth. She couldn't believe this was happening to her. She'd waited all her life for a good man, love, and happiness. Well, she thought she had the good man, but love and happiness she questioned.

Finally the words of the minister registered with her. “Do you, Maggie Ryan, take this man to be your lawful wedded husband, to love and to honor, in sickness and in health until you both shall...”

“I do,” Maggie murmured.

“Do you, Cutter McCallister, take this woman to be your lawful...”

Cutter stared straight ahead, not hearing one word. This couldn't be him standing here with a complete stranger, a damned Yankee at that. Hadn't he fought and killed them in the War Between the States? He didn't have any good feelings about the North. They had ruined many

good families. He wanted to run, then Melody Ann's crying face flashed before him.

"Mr. McCallister...do you take this woman to be your lawful wedded wife?" the minister asked again.

"Oh...yes, I do."

"Then, what God hath joined together, let no man put asunder. I pronounce..."

"I have the ring," Cutter fished into his jacket and brought it out.

"Place it on her finger, and repeat after me. 'With this ring, I thee wed...'"

With his head in a whirl, Cutter placed the ring on Maggie's finger and repeated after the minister.

Vaguely he heard, "I pronounce you man and wife. Mr. McCallister, you may kiss your bride."

Suddenly Cutter couldn't breathe. What had he done? *Good God, what had he done?* The vision of Maggie's red hair and gold-flecked eyes swam in front of him. He shook himself, closed his eyes and met her lips for the expected kiss.

His hands closed on her slender shoulders, bringing her in closer, and he found himself deepening the kiss. Heat slammed into his body and he wanted to devour the tiny woman in his arms. She tasted of mint, and a scent of lilacs overwhelmed him.

The minister cleared his throat, bringing Cutter back to reality. "Congratulations, Mr. and Miz McCallister." He shook hands warmly with both of them.

"Thank you." Cutter passed him a bill, and turned to Maggie. "Ready to go eat?" he asked, hoping to cover his nervousness.

\* \* \* \*

The moon hung in a silver orb, bathing the world in pale light when Cutter helped Maggie into the buggy some two hours later. Somehow eight couples had found out about the wedding and showed up at the hotel for well wishes and a shower of rice when Cutter and Maggie walked out.

Maggie brushed rice out of her hair, clasped her shawl around her tighter, and sighed.

"Are you tired?" Cutter asked, glancing at her. He had to tell her they wouldn't be sharing a room, or bed. Maybe he was crazy, but that's the way it had to be. She was lovely, all woman. He still had strong feelings about his brothers who were killed in that damned War Between the States.

"Maybe it's the excitement. I'll be fine."

He reached for her gloved hand and folded it into his big hand. "Maggie, we won't be sharing a room as a married couple. I want us to get to know each other, but I've no desire for a wife in the usual sense of the word."

Maggie looked up at him, tears rimming her eyes. Another rejection. Anger boiled up in her. "Why did you lie to me, make me believe I could expect love and a husband?"

Cutter dropped her hand like it was a hot potato, and looked out across the prairie, bathed in the soft light of the moon. "I didn't lie to you. I've never said I wanted a wife in the biblical sense. I still can't come to terms with the death..."

Maggie was heedless of the tears rolling down her cheeks, but she wiped at them impatiently. "You have deceived me, and made me the laughing stock of the country. I can't forgive you for this, Cutter McCallister!"

*Cutter's Woman*

“Hey, it isn’t the end of the world! You’ll have a home, plenty to eat, and all the clothes you’ll need. You won’t want for anything, Maggie.”

“I could just as easily have been hired as the maid and caretaker of the baby. Why go through the farce of a marriage?”

Cutter didn’t like the tone of her voice, but he couldn’t say as he blamed her. “I got hood-winked into it, all right? Ace put my name on that list.”

## Chapter 4

Maggie was quiet for a long time, her face burning with humiliation and embarrassment. She gave the situation a lot of thought. She couldn't go back to Baltimore...she had nowhere to go. Beth was here and supposedly had made a good choice. At least they'd been holding hands tonight. She wanted to be close to her only friend. Maggie couldn't tell the girls about this latest development. They would all pity her, or make fun of her.

"All right, Mister McCallister, I'll be the maid and take care of the baby. My terms will be met and respect shown. I was making twelve dollars a month, room and board in Baltimore. I'll expect fifteen dollars a month from you since I'll have to do the cooking, too. I'll also have the option of leaving with my fare paid back to Baltimore if I don't like this."

"Now, whoa there, woman!" He pulled the buckboard to a stop and glared at her. "I married you, didn't I? I expect some..."

"Then you'll treat me as a cherished and loved wife, not the scullery maid, sir." She was astonished at herself. Never had she been able to speak up for her rights.

Cutter clamped his mouth shut and slapped the reins down hard on the horse's back. She wanted to play tough,

did she? He'd show her a thing or two. It was his house, his ranch.

They rode into the ranch yard in utter silence, Maggie hardly enjoying the beauty of the place in the moonlight. Cutter held out his hand to help her from the buggy, but she ignored him. They walked across the front porch and into the lamp-lit sitting room.

Annika came out of a chair close to the fireplace, and scrutinized Maggie closely. "Why did you pick such a skinny one? Not big enough to do hard work or have baby," she said, squinting at Cutter. "Melody asleep. I go now."

Cutter swore under his breath, but tried to appear unruffled. "Thank you, Annika." Cutter picked up Maggie's valise and started down the hall.

Maggie could only follow, clenching her teeth to keep from crying.

Cutter set the valise on a chest at the foot of the bed and turned to Maggie. "I hope this will be satisfactory. If not, we'll make other arrangements tomorrow after you've had a chance to see the rest of the house. Goodnight. Tomorrow is a working day."

He hurried to the door and closed it quietly behind him, not waiting to hear her answer or wanting to see the disappointment, possibly hurt and disgust, in her eyes. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he take her to his bed? Guilt rode his shoulders like a red-hot branding iron.

Cutter didn't want the entanglements of marriage, being responsible for someone else and her well being. A marriage of convenience was fine with him. He had enough problems as it was with Ace ailing.

Looking in on Melody Ann, Cutter bent and kissed her cheek. He blew out the light, and marched into his room. Hanging up his coat, he stripped off his tie, and unbuttoned

his shirt collar and sleeves, turning the cuffs back. Cutter got a drink of water from the kitchen, and came back to the parlor, staring out the big front window.

The moon illuminated the tall silver spruce and lodgepole pine trees surrounding the house. A log crackled in the fireplace behind him, and he involuntarily jerked his shoulder.

Had he been fair with Maggie? He should have told her before the marriage ceremony. What would she have done? She couldn't very well go back to Baltimore. He doubted she had the money. Why was he being different than the other men? He bet they'd hardly waited to get their wedding ceremonies over before they took their women to bed.

Long after he went to bed, Maggie's seeming disappointment kept creeping into his mind. He knew the feeling of expecting more.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie threw the bouquet of roses at the door and stamped her foot. She would not be relegated to her room like a naughty ten-year-old child. She had some rights, didn't she?

She couldn't understand why Cutter McCallister had gone through with the wedding ceremony, even given her a ring, if it was all a farce. What was wrong with the man? Maybe he wasn't capable of making love to a woman anymore. Could he have had an accident? Been gored by a steer or bucked off a wild horse? All kinds of things flashed through Maggie's mind. She could understand why he couldn't tell her that it would be too embarrassing.

Well, here she was. She would have to make the best of the situation. Maggie undressed, hung her wedding dress

in the closet, then took the pins out of her hair and brushed it out.

Pulling on her long-sleeved white lawn gown, lavishly trimmed in lace and blue ribbons, Maggie belted her wrapper around her body. She wasn't tired or ready for bed.

Since it was her habit to be up early, and she figured she would be expected to fix breakfast, she picked up the lamp and crept out of the room. She was careful not to bump anything. Maggie looked the large parlor over, liking the rustic settee with blue leather cushions and back. Lamps with blue flowers on the bases adorned two big wooden tables. The tops of the tables were smooth and free of dust. Even the drapes were gunmetal blue, matching the settee and chairs. A braided rug with predominant colors of blue, black, and white centered the plank flooring. Maggie liked the room. It was comfortable and homey.

Maggie went on into the dining room to see a matching blue braided rug. Again the rustic wooden table and chairs, but the chairs had woven fiber seats and backs. A long sideboard nestled against one wall. Lamp and black metal sculptures were on the natural pine sideboard. In the corner, a glass-doored cabinet hugged the wall. Beautiful dishes and glasses adorned the top shelves, but the bottom doors were closed and made of wood to match the sideboard.

Tall glass doors opened out onto what she thought must be a patio. Three woven placemats were on the round dining table, along with silver candleholders, holding blue candles.

Maggie tiptoed into the kitchen. A smaller oblong table and four chairs sat in the middle of the room. There were cabinets along one wall with a pitcher pump and sink. More

cabinets and a cooking stove were along another wall. She opened a door into a pantry where pots and pans hung on the wall, bags of beans, rice and potatoes sat on the floor. Boxes of oatmeal, bran, brown sugar, and flour sat on the shelves along with jars of various vegetables and fruits.

“Well, they’re well stocked,” she said, backing out of the pantry and right into a hard body. Feeling hands grab her, she screamed and nearly dropped the lamp.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Cutter growled, releasing her arms quickly.

“Since I’ll be up early cooking *your* breakfast, I needed to know where everything was.” She caught her breath when she saw his naked chest covered with springy, sable brown curls tapering into a vee into low-riding denim pants. His dark hair was disturbed and sticking out in puffs like he had run his fingers through it.

“You could have asked where things were. I damned near shot you.”

“Mister McCallister, I’ll not be treated like I’m ten years old and sent to my room! *If* I’m going to live in this house, I *will have* free rein of the house. Who orders the food stuffs, does the planning?” she asked, backing away from him. His near naked state was too much.

“Annika has been. We grow some vegetables and butcher our own meat. Why aren’t you in bed? Wasn’t the bed satisfactory?”

“It wasn’t exactly what I expected on my wedding night. Haven’t tried the bed and I wasn’t sleepy. Go on about your business. I’ll try not to burn the house down.” She turned her back on him and ambled over to the back door to look out on the back porch.

“There’ll be plenty of time for looking around tomorrow. You need to get some rest.”

“How do you know what I need, Cutter McCallister? I’ve been taking care of myself close to twenty-five years. I think I can manage without you looking over my shoulder.” She glanced back at the big man, who still stood with one hand on the back of a chair watching her. A strange light appeared in his eyes, and his features softened for just a minute.

“Very well! Good night, Maggie.” He turned to go, but her next words stopped him.

“Miz Ryan to you!”

Cutter stubbed his toe against a chair in the darkened dining room and swore under his breath. This damned woman would be the death of him.

\* \* \* \*

He awakened to the aroma of coffee, the sizzling of bacon, and anticipation swept through him. Why was Annika cooking breakfast? Had she changed her mind? Then the woman in the kitchen came back to him. It was Maggie Ryan, his wife. No, he couldn’t admit she was his wife. That would never do.

Cutter dressed quickly in his well-washed and worn denim pants, a blue chambray shirt, socks, and boots. He strapped on his gunbelt, then looked in on Melody. She was still asleep and he marveled at how good she was. But she was a sad and serious child. She needed more love and laughter in her life.

Pulling out a chair, Maggie straightened from the stove and met Cutter’s dark gaze. His whiskers showed just enough to give him a more manly aura and he looked frustrated over the circumstances.

“Coffee would be nice,” he said, his gaze not leaving her pink cheeks or beautiful red hair pulled back into a clasp. He liked it better loose and around her face more.

"Yes, sir!" She poured coffee and set the cup in front of him, followed by platters of bacon, eggs, biscuits, and a jar of strawberry jam.

"Where's the butter?" he asked, looking over the table.

"How would I know? No one..." She hesitated, and then softened her voice. "No one told me anything."

He raised his gaze to sweep over her, where she still stood by the cabinets.

"I see. It's like that, is it?"

"I believe it is, Mr. McCallister. I'll try to locate things today. Will you be here for lunch?"

"No. Pedro sends lunch out usually. Aren't you going to sit down and eat?"

"Am I allowed? I thought I was the hired help. They usually eat last."

He laid his biscuit on his plate. "Maggie, dammit... Why are you doing this?"

"I don't like to be deceived, sir, but I believe I have it figured out. You aren't capable of making love anymore. Was it an accident?" She turned toward the dining room. "I'll be dusting the dining room if you need anything further."

"Woman, that can wait, and you have lost your mind. Who told you such rubbish? Eat while the food is hot, Maggie!"

Maggie sat down, flushing under his scrutiny. She purposely ignored his outburst, yet he hadn't denied it.

"I hope the baby wakes up before I leave. I want to see how you two take to each other."

"I'm sure I can handle a small child. I've taken care of many children at the orphanage."

He was going to scream if she mentioned the damned orphanage one more time. A small cry came from down the hall.

“Da...ddy?”

“I’m coming, kitten.” He came to his feet, colliding with Maggie when she rushed around the table to go to the child. “I’ll get her. She’s probably wet and needs changing.”

“Then let me. Finish your breakfast. I can eat later.”

Shock tremors raced up his arms, and he looked down to see he still held her shoulders. “Sorry,” he murmured, and stomped on down the hall.

Maggie sat down, not knowing what to expect next. She looked up when Cutter returned carrying the child. Her dark eyes were bright and inquisitive. Cutter placed her in her high chair and pulled it up to the table.

“My daughter, Melody Ann, Miz Ryan. Melody, this is Maggie.”

Maggie clasped the little girl’s hands, saying, “Hello there. Are you hungry?”

Melody looked at her daddy, then back to Maggie. She puckered her face and started crying.

“She’s not awake yet.” He lifted her from her chair onto his lap and gave her a piece of biscuit with jam on it.

“Shouldn’t she have milk, or maybe some oatmeal?”

“Both would be fine. In time she’ll get to know you. She’s kind of shy,” Cutter explained as Maggie sat down. It was an ordeal to get through the meal. She felt overpowered and overwhelmed by the big man.

Finally Cutter finished eating, placed Melody back in her high chair and turned to go. “Annika will be coming in to do the wash and cleaning. Ask her to show you where things are. Bundle Melody up if you take her outside, though.”

"Yes, sir!" she answered, her voice more sarcastic than she liked. She had sense enough to know that. A strong and nippy wind rattled the branches on the big trees.

"I hope you and Melody get along all right." He lifted a battered hat from the pegs on the wall by the back door, and re-created the top.

"We'll be fine," Maggie assured him, wishing he would go. He gave her too many problems already in those trim-fitting pants over his lean hips and waist. She could hardly breathe.

"Then I'll see you tonight, I guess. I try to get home by six." He slapped his hat on his head and hastened out.

"Lord have mercy!" he said under his breath. It would be pure hell living in the same house with this woman, seeing her night and morning. Watching the plain calico dress pull across her full breasts had nearly undone him, and she thought he couldn't perform the sexual act. Where had she come up with that?

\* \* \* \*

Maggie slumped into her chair, then raised her gaze to the baby. "Hello, Melody. You're a beautiful child. Want some milk to drink?" Maggie remembered she didn't know where the milk was either.

She lifted Melody from her chair and set her on the floor, reaching for her hand. "Let's explore, honey. I know of only one way to find things around here. I'll have to look for them myself."

Adjusting her steps to the baby's, they walked to the closed-in back porch. There Maggie found a safe that held butter, two hams, and bacon. A cooler held milk and more butter. She brought a pitcher of milk back to the table. Should she warm it a bit for the baby? Maggie skimmed the

cream off and put it in a bowl, then poured a small amount of milk in a pan, and put it on the stove.

When she turned around, Melody Ann dragged a knife off the cabinet and it hit the floor close to her feet. Melody Ann sat down and began to cry.

Maggie picked up the baby and held her tight, soothing her. "It's all right, sweetie. You weren't hurt. I can see right now, though, I'm gonna have my hands full. You like to be into things."

Singing a little song, Maggie whirled around and around. She was startled when she looked toward the door. A big, shaggy-haired man with ruddy cheeks stood there, a dark-skinned Indian behind him. "Lord have mercy!"

She breathed heavily and clutched the baby tighter.

"Sorry, ma'am. Didn't mean to startle you. Cutter around?" He smiled and held out his hands to Melody Ann. "Come to your old uncle, sweet thing."

"He's gone already. Cutter said he'd be back around six." Reluctantly she released the baby to him.

"Well now, you must be the new bride. Pretty little thing, ain't she, West? We'll have some coffee if you don't mind, Miz McCallister."

"The name is Maggie Ryan. Sir, who are you?" Maggie watched him settle into a chair with the baby in his arms. He kissed Melody Ann's soft hair, and then tickled her under the chin.

"I'm Ace, Cutter's brother-in-law. I thought you and Cutter got married? What happened?"

The Indian man took a seat across from him and Maggie shrunk further away. She had never been this close to Indian people. She reached for cups and poured coffee for them, cautiously setting them on the table.

“We got married all right,” Maggie answered. “It appears I’m just to be the baby’s nurse, I guess.”

Ace took a long drink of the hot coffee and smiled at Maggie. “Just you never mind Cutter, ma’am. He’s got a lot to learn about women and life. He thinks he’s doing the right thing by my sister’s memory, but he’ll wake up one of these days.”

Maggie’s hands fluttered nervously across the front of her dress, hoping all the buttons were fastened properly. “Are you the man who is sick? I thought Cutter said...”

“I’m still ailing. Doctor won’t let me do much yet. I can carry a little wood in now and then, make a general nuisance of myself. This is West, Annika’s husband. She’ll be along shortly to help you with the cooking and cleaning. She’s been taking care of my pretty baby here.” He looked down at Melody Ann, who played with the chain of his pocket watch.

“She’s a sweet baby. We’ll get along all right. This country is sure different from Baltimore. We have hills and lots of trees there.”

“Yes ma’am, so I’ve heard. This is more like the flat lands of Texas where Cutter and I grew up. Thanks for the coffee.” He set the baby on the floor and stood. “If you need anything, just yell toward the bunkhouse.”

Suddenly Maggie’s temper got the better of her. She resented Cutter for leaving her here on her own. He could have taken the time to show her around, made her acquainted with the people she’d come in contact with. “I don’t know about Cutter McCallister,” she said.

## Chapter 5

Before anything else happened, Maggie picked up Melody Ann and started through the house. "We're going to explore, pretty baby. Then I'll know where everything is."

She had seen the parlor and dining room, but they looked even better in daylight. A layer of dust covered the mantel and Maggie told herself that would be taken care of immediately. The big window outlined a few pine trees, and a jewel-like lake sparkled in the sun. "Oh my, that's beautiful," she murmured.

Walking on down the hall, she looked into a room. "Uh-huh, this is Melody's room." She looked around with interest at the white eyelet curtains, a low chest with a teddy-bear and a rag doll propped up on it. "You want your baby?" Maggie asked, reaching for the doll.

"No! No!" came from the hall. Maggie looked around quickly. Annika stood there, frowning. "That is Miz Anna Marie's baby. She can't play with it."

"I'm Maggie." She drew in a long breath, then continued, "Oh...I see. Does she have any toys?" Maggie asked, a feeling of helplessness washing over her. Would she be told, too, not to touch anything that belonged to the former Miz McCallister?

"Toys in bottom drawer. I'll get her diapers and dirty clothes. Did you give baby the bath?"

"I haven't been told anything, Annika. Maybe you would be kind enough to explain everything to me."

"Yes. Mr. Cutter fixes his breakfast. I come in when he leaves, give the baby bath and breakfast. Then I clean house, wash, and cook supper. Sometime I walk down to a little lake and show Melody the ducks."

"Mr. McCallister said I could do the cooking if it was all right with you, and I'll take care of the baby from now on. You can still clean and do the wash."

Annika drew her mouth into a straight line, unsmiling, and appeared not to like the situation. "Then who will clean and wash clothes when I see my daughter? She has new baby. They need me."

"I understand. I guess I'll have to do that, too. How long will you be gone, Annika?"

"I stay long as daughter need me. I told Mr. Cutter I go."

"Yes, I know. Don't worry about it. When are you leaving?"

"I go Saturday, but maybe you have to eat whole lot to be strong enough to take care of this house, the baby, and that big man, Cutter. He's a wild man, West says."

"Wild man? I don't understand. He appeared to be quite civilized to me."

"You haven't seen him when he's mean and drunk."

"Oh, God!" She held the child tighter, tears coming to her eyes. What had she gotten into? "How often does he do this?"

"Just when Miz McCallister die. He's loud and crazy."

“Thank you, Annika. I’ll be careful that he doesn’t get mad at me, and I’m afraid I won’t ever be any bigger. I’ve always been small, but I’m strong. You’ll see.”

Annika took the dirty clothes and left.

Maggie opened the bottom drawer of the chest and looked to see what kind of toys Melody Ann had. There wasn’t much—a set of wooden blocks, a bedraggled and chewed-on teddy bear missing one ear, and a string of big wooden beads. Maggie decided her first priority was to make a rag doll for Melody Ann. She gave the string of beads to the little girl and came back out into the hall.

An open door beckoned to her, and she looked. It was evidently Cutter’s room. The boots he had worn last night sat on the floor next to a chair. She could see jackets, shirts, and pants hanging in the closet.

It should have been her room. That should have been her bed. The marriage bed. Tears glistened in her eyes.

The big bed was unmade and that stopped Maggie. She had always been taught to make beds. Was she supposed to take care of his bed? She guessed she could do that, and set Melody Ann on the braided rug. Maggie fluffed the pillow, beat on the mattress to shift the feathers around to fill the hole where he had lain. She looked up when she heard someone clear his throat.

“Oh, you startled me, Mister McCallister,” she said, fighting her anger again. She climbed off the bed and pulled down her skirt.

“What are you doing in here?” His voice was low and raspy.

“Making your bed. What else?”

“I wish to hell I knew. Annika takes care of my room.”

“She’s starting the wash...”

"I believe you're to look after the baby. Why don't you give her a bath, see about some clean clothes?"

"Yes, sir! I didn't mean..."

"That'll be all, Maggie. I've got to change clothes if you don't mind."

"Oh...yes." Her gaze traveled slowly down his chest, and to the tight denims encasing strong legs and hips, now covered in blood. "Are you hurt?" she asked, blushing furiously. Every fibre in her body tensed. The room was too small for both of them, the air too tense.

Cutter groaned. "I'm taking Shorty to get doctored. Some barbed wire snapped and mangled his leg." He unbuttoned his pants, like no one else was around.

Maggie snatched the child up and left his room in a hurry, needing to escape. She poured warm water in the copper tub in the small room set aside for bathing. She had already used the water closet and marveled at such modern fixtures out here on a ranch. Maybe Cutter McCallister liked the good things.

Bent over the tub, Maggie bathed the baby and began washing her hair when she felt someone behind her.

"Mr. McCallister, I wish you wouldn't sneak up on me. What's wrong?" She noticed the pained expression on his face.

Cutter made an indistinguishable sound. This damned woman was going to be the death of him yet. That little rounded bottom was just too darned enticing. Already he was hard and aching. "I'm going into town. Do you need anything?"

Her anger boiled over, and she snapped, "Yes, a sewing machine! This child needs clothes and toys. She can't wear a gown..."

Cutter whirled and was out the door before Maggie could finish.

“Well, it would be nice to finish a conversation just once,” she said. The man was just too much. Grouchy as an old bear, and evidently she could do nothing to please him. She pictured a lonely life stretching out in front of her. Maggie vowed she would do everything she could for Melody Ann. She was a sweet little thing and couldn't help that her father was such a reprobate.

Long after Maggie had dressed Melody, she had a talk with Annika and thought she knew where everything was. She found a dust cloth and lemon oil and dusted.

Annika came in and saw her dusting the mantel. “No! No! That my job. You cook and take care of baby.”

“Oh! I can't even dust...”

“House not big enough for two womens. I go visit my daughter soon, then you be boss.” She dried her hands on her apron and looked back at Maggie. “You know how to hang clothes?”

“Well certainly. I've done washing and hanging many times.”

“Give baby fresh air and hang up clothes same time. She need coat and hat.”

“I know that, Annika. I've taken care of babies and children most of my life.”

“You're too little to make babies.”

“Thank you. I'm not making babies.” Maggie grabbed Melody's hand and brought her into the kitchen bench under the pegs on the wall for outerwear. “She needs coat and hat,” Maggie mimicked. “So here's your things, darling.”

An electric blue sky, with only a few white clouds racing across it, greeted them. The wind wasn't cold, but a

bit nippy and Maggie wished she'd gotten a sweater for herself. She doggedly hung the clothes, blushing at Cutter's linen drawers. They were nearly sheer and soft to the touch.

She looked down at Melody, ready to put a small rock in her mouth. "No, no, sweetheart! You can look at the pretty rock, but it isn't to eat."

A big, squawking goose came around the smokehouse and headed straight for them. Melody started crying and Maggie dropped the clothes back into the basket. She grabbed Melody Ann. "Shoo! Get away from here!"

That didn't deter the aggravated bird. She took a bite out of Maggie's leg. The bite hurt, but she had to get rid of the determined fowl. Maggie kicked at her, crying out, "Shoo! You have no right..." Maggie became entangled in her skirts and plopped down on her backside with the screaming child in her arms. "Now, see what you've done! Get out of here!" Maggie threw a stick at the irate creature.

"Get away! We don't need you!"

The goose gave one last squawk and ran away. Maggie wanted to cry, too. She hugged Melody tighter, trying to soothe her. "It's all right, honey. She's gone now."

"God, what else can happen?" Maggie asked, settling Melody on the ground and picking a tiny blue flower for her. "Look how pretty. Don't put it in your mouth."

Annika didn't appear to like her, and now the crazy bird was mad at her. Had she invaded private territory? Cutter acted like he was ready to send her back already. Maggie realized she wasn't getting off to a good start.

She was glad when Annika finished and left. Maggie thought about her words—the house wasn't big enough for two women. She put Melody down for her nap and went to the kitchen to see what was available for supper.

Rummaging through the pantry, she looked up when Cutter and West came in, carrying a sewing machine and a big sack.

Maggie stared first at Cutter, then at the machine. "What on earth?"

Cutter frowned and chewed his lip. "Well, don't just stand there! Where do you want this thing? It's heavy."

"Oh, I didn't think...I wasn't serious. Why did you..." She burst into tears, bringing her hands up to her face.

Cutter's deep voice made her jump when he bellowed, "Hell's fire, woman! You said you wanted a machine, so where shall we put it? Open the damned door!"

Maggie opened the door and stood back out of the way. "Put it in my room, but be quiet, please. Melody is sleeping."

"Come and show us where. You aren't big as a mite and can't move it by yourself. We better get it right the first time."

"Yes, sir," Maggie retorted, and followed the men down the hallway to her room. She pointed to a corner by the window. "That's a good place. There'll be plenty of light."

Cutter turned, set the machine down, then opened it, lifting out the head. "Do you know how to use it, Maggie?" His dark gaze raked over her slim figure, her uplifted breasts and her too bright green eyes.

"I've never used one quite like this. The machines we had at the orphanage were older, but I'll learn. Thank you, Mister McCallister."

"That's all right. Where do you want this?" He held up the sack.

"What is it?" Maggie asked, raising her gaze to meet his.

“Material, threads, needles and stuff. Your friend, Beth, helped pick it out. I sent for her while Shorty was getting stitched up.”

Maggie clasped her hands together nervously, eager to see what was in the sack. “Oh my! On the bed, please. I’ll put it away. I hope Shorty is going to be all right. How was Beth?”

“She’s fine. Said she misses you and you’ll have to get together soon. I’ve got to go.” He set the sack on the bed and reluctantly turned to go.

“Is Shorty going to be all right?” she asked again since he hadn’t answered her.

“I think so, but he’ll be laid up for a few days. May mean double duty for me and West.” He looked around, but West was already gone. “How did you get along today?”

Maggie felt the vibrations from him; tension building, and she didn’t know what to do. The room was too small for both of them, and the bed...Lord, how she wished she wasn’t thinking of the bed.

“Annika says the house isn’t big enough for two women. She didn’t want me dusting, but did let me hang clothes. An irate goose attacked Melody and me. She resented me, too. I get the feeling I’m not in the right place.”

He smiled briefly, showing a dimple in his cheek. “Don’t worry about Annika. I’ll talk to her. She’s used to having the run of the house, but she’s leaving soon. I’m sorry about the goose. She is kind of bossy. I’ll see if Ace and Pedro can put her in the pen with the chickens, otherwise she’ll wind up on the table.”

“Do you have any preferences for supper? I looked in the pantry to see what to cook.” She followed him out into the hall and back to the kitchen.

“Anything will be fine. Since I’ve wasted more than half the day in town, I’m not too hungry.” He got a drink of water at the pitcher pump, bringing the handle up and back down. The water shot out of the spout. Cutter set his glass on the cabinet built against the wall.

“We’ll manage something. There seems to be plenty.”

“I’ll see you later.” He hurried out like the demons of hell were after him.

Maggie took three deep breaths to calm herself. She wondered why she was so flustered at being in the same room with the man, and this was only the first day. Cutter took long strides across the yard and around the smokehouse toward the barn. His denim jeans hugged strong thighs and buttocks, his black Stetson hat set at a jaunty angle. He was too handsome for his own good.

She bet every woman in town swooned over Cutter. She could hardly wait to talk to Beth.

Beth...Beth had helped him to buy material and thread. Beth...oh, she didn’t want flirty Beth spending time with Cutter. She raced back through the house to her room, anxious to see what Beth had helped with. He should have left that to her. She knew her needs and wants more than Beth did.

Maggie dumped out the sack on her bed and stared at the array of materials. There were four pieces of calico: a red, blue, yellow and green. Laces in several designs and thread matched every piece of material. Also two pieces of denim, one each of plaid and light blue flannel were in the mix. Then her heart stopped—a gorgeous piece of sapphire blue velvet and a pale green tissue faille caught her eye.

What was Beth thinking? One final piece drew her like a magnet. It was a shimmery, sheer lavender floral lawn. Tears welled in Maggie’s eyes. She had never had such

beautiful pieces of fabric or so many. Her heart burst. How could she ever pay for all of this? The machine alone must have cost over fifty dollars. Would he also bill her for all this material?

She ran her hands lovingly over the pieces of fabric, then put them away in a drawer of the big dresser. Tomorrow she would start making dresses and shirts, maybe a pair of overalls for Melody. The overalls would protect her legs and make her more comfortable when she took her for a ride. She did intend to ride a horse and teach Melody to ride.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter hurried around the smokehouse, needing desperately to get out of the house and away from Maggie Ryan. He couldn't bring himself to think of her as his wife—Maggie McCallister. Wives had privileges and needs. Cutter reaffirmed that he didn't need a wife in that sense, he only needed someone to care for Melody Ann. Already she appeared to be protective of the baby, and that was good.

He was glad it was spring. More than likely there would be another snow or two, but spring snows weren't usually much to bother about. Now with both Ace and Shorty on the ailing list, more work would fall on him. He would have to be out on the range more, checking the cows that were ready to calve.

Wanting to make one last check on the men, he opened the bunkhouse door. "Hello men? You getting settled in, Shorty?"

Shorty was a bow-legged, grizzled cowboy with weathered and bronzed skin, his eyes dark and piercing. "I'm doing all right. Hell of a time to be laid up, though."

“Try not to worry about it. There’ll be plenty of work waiting for you when you’re able to get back to it.” Cutter straddled a chair and turned toward Ace. “You feeling all right this afternoon?”

Ace lay on his bunk, two pillows under his head, his ankles crossed. A colorful red and white blanket covered his body from chest to ankles.

“Don’t have much strength. Can’t do a damned thing.”

“What have you tried to do? You’re supposed to be taking it easy.”

“Just walked to the house to see that pretty little wife of yours. I’m surprised you’re not up there holding her hand. She acted like she was ready to cry this morning. Aren’t you treating her nice?”

“I didn’t marry her to hold her hand, Ace. She’s going to have to figure out a few things for herself. This is a working ranch, and everyone who is able works. She’ll be on her own when Annika leaves.”

“God, Cutter, you’re dense. Why are you acting this way? Don’t you have a heart?”

“I’m not so sure anymore, and if you don’t mind, I’ll handle this my way. You take care of yourself.” He shoved the chair back in place and hurried out the door. There was still work to be done.

Already feelings for Maggie overwhelmed him. He hated to think he could be led around by a pretty face and curvy body.

Cutter stayed out as long as he could, knowing he wasn’t ready to face Maggie, spend another night under the same roof with her. She’d put the baby to bed, then what was he supposed to do? Sit there and twiddle his thumbs, and talk to her? He wasn’t one to talk about his life with women.

*You should have thought of that, you fool! You married her, didn't you?* slammed into his gut.

Washing up on the back porch later, he looked up to see Maggie watching him. "What are you staring at?"

Stripped to his waist, he ran wet fingers through his hair.

"Do you always make those horrible noises?"

He laughed. Did she like looking at him? "I didn't realize they were so horrible. The water was cold."

"Plenty of hot water on the stove," she answered quickly.

"Yes, ma'am. I'll remember that." He was used to coming home to a cold stove. His gaze met hers again. He hadn't realized how pretty her eyes were, now a glittery green in the evening light. Her lips were pink and inviting.

"I fed Melody Ann. She was fussy. Maybe she's cutting teeth. She wants to put everything in her mouth."

"Might be." He hung the towel back on the rack and shrugged into his shirt, buttoning it.

Maggie turned away when she thought he was going to open his trousers and stick in his shirttail. She blushed and set the food on the table.

He followed Maggie, kissed Melody's cheek, and pulled out a chair. "You all right, little girl?" he asked, curling his fingers around his daughter's hand. She laughed and looked up, waving her spoon.

"You're happy, huh? Did you and Maggie get along all right?"

She gurgled and reached for the piece of biscuit on her high chair tray, offering it to her father.

"No, no. You eat it, sweetie. I'm going to eat."

Maggie sat down and passed the food. "We had a nice day, Mister McCallister. She's a delight."

“Yes. Very much like her mother. What did you do?”

“We hung up clothes and got attacked by that crazy goose I told you about. We took a walk out to the garden spot. Will someone be plowing it up soon so it can be planted?”

“West usually does that, but it’s too early yet. We’ll have more snow and cold weather.” His dark sable eyes met hers across the table. “Very good meal, Maggie.” He took a big bite of gravy and biscuits, remembering the many times his family back in Texas had existed on the same fare.

“Maybe I’ll make some oatmeal cookies tomorrow if I can find everything. I looked through the pantry and closets today trying to locate vittles.”

“Didn’t Annika help any? She can be kind of stubborn at times.”

“So I noticed. She questioned everything I tried to do.”

“Do it your way. This is your territory now.” He was careful not to say home. Somehow he couldn’t admit to that yet.

“If I make a big mistake and do things wrong, you’ll have me on the first train back to Baltimore.”

Melody whacked him on the hand with her spoon. “Ouch, you little vixen. Are you trying to get my attention? What’s wrong, sugar?”

She reached for his knife. “No, you don’t. Want part of my potatoes?” He gave her a couple of chunks from his fork.

“Sorry.” He brought his gaze back to Maggie. “What were you saying?”

“It isn’t worth repeating. More coffee, Mister McCallister?”

“Thank you.”

“What do you want me to call myself to Melody? Will I be considered her mother?”



## Chapter 6

Cutter couldn't answer that question. What should Melody call Maggie? He grabbed Melody Ann from her chair and hurried into the parlor.

Left alone with her thoughts and the dirty dishes, Maggie washed the plates and cups, wiped the blue checked tablecloth on the table. She wondered if they ever used the beautiful dining room. A monotone voice drifted through to her. Was Cutter reading to Melody? She had heard him stir the fire and add more logs.

Thinking of joining him, Maggie wanted to put Melody Ann to bed soon. They were having so much of a quiet time, she might listen to them for a while. Would they be comfortable sitting together? Would they find things to talk about? Would he tell her what happened in town with him and Beth?

Drying her hands, Maggie hung up the towel, and turned off the lamp. She adjusted her dress over her breasts, checking that her buttons were all buttoned. The dress was too small and was nearly worn out.

Not knowing what else to do, she crept into the parlor. Her breath caught in her throat when she saw the picture of Cutter, with his young daughter on his lap. He bent toward her dark head, reading her a story about a dog.

Feeling her presence, Cutter looked up. The scent of Maggie's womanliness and lavender came to him. "Come on in, Maggie. We're just finishing our story."

Maggie surveyed the room. The solid oak arms of the chairs, the couch and the tabletops gleamed. She was glad she dusted after Annika left.

Not that she expected Cutter to notice or hand out any compliments, but she wanted to be a good homemaker. Being an orphan, she wanted to belong and be a good mother to Melody Ann, even if Cutter wouldn't let her be a wife.

Maggie walked across the room swinging her hips just a little to get him to notice, and took a seat on the long blue leather couch near him? "Go right ahead," she said, self-consciously feeling his eyes on her.

"All right, Melody, let's finish our story."

His deep voice washed over Maggie, making her shiver. She crossed her arms, running her hands up and down her arms.

"That does it, sweetheart. I think this little girl is ready for bed," he said to the nodding child. He kissed her cheek.

"Oh yes, I'll take her," Maggie said, coming to her feet. Too conscious of the big man, she needed to do something. The furniture and room matched the bigness of him, as did the dining room table and chairs. They were rustic and strong. Then she thought of his big bed, and she flushed again.

Reaching for Melody Ann with her hands, she had dangerous thoughts of touching him. A deep trembling raced through her and she murmured, "I'm sorry."

Maggie hugged the baby and patted her back, but not before she saw the look in Cutter's eyes. What was it? Was he thinking of his wife and wishing she were putting the

baby to bed? Or was it desire? Did he want to take her to his bed? Oh, how she wished.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter watched Maggie walk out of the room with the baby cuddled in her arms. What if...no, he couldn't even think it. He didn't need a woman in his bed and in his heart. He wanted her, but had to keep himself restrained. He let out a long breath—what a problem this was going to be.

He was getting along fine, and he would continue to manage. But her soft voice drifted back to him, and he couldn't understand how much she affected him.

The sweetness of Maggie talking to Melody Ann made him wish for things that couldn't be. He had never had a woman's voice soothe and please him so. Cutter felt her presence before he looked up. "I hope the fabric and sewing machine were satisfactory, Maggie."

Maggie took her seat on the long couch, seeming to be at a loss as to what to do with her hands. "Oh yes, thank you so much. Why did you buy all that?" She met his dark eyes across the expanse of the room.

"Beth seemed to think you would like it. She said you liked to sew, and hoped to have your own dressmaking shop."

"I do, but I'll be indentured for years trying to pay you back. That machine alone must have cost over fifty dollars and the..."

"Indentured! What do you think this is, woman? I didn't ask you to pay for anything."

She shrugged, wondering how she could make him understand. "But I insist, Mister McCallister. I can't accept gifts like this."

“You’re going to be sewing for my daughter, aren’t you? She has been kind of neglected. Already I can see a change in the house.”

“Thank you. I thought you were ready to send me back.”

“No, I haven’t given it any thought. Are you saying you’re ready to go?”

“Oh no! I can see your disappointment, though.”

He crossed his legs nervously, and swore under his breath. “You don’t know what in the dickens you’re talking about. I couldn’t answer you about what Melody Ann is to call you, because I don’t know. Let’s just leave it at that, Maggie, for now, then we’ll see. Okay?” He grabbed a farm and ranch periodical and thumbed through it.

Maggie sat on, feeling more useless all the time. From now on, she would have a sewing basket and buttonholes to make or a garment to hem.

Finally she stood. “It’s been a big day, Mister McCallister. Good night.”

He looked up quickly. “Yes, it’s about time for me to turn in, too. Night, Maggie.”

Cutter stood, blew out the light beside him, and crossed to the other light when Maggie left the room.

He banked the fire. He hoped he could do the same with his fires. He placed the black screen in front of the fireplace. Maggie’s door was slightly past his, and he hesitated briefly, sniffing for her lavender perfume before he grasped the knob to his door. Should he ask her if she needed anything? He wouldn’t and opened his door.

\* \* \* \*

Sometime later Cutter awoke. Something wasn’t right. Maggie stood at his door. A sheen of perspiration broke out on his brow. Had he given her reason to think he expected

her to come to his bed? The brazen little hussy! He lay rigidly on his bed, waiting for it to open. Cutter slept in the raw and he made no excuses for it—just let her come in and find out for herself.

The door remained shut. Cutter stared at it, baffled. He could feel her presence there. Every taut muscle in his body told him that. He sat up, curious as to what was going on. The bed creaked slightly. In the quiet night it sounded as loud as rifle shot.

Was she as sexually frustrated as he was? How could she think they would share a bed? Cutter was ready to give her a blistering remark, his impatience getting the better of him.

He swung out of bed and rubbed a hand over his eyes. Was the fool woman waiting for an invitation? Or did she like to wander around in the middle of the night as she had last night?

Cutter jerked open the door, his fist upraised. “What do you want?”

A cold frosty moon streamed through the bedroom windows, allowing Maggie to see him in all his nudity. She sucked in her breath, her hand going to cover her mouth. She turned away quickly.

“What? What is it?” he asked, grabbing her soft flannel wrapper and jerking her into him.

“The baby...she’s fretting. What should...”

She reached out, touching her hand against his chest.

“Is she sick? I don’t hear...” Warm womanly scents filled the air, and it wrapped around him. Releasing her wrapper, he took her arm.

“What is it, Maggie?” he repeated, his voice low and raspy.

“Her teeth, I think. She’s fretting. Do you have any oil of cloves or something to rub the gums?”

Cutter threw an old robe over his nudity and strode down the hall, through the parlor and dining room, into the kitchen. He lit a lamp and rummaged in the end cupboard. He finally found what he looked for and set it on the table “I’d advise you to spend a few minutes finding where things are, so you won’t have to disturb me in the future.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered, swearing she wasn’t going to look at him again, and she’d be damned if she ever asked him for anything else.

Maggie awkwardly tottered back to the baby’s room. She placed Melody in the bed, then rubbed the oil of cloves over her gums. Maggie covered her with a light blanket and sang a little song to her until she dropped off to sleep again. She did not know when Cutter left the doorway to seek his own bed.

\* \* \* \*

At dawn Cutter crept from his room, guilt laying heavy on him about last night. Maybe he’d been too rough on Maggie, and he had tried to shock her.

Not hearing anything from Melody’s room, he gave a quick peek in the door. Everything looked fine to him in the darkness. He went into the kitchen expecting coffee and breakfast. Maggie was nowhere in sight. Neither had a fire been built or coffee started.

Swearing under his breath, Cutter raked the ashes out of the stove box. Finding several live coals, he added kindling. When that caught, he added wood, filled the coffeepot, and set it on the stove. What was wrong that Maggie wasn’t here to cook breakfast? Impatiently he strode back through the house and not bothering to knock, he burst into her room, ready to give her the time of day.

Maggie wasn't there. Bewildered, he looked around. Had she left during the night? Where the hell was she? He opened Melody Ann's door and peered in. Maggie sat in the rocking chair in the corner with Melody across her shoulder. Both were sound asleep.

"Oh, God!" he croaked. Had she been up most of the night? He guessed he could cook his own breakfast and slowly backed out, loving the angelic view in front of him. He quietly closed the door.

\* \* \* \*

The click of the door woke Maggie. She came instantly awake. No one was there, but she felt Cutter's presence. She laid Melody in her bed and hoped she'd sleep for a while.

She hurriedly washed her face, and brushed her hair. Not bothering to change clothes, she rushed into the kitchen still wearing her soft wrapper and gown.

"I'm sorry. We were awake most of the night. Let me finish your breakfast."

Cutter shook his head, not believing the vision of loveliness in front of him. Her pouting mouth and sleep-filled eyes made him want to grab her and lay her right down on the kitchen floor, bury himself in her softness. "I'll do it. Go get dressed!" he snapped, not intending for his voice to be so derisive.

"Yes, sir! The general has spoken." Tears sprang to her eyes and she turned, hurrying out.

Cutter saw the quick tears, her trembling lips, and he swore under his breath. He had no reason to snap at her. She was trying to take care of his baby. Was she actually afraid he would send her back? He couldn't tell her she was entirely too desirable. He couldn't help if he was a

pushover for a woman's tears. He didn't want to be. But he didn't like to make her unhappy either.

When Maggie returned, Cutter was eating. She poured a cup of coffee, and slumped into a chair.

"You look exhausted. Did you get any sleep?"

"Not much. I'll manage." She couldn't meet his eyes, remembering his nakedness of last night. What a virile and enchanting man he was.

"I had no right to snap at you this morning. I'm glad you're concerned about Melody."

"I believe you warned me about your temper and lack of patience. I hope..."

The back door slammed as West came in, a basket of eggs in one hand, bucket of milk in the other.

"Morning, boss, Miz McCallister." He set the eggs on the countertop and reached for a cloth hanging on a rod.

"Good morning, West. What are you doing?" Maggie asked.

"Straining the milk. Sometimes that ornery cow switches her tail and gets straw and stuff in the milk."

Cutter nodded, set his coffee cup down, and asked, "How's Ace this morning?"

"Didn't get up for breakfast. Shorty is feeling better."

"Good. I'll go check on Ace." He turned to Maggie. "You need anything?"

"Oh, no!" Maggie watched West strain the milk into a big pitcher and put it in the cooler on the porch. That was probably her job and she wanted to learn all she could.

"The wind is colder than blue blazes this morning and looks like snow," West said, setting his hat back on his long black hair.

"I figured as much. I knew this warming spell wouldn't last." Cutter shoved back his chair and stood, looking down

at Maggie again. "Eat something, Maggie, then you'll feel better." He raised his gaze to encompass West. "We better check those cows first thing."

"She sick?" West asked, studying Maggie closely.

"No. She was up most of the night. Melody Ann is cutting teeth."

West nodded and started toward the porch. Cutter grabbed his denim jacket and hat off the coat rack by the back door and followed. He wanted to say something else to Maggie, but what? It seemed unfinished business hung in the air between them.

Maggie closed her eyes, still seeing the handsome man in a red cotton bib front shirt, and denim pants this morning. He was entirely too...too everything. She could hardly keep her hands to herself, but it was evident he wanted no part of her. She was nobody—just someone to take care of the child.

Melody Ann was still fussy, but Maggie managed. She tried to stay out of Annika's way and took Melody Ann into her room and cut out little shirts and overalls for her. With the scraps, she sewed a beanbag, a raggedy doll, and a ball.

During the afternoon while Melody Ann slept, Maggie was surprised to see the ground white with snow. "My goodness, are the men still out in this?"

Maggie piled more logs on the fire in the fireplace, then put a stick of wood in the stove and made a cup of hot tea. She added a teaspoon of sugar and a dollop of cream. She had just sat down at the table when Cutter came in, his blue bandana pulled up over his nose.

"It's getting worse, and that wind is howling cold. Should I get something from the smokehouse for supper? There are sides of beef and venison out there."

"I didn't know. Get whatever you would like."

Cutter pulled his coat tight, re-buttoned it, and jerked on his gloves. "Did you churn fresh butter today? I'm sure there's plenty of cream."

"No, Mister McCallister, I didn't. I tried to keep Melody Ann quiet."

He gave her a sharp look and stalked out.

Maggie cringed in her shoes. How had she gotten so brave to back talk a man? Why didn't someone tell her exactly what her job entailed, not just take it for granted that she knew. She had never lived on a ranch or churned butter. What else was she expected to be doing that no one had bothered to explain?

Cutter came back with a large roast and beefsteaks. He removed his coat and hat, hung them, and automatically warmed his hands at the stove. Stalking around Maggie, he shook the coffeepot.

"Dammit, there's not even any coffee." He cringed when he heard his rough talk. Why should he be complaining to her? He bet West had drained the coffeepot.

"I didn't empty it. Maybe if you'd take ten minutes of your precious time to explain exactly what my chores are, I could handle them easier. Annika says don't do this—that's her job. You blow up if something doesn't get done."

He filled the coffeepot, added the coffee, and set it on the stove. Glaring at her, he said, "I thought you knew a man always likes coffee on a cold day. The cream needs to be churned about every fourth day, and it's going to be rough for a few days. The cows will start calving any minute."

Maggie saw the tiredness in his face, the tiny tic in his jaw. She also noticed the small mole just to the right of his full lips for the first time. "I didn't claim to know anything about ranching, Mister McCallister."

He ran a hand through his already tousled brown hair and poured his coffee, then sat down across from her. "I know! I know! Did you and Annika have words?"

"No, I didn't see much of her today. I took Melody Ann into my room and sewed. At least she'll have something to keep her little legs warm. A floor can be drafty and cold."

"It'll be worse by morning if this snow keeps falling. I wish those cows could wait a few days."

"Am I expected to help with that, too?"

"Gawd-a-mighty, woman! That's what my men are for. But with Ace and Shorty both laid up, we'll be short handed."

"Mister McCallister, just please lay out why I'm here, except for taking care of Melody Ann." She gave him a direct look, trying not to flinch under his stare.

"I've asked myself that same question. I told you Ace signed my name to that list." He pushed back his chair, grabbed his coat and jerked it on. Clapping his hat on his head, he stalked out again.

Maggie breathed a sigh of relief. It was so hard to sit that close to him. His sable brown eyes were penetrating and made her feel undressed.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter entered the blacksmith and tack shop, slamming the door behind him. A red-hot fire glowed brightly in the big forge and Chiso looked up, holding a horseshoe with tongs. He had a wooden leg, his commemorate of the War Between the States.

"What's going on, boss?"

Cutter chewed his lower lip, suddenly at a loss for words. "I'm worried about the cattle right now. With Shorty and Ace both ailing, we'll be..."

"I'll do what I can. You know that."

"I figured I could count on you. Is Ace feeling better?"

"Go see for yourself. He was up for lunch. How's the Missus?"

"Trying to figure it all out. She's never lived on a ranch. It'll be hard on her, I'm afraid, but she cottoned right off to the baby. Was up most of the night with her. Melody Ann is cutting more teeth."

"Poor little thing. She does need a mother."

Cutter glanced at his friend of eight years and smiled slowly. "Yes, she does. Talk to you after while."

When he entered the bunkhouse a few minutes later, he wondered why he rushed away. He had intended to work on a couple of bridles and a saddle. Had he been afraid Chiso would question him and get too close to the truth, find out that he and Maggie weren't sharing a bed? It was nobody's business but his, as far as he was concerned.

The warmth of the bunkhouse swept over him. Cutter pulled off his coat, and brought a chair to the bunk where Ace lay. "How are you doing, fellow?"

"Not bad. Is it still snowing?"

Cutter watched Ace closely. He looked frail, his lips blue tinged. The veins in his hands stood out starkly. "Snowing like hell, man. It'll be deep by morning. I still wish you'd come up to the house and stay."

"You need your privacy with a new wife. She'll have her hands full taking care of you."

"No, you don't understand. She can take better care of you than Pedro."

Ace raised tired eyes to meet Cutter's. "I don't need no woman fussing over me. She has Melody to see to."

"Melody is feverish and anxious right now. Cutting more teeth, I guess. She couldn't sleep last night."

"I'll try to go up to see her tomorrow."

"I don't think so. You don't need to be out in this, Ace. Maybe catch your death of cold or pneumonia. I'm afraid all of us will be gone most of the day." He crossed his legs and rocked his foot back and forth.

"How are the cows coming along?"

"They'll start any day now. Wouldn't you know it?"

"Never fails, Cutter. You know that. Shorty seems to be doing okay."

Cutter nodded.

"You afraid that little wife might like to talk to a man?"

"No...I know and trust you. I wouldn't ask that you move up to the house if I thought there would be a problem. You're getting to be an old woman, imagining things."

"Oh, shut up, Cutter! You're all talk and no action. If I felt better, we'd have another wrestling match and see who's the better man."

"You're damn touchy today. Can I get anything for you?"

"Nope! Pedro is taking good care of me. Fixed me some chicken and rice soup for lunch. It was lip-smacking good. Is Miz Maggie a good cook?"

"She's done pretty good so far. Think we're having beefsteaks tonight, maybe roast tomorrow."

"You wanting to fatten her up, or something? She's no bigger than a minute. Careful there, or she'll dry up and blow away."

"Could be, Ace. You take care." He moved the chair back, and pulled on his coat, leaving quietly.

Cutter went to the barn, fed the horses and forked extra hay down. West was there also, ready to milk again.

“What are you doing? Don't I always take care of the horses?” West asked, staring at Cutter.

“Just thought I'd help, West, so you don't have to be out so long.”

“You're forgetting something, aren't you? Indians can take the cold weather.”

“Save your strength for tomorrow. I'm afraid we're going to have a rough day.”

West laughed, then grunted. “Somebody ought to tell those dang cow critters this is not the time to be dropping their little brown babies on the snow and cold ground.”

“Yeah, we better have a talk with them.” He waved and started to the house. West would take the milk to the bunkhouse tonight. That's the way they divided it.

Cutter wasn't looking forward to sitting around the house with Maggie. It was hard enough to sit across the table from her long enough to eat. He knew his emotions would get out of kilter again, and he had to fight that. He stamped the snow off his boots, and hung up his coat and hat on coming into the kitchen. Maggie barely looked up from stirring something on the stove. He patted Melody Ann on the head, and said, “I'll be in my room doing bookwork. Give me a call when supper is ready.”

“Please,” Maggie sarcastically muttered under her breath. She gazed out the window at the dismal weather. She could hardly see as far as the big barn. This would sure be the night to be curled up in front of a hot fire with a willing man.

Shocked at her own thinking, Maggie smiled gleefully. She just might have to learn how to seduce a man.

## Chapter 7

Cutter turned away from the window and his thoughts of his life with Anna Marie. Ace had warned him over and over about burying the past, but Cutter couldn't stop feeling the resentment. Why couldn't he quit thinking about Anna Marie and the passion they had known? He intended to steer his path as he set it—a marriage in name only. Melody Ann needed a mother. It was simple.

It took Cutter a while to realize someone pounded on the back door. "Yeah, I'm coming!" he yelled, forgetting for the moment that the baby was asleep. He supposed Maggie was in her room sewing.

He had only been in the house a short while, long enough to get warmed up and some hot food and coffee down. The wind had risen, whipping the snow around, blinding a person.

"We've got a problem, boss. Those cows are drifting off by themselves."

"I'll be right with you, Cosi! Did you tell 'em to get the wagons ready?"

"Sure thing, and Rusty is saddling the dun for you."

"Yeah, Boots is the best horse in this snow."

Maggie rushed into the kitchen. "What's wrong?"

“Cows are calving and we’ve got to try to save some of them. Can you bundle up Melody and go to the bunkhouse to keep coffee and soup going? We’re going to need Pedro and every hand.”

Maggie nodded. “I’ll do whatever I can.”

Cutter tugged on his coat and gloves. “Thanks, Maggie.”

“You’re sure there’s nothing else?”

He gave her a quick look, seeing her anxious expression. “Bundle up good and say a prayer, if you’re a praying woman.”

“I will. You be careful,” she whispered, when the cold air from the door hit her. She hated to awaken Melody. She had been so fussy lately, but today she didn’t have much choice. Adding more wood to the stove, she pulled on her boots, and then went to awaken Melody.

“Come on, sweetie. We’ve got to go to the bunkhouse. You want to see your Uncle Ace?”

Maggie pulled on her coat and tied a scarf around her head. She put a coat around Melody, and wrapped her in a heavy blanket, pulling it up around her head.

The men would be cold and hungry when they came in, so helping wherever she could was what she wanted. She needed to feel more a part of the ranch, and to learn as much as she could...to belong.

A cold wind whipped at her, cutting through her coat, and she wrapped her arms tighter around the blanket-wrapped Melody. Maggie stumbled and nearly went down with the baby. Her nose and eyes stung and she couldn’t see.

Nearly bumping into the log building, Maggie realized she had made it and she searched for the door. Staggering inside, she came face to face with Pedro.

"I was going to help you, Miz McCallister. You all right?"

"I think so. I'll get Melody Ann settled down with Ace, and be right back. Tell me what to do. Where's Ace?"

"In there...third bunk. He's expecting you. I'm getting things together for vegetable beef soup," Pedro said, flashing a quick smile.

Maggie took Melody inside. "How are you feeling? Melody Ann was asleep and may go back to sleep. I'll look in on you as soon as I can."

"You shouldn't be out here. I'm feeling better. Me and this youngun'll be fine."

Maggie unwrapped the still sleepy baby and handed her over to her uncle's arms. He tucked her under the covers of his bed.

"Can I get you some coffee?" She studied his lined face closely. His graying hair needed a trim and stood out like he'd run his fingers through it.

"No, ma'am. You just do what you have to do."

"I will. I'll be back." Maggie hurried back into the kitchen, and Pedro was nowhere in sight. He had set out a big pot and had potatoes, carrots and onions ready. Chunks of roast beef were on a platter. She chopped that up and added it to the pot. Maggie struggled with opening tins of tomatoes, but finally succeeded. The cans were large and the knife too cumbersome for her to handle.

Sometime later she heard shouts, and looked out the window to see a wagon pull up in front of the barn. Someone flung open the big doors and it pulled on inside. These men knew what they were doing, and probably went through this same thing every year. Maggie checked the coffee again. Finding a wheel of cheese, she sliced part of

that and set bread, cups, and bowls on the table. Had she done everything she could?

Maggie hurried back to see about Ace and Melody. They were both asleep, with Melody lying in his arms. "What a pretty picture," she murmured softly.

Another wagonload of calves came in, and Maggie breathed easier. Maybe they would be able to save many of them. Were they feeding them, and putting them in warm straw beds? She wished she could be in the barn to help.

Rusty came to the bunkhouse. "Miz McCallister, that soup sure smells good."

"How's it going?"

"Can hardly see and that wind is cold," he rasped, his lips numb. "I'm Rusty, ma'am."

"I'm Maggie. Glad to know you. Please sit. I'll pour coffee and dish up soup. You need to get warm."

He shoved a loaded spoonful into his mouth. "Ummmm, this is good."

"Will Cutter and the others be coming in shortly?"

"Don't know. The boss will be the last and since Ace isn't out there, most of it will fall on him. He waits until the mama licks her calf all over so she knows it's hers, and then we load them and bring them in. Seems like we go through this every year. Dang cows! I don't know why they can't wait for warmer weather."

"Maybe they're like people. When it's time to be born, it's time." Maggie pushed at her hair that had straggled loose and hung around her face.

"Sometimes I think range cows are the dumbest things that ever came along. They follow the leader. Good soup, ma'am."

Dark came and another wagon came in, with horses tied to the back. Maggie figured the others would be

coming in, too. She made another pot of coffee and built up the fire again. When she walked in to see about Melody and Ace, they were playing checkers, both laughing.

“Who’s winning?” she asked.

“I am, if I can keep them outa her mouth. Quite a little girl, isn’t she?”

“Lovely child. I’m going to take her up to the house. I saw some of the men come in, so I figure the others will be along soon. I’ll put plenty of water on to heat for Cutter. He’s probably half frozen.”

“Yeah. I ought to be out there with him. He’s got cow sense, but I’ve got horse sense. It takes us both.” He helped Melody with her coat and hat, wrapped the blanket around her before handing her over to Maggie.

“Thanks so much. There’s plenty of soup and cheese.”

“I’ll eat with the men, Miz Maggie. I expect Pedro milked and fed the calves. Shorty shouldn’t be out in this, either.”

“I’m just glad to be useful. Come up to see us when you feel like it.” She hugged Melody to her, and continued, “Let’s go, sweetie.”

Maggie sat at the table in the house, finishing the last of her coffee when Cutter came in. The room was warm and she felt like she could go to sleep right at the table.

Cutter’s coat and hat were covered with snow. Maggie came to her feet, ready to wait on him. His skin began to sting as the heat seeped into him. He nodded his thanks when he sat down at the table and Maggie set soup, bread, and hot coffee in front of him.

“There’s plenty of hot water for a bath.”

“Are you insinuating I don’t smell so good, ma’am?” He laughed harshly and attacked his food.

“No, but I thought that would help warm you up. I’ll put Melody to bed.” She took Melody from her high chair, washed the cookie crumbs from her hands and face. “Want to kiss your daughter good night?”

“My face is too cold. I’ll frighten her.” He leaned into Melody and kissed her on top of the head. “Night, sweetie.”

“Daddy...Da!” she exclaimed, laughing.

“She had a good time with Uncle Ace. They played checkers.”

“Checkers? I bet that was good.”

Maggie put the baby to bed, and then came back to the kitchen. She poured more coffee for Cutter and sat down across for him. “Did you save most of them?”

“We’ll know more in the morning. Some of them won’t make it, because of pneumonia in the lungs. Many will freeze to death out there.” He didn’t want to talk about dying and calves. Nothing would be better than to lie his head down on his hands and let the warmth claim him.

“Do you need help with anything? I’ll fix your water.” She lifted a big bucket of water from the stove.

“Something to keep me from falling...” he said, letting his head drop forward.

Maggie added two more buckets of water to the big copper tub, and laid her hand on his shoulder. She felt protective and tonight wanted to do for him as a wife would her husband.

“Come on. I’ll help you.” She put her hand under his arm and lifted, even though he weighed twice as much as she did.

“Can’t even think straight, much less walk,” he mumbled.

“Come on while the water is hot. I’ll help you.” She pushed him along, and then sat him on a chair close to the

tub. When she reached to unbutton his shirt, he became more alert.

“What do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying to get you in that hot water to warm you. You’re chilled through and through. Don’t be a grouch tonight. Let’s get these clothes off.” She pushed his shirt off, tangling her fingers in the soft whorls of hair on his chest. She felt him suck in his breath.

While he pulled off his trousers and boots, Maggie added another bucket of water. “That should do it. In you go.”

She tried not to look, but the dark curling mat of hair intrigued her, and her gaze was drawn to him. The muscled arms and back, the strong legs and thighs, made her know his male power.

“You staying?” he asked, stripping off his underwear and stepping into the welcome warmth of the water. He sank down and sighed heavily.

“I’ll wash your back. That’ll loosen some of the tension from your shoulders.”

“You’re too good, Maggie Ryan.”

Maggie Ryan! She didn’t want to be Maggie Ryan or a good woman tonight. She felt too much for this big man already. She lifted the soapy cloth and began massaging his shoulders and back muscles.

He groaned. “Ummmm...I think I’ve died and gone to heaven.”

“You’ll feel differently tomorrow. Be still.” He rolled his head from side to side. She finished and handed the washcloth to him. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where you going?”

She didn’t answer, but soon came back with a tumbler of whiskey. “Drink this.”

He drained the glass and his eyes closed. He could only think of Maggie in his arms and in his bed. Of her pleasuring him as a wife should.

Maggie shook Cutter. "Come on. You're out on your feet."

"I'm so cold and tired."

"I know you are, but let's get you to bed." She helped him to stand, and wrapped a blanket around him. Maggie slid her arm around his waist and walked him to his bed.

He stumbled into bed, taking Maggie with him.

"Oh, no you don't!" she exclaimed, trying to free herself. One arm was underneath him, his heavy leg across her.

"Warm...got to get warm," he mumbled, his head resting on her breast.

"Then let me cover you." She pulled at the blanket, trying to get out from underneath him. Her heart thundered in her chest and she was sure he could hear it.

"I need..."

She wasn't sure what he said. Had he said he needed her? No, Cutter McCallister didn't need her. He had made that very clear. She wriggled out from underneath, pulled the covers over him, and softly closed the door. She had to put a lot of distance between them. He was too much man and she didn't want to give in to him, just be his plaything. She wanted love, the amenities of being a true wife and mother. She'd been looking for love all her life, and she had to have it, not just need for one night.

If she gave in to him tonight, he would be shoving her away tomorrow, blistering her hide with his criticism and strong words. She couldn't take it. He probably would blame her for taking advantage of him.

\* \* \* \*

For the next several days, Maggie and Cutter walked around each other. He spent very little time around the house, only coming in to eat his supper in late afternoon. He usually played with or read to Melody Ann while Maggie cleaned the kitchen, then shut himself in his room with the excuse of having bookwork to do.

Maggie hadn't seen any of the girls she came out with on the train. The snow had melted, she needed companionship, and she had about sewed herself out. It wouldn't hurt now to see if anyone in town would like for her to make dresses for them.

The sun, like a fire in the sky, held the promise of a nice day. At breakfast Maggie announced she was going into town.

"Not today. I have things to do," Cutter answered, setting down his coffee cup.

"I didn't ask you to go, Mister McCallister. I'll bundle Melody Ann up good and we'll make it fine. I do know how to drive a horse and buggy."

Cutter eyed her closely, knowing he'd nearly made a grievous error the night he'd been so tired. He had avoided her ever since.

"Why is it so important to go today? My bed hasn't been made in a week, nor have my dirty shirts or socks been picked up."

Maggie swallowed her bite of biscuit and strawberry preserves. "I believe it was plainly pointed out to me that Annika takes care of your room. The dirty clothesbasket is in the bathroom. I think you're capable..."

"Hell's bells, woman! You've gone too damned far with this farce."

Maggie jumped up from the table, her hands clamped on her hips. "To the contrary, Mister McCallister! I'm tired

of being a prisoner and I need some talk with friends. I was hired to take care of Melody Ann, and that's what I'm doing."

"You were hired? I married you, didn't I?"

"Why? I'm not a wife or partner. You treat me like a slave." She burst into tears and stalked out of the room, so angry she couldn't see.

Cutter bit his tongue. Why couldn't he keep his condemnations to himself? She had done what he had told her, but he thought surely that she'd take care of his room when Annika left. Lord only knew how long she'd be gone. Did that mean he got no clean linens on his bed, or socks and shirts washed until she came back? He swore under his breath. He would not have this.

Walking into the parlor to the fireplace, Cutter found Maggie had Melody Ann up and dressing her in little denim overalls and a red calico shirt. His mouth fell open. His daughter looked like a boy with long curls.

"Why is my daughter wearing that contraption?" he asked, his eyes cold.

"To keep her legs warm, Mister McCallister. I don't want her getting sick, do you?"

"No! But she looks like a boy. This isn't..."

"Oh, but it is proper. These are appropriate for riding a horse or playing in the dirt." She kissed Melody Ann's hair and sat her on the floor, taking her gown to the bedroom.

"Why can't this wait until I'll be going to town?"

"I want to visit my friend, Beth, to see if the other girls are happy in their marriages. We have things to talk about, and I know I'm the only one who isn't sharing her husband's bed. I won't deprive you of a working day, sir. I can manage very well on my own."

“Always got an answer, haven’t you? Do you stay awake at night thinking of ways to needle me?” He leaned into the mantel, one foot propped on the hearth.

“No, but thank you for the idea. I’ll take my first month’s wages, if you don’t mind. I may need some money.” She picked up Melody Ann and started toward the kitchen.

He caught her arm, whipping her around. “I have charge accounts at Jake’s and Ira’s stores. They’ll let you have what you need.”

“What if I want to have lunch with my friends at a restaurant? Do you want everyone in town to think...”

“Dammit, Maggie! You’re pushing me!” He turned her loose and she scurried into the kitchen like a scared rabbit. Cutter felt a tingle race up his arm and down his backside. He couldn’t send anyone in with her. Ace still wasn’t feeling good and he needed the others.

When he walked into the kitchen, she was feeding Melody Ann. He laid a twenty-dollar bill on the table in front of her. “Just be careful. I’ll have Shorty hitch up the buggy. How soon will you be leaving? I’m sorry I’ve kept you from your friends, and I apologize for talking so tough to you.”

Maggie wiped at her eyes. “I’m sorry, too, for getting huffy. I’ll be ready to leave as soon as I finish in the kitchen.” She fed Melody Ann the last bite of her oatmeal, stood and turned to the pan of warm water to wash the dishes.

“Will you be home before dark?”

“That’s my plan, Mister McCallister,” she answered, clattering the cups and saucers a bit too much. “I do know how to take care of this sweet little girl. Excuse me,

please.” She wiped the cabinet with her dishcloth and moved on to the stove.

Cutter was stymied, and the lump in his throat grew larger. Melody had never been to town. Would she be frightened? He didn't want to leave, feeling there was something else he had to say.

“Just be careful,” he repeated. “Melody Ann has never been away from the ranch.”

“Then it's about time she went somewhere. We'll be careful.”

Cutter couldn't say what he felt. He touched Maggie's shoulder briefly, then walked across the room to pull on his coat and settle his hat on his head. He looked back at Maggie one last time before leaving.

Maggie tried to ignore Cutter, the fluttering in her stomach and breasts. It was getting harder all the time to pretend not to see him, to look away when his dark eyes roamed over her. She had seen the softening in his eyes many times when she held Melody Ann, like he wanted to enfold both of them in his arms.

How had she ever gotten into this crazy situation anyway? She was the one who desperately needed love, security and a home, and by all that was holy, she intended to find it.

## Chapter 8

“Oh, Maggie, I’m so glad to see you,” Beth said, hugging her old-time friend. “And this is the child? Isn’t she a sweetie?”

“This is Melody Ann. How are you, Beth? How’s your marriage? Have you found love and happiness?”

“Oh my, so many questions. Alex is wonderful and we’re going to be happy. It’s taken some adjustments. How are you and that big, handsome Cutter getting along?”

Maggie blushed. She took a seat on a small love seat where Beth indicated. She had known these questions would be coming, and she’d pondered all the way into town how she should answer. “He’s big and handsome, all right. I love taking care of Melody and we have a lovely log home. Mister McCallister and I are still working through our adjustments.”

Beth clapped her hands together. “Maggie, you mean you haven’t slept with him yet? Good grief, what’s wrong?”

“I didn’t say that, Beth. His touch makes me melt right down to my toes, and his kisses are so wonderful.” A loud knock sounded on the door. Maggie had left word with Ira to send Josie and Summer over.

More kisses and hugs were shared as the girls came in, and they both exclaimed over Melody. Finally Summer got to hold her.

“I may be the first to have a baby. I think I got with child the first night, and I need to be learning what to do.”

Maggie hugged the dark-haired Summer again. “Oh my goodness, I can’t believe it. Your marriage must be wonderful then.”

Summer wrinkled her nose. “It could be better and we’re working it out. It was a big step for both of us. Jake didn’t know my ways, and I didn’t know his.”

Josie spoke up, not to be outdone. “You’ve never seen two brothers more different. Ira is the outspoken one, and we get along fine while we’re talking. It’s when we go to bed that I kind of freeze up. I don’t relax like I should.”

Beth laughed nervously. “We should have been given a month or more to get to know these men. They expected us to be perfect women, and none of them are perfect. I’m sure for women’s rights out here. We don’t have to take any guff from them.”

Maggie wondered how to answer that. Maybe she and Cutter were the smart ones after all. At least they hadn’t jumped into bed the first night, expecting everything to be perfect.

“Thanks so much for helping Cutter pick out that lovely material for me, Beth. As you can see I’ve been busy sewing for Melody Ann already.” She patted the baby’s knee and straightened the collar on her little shirt.

Summer hugged Melody close. “She is a sweet little thing, but not very talkative.”

“No, she isn’t,” Maggie answered. “Annika, an Indian woman, has been taking care of her and she didn’t talk to her a lot or play with her. We’ve been learning to do some

things, and I made her a beanbag, a ball, and a raggedy doll out of scraps. We're going to be gardening, walking down to the lake, and even riding horses as soon as the weather permits."

Josie had been rather quiet, but she looked up with a thoughtful expression on her face. "You're so lucky, Maggie, to have gotten such a nice man. Ira says he has money—that he made it the last three years after the big gold strike in the Deadwood, South Dakota Territory. Ira says he supplies beef to Fort Russell, too, and he's so...handsome. My goodness, I get the shivers thinking about going to bed with a man like that."

Beth jumped up. "Hey, let's quit talking nonsense. We wanted men, and we've got men, so we're going to make the best of it. Anyone want to help me in the kitchen? I'll start some lunch for us."

Maggie laid her hand on Beth's arm. "I wanted to take everyone to lunch. You can fix for us some other time."

Josie came to her feet. "Well, look who's talking! Miz rich bit..."

"Don't say it, Josie!" Summer grabbed her arm. "Let's go have lunch and be pleasant. We may never have another chance."

Maggie looked from one girl to the other. "Now what have I done? Was I wrong in offering to take you to lunch?"

"You're flaunting your husband's money," Summer answered, handing Melody Ann back to Maggie.

"I am not. I've earned every penny of this money. Have you tried to take care of an eighteen-month old who's into everything? We even got attacked by a crazy goose one day, and she took a bite out of my leg."

They laughed at that, and broke the tension. Each one retrieved her shawl or cloak, hat or scarf, and left the small

apartment. Maggie considered herself lucky indeed. She had a lovely home.

By two-thirty Maggie was ready to go home. The word had a sweet ring to it. She had left word that she was available for dressmaking. Melody Ann fussed and wanted her nap, so Maggie spread a blanket on the floor of the buggy and laid Melody there, covering her good. The sky had turned a leaden gray and the wind was blowing and much colder.

Maggie slapped the reins down harder on the mare's rump and peered into the overcast cloud hanging in front of them in a small valley. The wind whistled through the pine and spruce trees, making an eerie sound. She pulled the other blanket around her shoulders and checked Melody Ann to be sure she was still covered and warm. She was asleep.

Small pellets of sleet hit the buggy top making a sharp, snapping noise as it bounced off onto the hard ground. The wall of white was snow, blizzard like flakes swirling in the wind. It surrounded them and the road disappeared fast. Could she depend on the mare to get them back to the ranch? She had heard that horses instinctively knew the way home.

Melody woke up and began crying. Maggie brought her up into her lap, wrapping the blanket around her and talked softly to her.

"We'll be home in a little bit. You aren't cold, are you?"

"Look at that snow. It's sure coming down."

"Old Betsy knows the way home. We don't have anything to worry about."

Maggie could hardly see the mare's head, but she hoped Betsy knew where she was going. "Come on, girl, let's get on home," she called encouragingly.

She knew they were more than halfway home. Cutter had pointed out the small hill the first day they had taken the ride. It shouldn't be long now.

The snow appeared to be getting worse, and Betsy stopped.

"What's wrong, girl? Come on! We've got to get home." No amount of urging would make Betsy move.

"Well tarnation, Betsy! I can't see anymore than you can. What are we going to do?" She didn't recall any windbreak of trees or shelter of any kind. But they just couldn't sit out here in the open and freeze to death. "We've got to do something," she muttered. Desperate, she didn't know which way to turn.

"Melody Ann, honey, I hate to do this, but I'm going to tie you to the seat with my scarf. Don't worry, you'll be warm with the blankets. I'll walk and lead Betsy." She positioned Melody Ann and tied her in, then brought the blanket over her, making a tent for her. She said a silent prayer, wanting to curl up and cry. It would be all her fault if they froze to death.

"Now, that's done," she muttered and stepped down on the cold ground. Her hands felt like frozen claws already, and her feet were getting numb. An icy blast of wind nearly knocked her down, and she held onto the wheel, then the mare as she made her way forward.

"What's wrong, Betsy? We've got to get home," Maggie urged.

Melody Ann let out a long frightened wail, louder now. She had to be afraid under the blanket.

Maggie knew she couldn't be deterred. She had to get the mare moving again, but Betsy was stubborn. Realizing the mare must be as disoriented as she was, Maggie was ready to cry herself. She couldn't see the road two feet in

front of her, if they were still on the road. The ground was uneven. Maybe this was the two lanes the wagons and buggy wheels had beat out.

"Come on, Betsy! We're going home," she said with more authority, pulling on Betsy's bridle. "I've had enough of this. Get up!"

Betsy took one step and pawed at the ground. Maggie thought of the warm house waiting for them and she felt such a sense of loss. Cutter would be furious with her and she couldn't let anything happen to his daughter.

Numb all over, Maggie saw this wasn't working. What could she do to make Betsy go? She stumbled back to the buggy and climbed up on the seat, trying to console Melody Ann. "It's all right, sweetheart. I'm here."

She hugged the baby to her and pulled the blanket back where she could see her face. Melody quit crying and patted Maggie's face. "I know you were frightened, but we'll make it, sweetie..."

A call echoed through the curtain of snow. "Hey, out there! Where are you?"

"Oh, God," Maggie prayed. "Someone has found us."

"We're here!" she called.

"Keep calling! I'm coming!"

She recognized Cutter's voice now and peered into the swirling snow. "This way! We're here!"

Cutter appeared out of the whiteness and Maggie's heart sank. He was as white as the ground, his hat and coat covered with snow. Her heart dropped when she saw the deep scowl on his face and she was afraid to move. Anger flashed in his eyes, and his jaw visibly tensed.

"Damn fool woman! Is Melody Ann all right?"

He could see for himself that she was and Maggie refused to answer that. "Betsy wouldn't go," she answered lamely.

"She'll go!" He whipped out a large bandana and tied it around the mare's eyes. Then he came back and tied his big dun horse to the back of the buggy. "Move over!" he said, his voice hoarse with frustration.

Maggie didn't question him, but moved over. Cutter squeezed in, practically sitting on Maggie. He jerked the whip from the holder and brought it down smartly, stinging Betsy's backside.

"Get outa here!" he yelled.

Maggie jumped, but the mare brought her feet forward and started with a jerk, slamming her into Cutter. He steadied her with his hand, looking neither right nor left, and flicked the whip again.

"Get on there, Betsy!"

They were soon at the front door, and Maggie didn't wait for Cutter to help her down. She jumped out, grabbed Melody Ann, blankets and all, and rushed into the house.

Oh, the house felt good, so warm and toasty. Maggie unwrapped Melody Ann and left the blankets on the sofa. She dipped a pan of cool water and immediately immersed their hands. When Melody tried to pull away, Maggie held her hands.

"No, no, Melody Ann! We've got to do this."

The feeling was coming back to her hands and face when Cutter came in, loaded down with the sack of supplies. He hardly looked at Maggie, but dumped the sack on the countertop and jerked Melody Ann out of Maggie's arms. "I'll take care of her," he said, his voice terse and clipped.

Gradually Maggie's toes began to ache. She dried her hands and began walking, back and forth across the kitchen and dining room. She noticed Cutter in the parlor, holding Melody Ann on his lap, and massaging her hands and feet.

She tried to tell herself this wasn't her fault. They had never had snows like this back in Baltimore, so how did she know she had put them in danger?

When the warmth seeped in, Maggie pulled off her boots and slipped on felt house slippers. She peeled potatoes and onions, and made a big pot of soup. When it was ready, she sliced cheese and crisp chunks of bread, setting them on the table with bowls and spoons.

She felt Cutter was spoiling for a big fight, and she was ready for him. He still held Melody Ann in front of the roaring fire in the fireplace. They were too quiet, and she wondered if they were asleep.

Maggie tiptoed into the room, glancing quickly at Cutter and his closed eyes.

"Why are you creeping around? Do you want something?"

"Would you like to eat? Soup is ready."

He stood with Melody Ann in his arms, and brought her into the kitchen. "Why don't we ever eat in the dining room? Anna Marie loved to..." He caught himself and clamped his mouth shut. Cutter put the sleepy child in her highchair and handed her a piece of bread.

Maggie didn't have an answer. She dished up soup from the large white tureen and handed Cutter his bowl. She sat down again to feed Melody Ann, blowing the soup before she put the spoon in her mouth.

A long silence engulfed them. Maggie kept wondering if she should apologize. Was it really her fault? She didn't

control the weather. She couldn't help it if she didn't know how to make Betsy go in the blowing snow.

Maggie served Cutter a piece of yesterday's apple pie, and still he hadn't spoken. What was she supposed to do? He left the room as soon as he finished.

She gave Melody Ann a small piece of cheese to chew on while she washed dishes, and handed her the beanbag. Melody Ann kept throwing it on the floor and laughing at the noise.

"This is getting a bit tiresome, isn't it, young lady? How many times have I picked that thing up for you?" Maggie looked up to see Cutter leaning against the doorframe watching her.

"Where did she get that thing?"

"I made it for her. She needed something to play with." She met his gaze, then quietly turned away feeling his reproach and condemnation again.

"I wondered what that noise was," he answered, turning back into the other room.

Maggie finished cleaning the kitchen, and gave Melody Ann a good warm bath before putting her to bed. She hated to go into the parlor, hoping Cutter had gone to bed. Maggie had given Melody a dose of the cherry bark syrup with a pinch of aspirin powder, hoping to ward off a cold or worse.

She took a hot bath, pulled on her warm flannel gown and wrapper. When she walked into the parlor to check the fire, she found Cutter sitting in a chair in the dark.

He looked up at her, his jaw still tense. "Sit down, Maggie. Are you all right?"

"I hope so. I took an aspirin powder and some cherry bark syrup..." She dropped into a chair and crossed her ankles.

"I should have sent Pedro or Shorty with you today. It won't happen again. I was worried."

"I'm sure you were. Melody Ann is your only..."

She quit, not wanting to say his only link to Anna Marie.

"I knew you'd keep her safe if you could. I kept thinking how I hadn't taken time to explain about the perils of the sudden snowstorms, flash floods, stampeding cattle, and maybe renegade Indians occasionally. I've been too wrapped up in my own world and you deserve better. This hasn't been much of a life for you, has it?"

*Uh-oh.* She caught her breath. Was he leading up to sending her back? "I've tried not to complain."

"You haven't complained. From now on you'll go to town at least once a month, and if I can't go with you, Shorty or Pedro will. The weather will be warming up soon and we'll have the Cattlemen's Association picnic and dances. Will you like that?"

"It sounds exciting. I'm trying to be a good person for Melody Ann and to take care of her."

"I can see now the wisdom of the overalls and having her legs covered. They were protected today. Thank you, Maggie Ryan, for all you've done for my daughter. I couldn't believe the laughter and fun she was having in there tonight."

"Is that all, Mister McCallister? I believe I'll go to bed now." She was getting drowsy from the fire and the headache powder. Maggie yawned and came to her feet, staggering slightly.

"Maybe I ought to help you. You sure you haven't been tipping with my good whiskey already?" He laughed and touched her arm.

*Cutter's Woman*

“I never touch spirits, Mister McCallister. I’ve seen a few drunks in my life and they aren’t a pretty picture.”

He walked with her to the door of her room, his hand under her elbow. Maggie reached for the door and he turned her into him. Cradling her face with his big hands, he looked into her green eyes, his head lowering to her lips.

His lips barely brushed hers in a whispery kiss. “Sleep well, Maggie.”

“Good night, Mister McCallister,” she murmured.

## Chapter 9

Late April brought on the calf roundup, branding, and steer castrating. Cutter enjoyed the good days, feeling more comfortable around Maggie. She wasn't just someone to take care of Melody Ann anymore. She was a person, and he recognized that she had needs and wants the same as he did.

Jolted out of his reverie by a shout from Shorty, Cutter jerked his head up to hear, "Watch 'er, Cutter!"

He brought his gaze around to see a mad longhorn cow headed straight at him, her long horn piercing his thigh when he didn't get out of the way in time. She threw him up in the air, then shook her head to dislodge him.

"Damn it all!" he swore, feeling the corrosive sting of the horn even as his knees buckled and he hit the ground hard. The cow shook her massive head at him, bellowed, and trotted away. Blood gushed out, running down his leg, soaking his pants and into his boot.

Shorty was by his side in seconds and cut his trousers away. He tied his bandana tourniquet around Cutter's leg and wound a piece of white shirt around the wound.

"We've got to get you to the house, boss. Does Miz Maggie know how to doctor you?"

"I doubt it. Guess I can join Ace in the bunkhouse."

“No way. Come on, we’ll put you on the wagon and get you back. Make that leg bleed worse forking a horse.”

“I know it, Shorty.” West and Rusty picked him up and placed him on the end of the wagon.

“Your mind has been on other things lately. It’s a wonder you don’t get stepped on by a horse. What’s ailing you?”

“Nothing is ailing me.” Cutter grimaced. He couldn’t tell them how much Maggie was on his mind. They would think he had really lost his marbles.

Shorty pulled a tarp free and laid Cutter down on it. He jumped on the wagon and soon the horses jolted over the rough ground.

Cutter groaned and hung on, knowing this had to be. He hoped Maggie wouldn’t faint at the sight of blood, his blood. Ever since the night he had kissed her, he’d had such a tender feeling toward her. He watched her with Melody Ann, cuddling her in her arms, bathing her, or reading to her, and his heart melted. Still it wasn’t what he wanted, he told himself.

So many times lately he’d ridden to the house on some excuse or other, telling himself he had to check on Ace or get some supplies. He’d found Maggie and Melody Ann, with Ace and Chiso, all engrossed in the garden. He’d scolded Ace, but it hadn’t done any good. They were both right there with her if she didn’t know about something. Now she had rows of lettuce, radishes, and green onions up, and Maggie was tickled to death over them.

Chiso had even put up a better clothesline for her and hung a rope swing with a board seat for Melody Ann. Then Cutter came in one day to see Maggie dressed in her new denim split skirt and vest, a pretty blue ruffled blouse and boots, sitting pretty as you please on his Appaloosa mare.

Ace handed Melody Ann up and they cantered away across the pasture.

With his heart in his throat, Cutter waited for them to come back, hoping Maggie knew what she was doing. She was learning and she appeared to be happy. He wondered why all these things were coming back to him now. Maybe he had been stubborn, refusing to think about Maggie, her little laughs, her beautiful green eyes, and her softness.

Cutter groaned again when Shorty brought the wagon to a stop.

“Sorry, boss! How are you doing?” He helped Cutter sit up and gradually pulled the tarp toward the end of the wagon. “Hang on now. We’ll try to get you in the house. I reckon I’ll have to help Miz Maggie get you in bed. It’s a pity you’re such a big man, her being so little.”

Maggie rushed out the back door. “Good gracious, Shorty! What happened to Mister...”

“One of those mad mama cows didn’t take kindly to us operating on her youngster. She took it out on Cutter.”

Maggie leaned into Cutter, seeing the blood on his leg, the tourniquet, and her heart nearly stopped. “Oh no!” she whispered, her hands going to her mouth. Taking his arm across her shoulder while they walked up the two steps into the house, she felt faint but knew she had to steel herself to be strong for Cutter. “Won’t we need to get his pants off so we can doctor him right?”

“Yes, ma’am. Can you handle it? I figured I’d help you get him in bed, but I’ve got to get back.”

“I can do it. Set him down here. I’ll get the scissors. Melody Ann, please, honey, don’t start crying now. Your daddy needs help,” she said to the child in passing.

Cutter patted Melody Ann. “It’s all right, sweetheart. She’ll be back.”

Shorty removed Cutter's shirt, cut off his pants and helped Cutter to stand. "Better put something on the bed, Miz Maggie. We'll get blood all over."

Maggie jerked the oilcloth off the kitchen table and hurried into Cutter's room. As she bathed the blood off, she tried not to think of touching him on his legs. Hadn't she helped bathe many of the young boys at the orphanage? Cutter was only a grown up boy, wasn't he?

She helped Shorty ease him back on the oilcloth, then got her pan of warm water and began. Melody Ann yelled her head off in the kitchen and Maggie had to stop and go get her and try to soothe her.

"Please, lie down with your daddy. I'm going to be busy for a while, honey." She set Melody Ann on the bed beside Cutter, took up her washcloth, and bathed the blood off again.

"This is a deep hole, Cutter. I'll do what I can."

"Just clean it good, Maggie. Do the best you can." He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes, knowing he was going to pass out. Not only had he lost a lot of blood, but the pain felt like seared hell ripping through him.

"I'm so sorry," Maggie said, finishing the bathing. She smoothed the pine tar ointment on the wound, and wrapped the bandage around his leg. Her hand came perilously close to his private parts and she held her breath.

When she finished, she dared to look at Cutter. His eyes were closed, his brow puckered in a frown. "I'm sorry I hurt you worse. How do you feel?"

She pulled a sheet and light blanket over his naked body and realized he hadn't answered. She quickly felt for a pulse and found it strong. Maybe this was best. He needed rest. She bent and kissed his forehead, gathered up the pan of bloody water, cloths and supplies, and took them away.

When she returned for Melody Ann, she had snuggled into her daddy's shoulder and was sound asleep. Maggie tiptoed from the room. Her heart had melted enough for one day. It would never do to let her heart control her body or her actions. She didn't need more reproof or rejection.

Maggie looked in on Cutter several times, not daring to leave the house. He might need her. She took Melody Ann from the bed when she awoke and felt of Cutter's brow. He didn't have a fever and appeared to be asleep.

He caught her hand. "Where you going?"

"To take care of Melody. You need to rest. How do you feel?"

"I've felt better. It burns like West is holding that branding iron to my groin."

"It's a deep hole. Maybe we should send for the doctor."

"I'll be all right. Don't worry."

"I'll check the bandage again in a while. Want some soup or something to drink?"

"If you don't mind. I feel kinda hollow."

Maggie walked Melody Ann to the kitchen and fed her, while the soup heated up. She took a pitcher of cool water and a glass into Cutter, and turned to go.

"Thanks, Maggie, you did good."

"I had to. Is there any danger of infection?"

"Always." He opened his eyes and stared at her for a moment, like he had never seen her before. "You're very pretty today."

"Thank you, but I think you're having delusions already." She laughed, feeling light headed. He hadn't given her a compliment since they'd been married.

"I guess you'll do."

She frowned, not understanding his words, but knowing she had to get away from him. "I'll be back with your soup in a few minutes."

\* \* \* \*

Much later Maggie felt ready to drop. This had been an exhausting day. She gave Melody Ann a bath and tucked her into bed, then went to see about Cutter again. Ace, West, and Shorty had all been in for a few minutes.

Maggie walked into his room and touched his hand, not wanting to startle him. "Cutter, I'll check your wound and re-bandage for you. Maybe you can sleep better."

"I could use a headache powder or something to take away this pain."

"I'll bring something. I'm going to undress it now." She folded the blanket back to expose the one side and began.

"Am I that ugly to look at?" He studied her puckered brow and squinted eyes, like she was afraid she would see something.

"That has nothing to do with this. I'm trying to act like a nurse would. Don't make it difficult, please."

She poked, then wiped the seepage off and applied more salve. The redness around the wound bothered her a bit. She replaced the bandage and blew out the light.

"I'll leave the door open in case you call out for me."

"You could stay here with me. I won't bother you."

"I don't think so, Cutter. We'll both sleep better to continue as we are."

"What are you afraid of, Maggie? I can't do anything, and I might need you."

"I can hear you from my bed. Please, don't push me. I'm exhausted and you're hurting. I'll get your headache powder." Maggie hurried from the room, not wanting to give in to him, but was afraid she would. It would be

wonderful to lie close to him, to smell his sage scent, to feel cherished for a little while.

When she came back, he drank the medication down and sank back on his pillow. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about anything. I hope you can sleep."

"So do I, Maggie. So do I."

Sometime during the night, Maggie came awake with a start. Was it Melody Ann? Then she heard the noise again. Cutter groaned, and she could hear him thrashing. Not taking time to pull on her wrapper, she dashed into his room. The moon shone nearly as light as day. He had kicked the covers back and his body was exposed.

Instinctively she laid her hand on his brow. He was hot, and she worried. Was an infection setting in already? Maggie wet a cloth in cold water and bathed his face, hands and arms.

He kept mumbling and thrashing around. She heard the name Anna Marie several times. His wife's name. Why did he call out to her?

"I didn't want to do it," he said plainly, "but Melody needed..."

Maggie cringed, afraid of what she might hear.

"I loved you so much..."

"But Maggie is so pretty..."

"I can't do it, Anna Marie..."

"Oh, God, love me, hold me..."

She didn't know how long she sat there bathing his fevered brow, but her back cramped. She reached over to straighten the sheet and blanket, and he jerked her over on the bed.

"I can't let you go. Love me, hold me..."

"Stop it, Cutter. Let me go," she said, trying to loosen his hands on her arms.

Afraid she would make him worse by struggling with him, she tried again to loosen his fingers. She eased off his legs and lay down beside him. His whole body was warm.

"Need you so much..." he mumbled, pulling her into his shoulder.

"I'm not Anna Marie," she insisted, not wanting to be a substitute.

"It's all right," he said, laying his hot face against hers.

Maggie lay there, afraid to move. Maybe he would get over this and she could ease out of bed. She wasn't comfortable and scrunched down more, bringing her gown up to expose her legs. She flinched when she felt his bare leg come across hers. This was too much.

"So pretty, my love," he murmured, his arm tightening around her.

What could she do? She would be sorry tomorrow, but tonight Cutter needed her. He appeared to relax and she held her breath. She could get away in a few minutes. Maggie didn't want him thinking he was holding his deceased wife.

As Cutter relaxed, so did Maggie. She came awake with a start sometime later when she felt kisses across her face and settling on her mouth. "Don't..."

His hand slipped inside her loose cotton gown and settled over her breast. She felt his manhood pressed into her thigh.

She couldn't move. His leg had her anchored. One arm was underneath her neck, the other hand holding her breast. What could she do?

Maggie tried to relax, hoping he would loosen his hold on her so she could get away. "No! No! Who the hell is this red-haired woman? Get outa my bed!" jarred her out of her sleep.

Maggie batted her eyes, trying to come awake. It was daylight, and she looked up into Cutter's fever-glazed eyes. She didn't waste any time, but scrambled out of bed.

Not bothering to pull on her wrapper, she hurried to the kitchen for more water. She leaned over his bed to bathe his face, hands and arms again.

Cutter slapped at her hands, saying, "Get away from me. I don't want a woman with her tits hanging out."

Maggie looked down, horrified that her breasts were exposed. Never so mortified in her life, she told herself she had to get his fever down. She pulled her gown to the back, bringing the neckline up, and laid the cold cloth over his eyes and forehead.

"Please relax, Cutter. I'll get another headache powder for you." She hurried into her room, pulled on her blue cotton wrapper and tied all the ribbons. She slid her feet into felt slippers.

When she returned to Cutter's room, he didn't look like he had moved. She removed the cloth, put her arm under his shoulder and raised him. "Please drink this, Cutter."

He drank, never opening his eyes.

She eased him back on the pillow, vowing she would stay as far away as possible. Yet she knew she would have to redress his wound soon, and she was afraid. What could she do for the infection?

Maggie had hardly finished feeding Melody Ann and gotten some thin porridge down Cutter when West came in. He had a small poke of green fuzzy leaves.

"Miz Maggie, I'll make a poultice of these and put on Cutter's wound. They're good for infection. Would you have a clean white cloth I could use?"

"How large, West?"

"Like this." He measured with his hands to give her size and Maggie nodded.

"I'll bring it to you." Maggie had recently cut up two of Cutter's old white shirts that were too frayed to wear. Glad West was doing something, she didn't want to go through another night like last night.

She walked into Cutter's room, seeing the exposed and inflamed wound. Large red streaks ran up his side and down his thigh. "Oh, my goodness!"

"Looks bad," West said. "We'll fix. Borage is good."

"Thank you so much, West. He had a terrible night."

"I figured so. Good man."

"Yes, he's a good man, and a good father."

"More baby come?" West asked, his dark eyes twinkling.

"Pardon?" She looked up, not sure she had heard right.

"You get baby with Cutter?"

"No, no...we're..." She couldn't tell him they slept separately.

West laughed, finished the poultice of leaves and replaced the bandage on Cutter's thigh and groin area.

He came back into the kitchen where Maggie had taken refuge. "Would you like a cup of coffee?"

"Thank you, Miz McCallister. My Annika fixed some."

"She's here? She came back?"

"Yes. This is our home. Don't be sad now. Cutter will be good. That old cow didn't dehorn him." He laughed again, smacked his lips and walked out.

Maggie didn't know exactly what she had missed, but it wasn't funny to her.

Taking Melody Ann, Maggie went in to see how Cutter felt. She sat the baby down on the bed and felt of Cutter's brow. He was still warm.

He opened his eyes slowly and looked up at her. "Was West here?"

"Yes, he doctored you. Do you need anything?"

"For this throbbing to go away. Am I all right?"

"The wound was deep and you lost a lot of blood. West says the poultice will take care of the infection." She pulled the light blanket up to his chest and folded it back.

"She didn't damage anything vital, did she?" He closed his eyes again, and frowned.

"I thought your legs were vital, and they're still there." She didn't like to think what he referred to, and didn't know how to answer him. Maybe that's what had happened to him before.

He patted Melody Ann's arm and drifted off.

Maggie took the baby and left, wondering what she could do for him. Annika came in shortly, picked up Melody Ann, hugged her and smiled at Maggie.

"I'm back. I'll wash dirty clothes now."

"I washed most everything Monday, Annika, but there's some towels. Mister McCallister was hurt."

"I know, but West says he be fine. Don't worry. You have to be strong. Bad for baby."

"What baby? I'm not upsetting Melody Ann."

Annika walked up to Maggie and laid her hand on Maggie's stomach. "That baby."

"There is no baby. You're mistaken."

"You'll see. Soon maybe?"

Maggie threw up her hands, grabbed the feather duster and dusted in earnest. No use arguing about it, everyone was determined she would be having a baby. Oh how she wished they could be right, and that she had a regular marriage. More and more she wanted to be in Cutter's

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arms, to be kissed senseless. She could only imagine what their lovemaking would be like.

## Chapter 10

Restless, Maggie paced the floor, wondering. She'd hardly been out for a walk or outside the house since Cutter had been hurt. After she put Melody Ann to bed, she threw open the patio doors and stepped outside. A beautiful, warm evening wrapped around her.

Fireflies flitted around her and a night bird called. The haunting strains of a violin and harmonica came from the bunkhouse.

She sighed heavily.

"Would the lady care to dance?" Cutter asked, right behind Maggie.

"Oh, you startled me! You shouldn't be up, should you?"

"I'm better and I've been sitting up some." He held out his hand to her.

"I don't know how to dance, Cutter. I've never had the opportunity."

"We'll go slow. Just follow me." He put his arm around her waist and took her hand. Laying his cheek against hers, he barely moved, taking minute steps.

Maggie inhaled deeply of his manly scent, a spicy aftershave and soap. West had helped him get in and out of the tub and redressed the wound.

"Why are you doing this?" she asked, not understanding this man at all. He could be tender at times, cross as an old bear at other times.

"Needed you to hold me up, and I know you haven't been getting out lately. Are you afraid I'll need something?"

"Well, that thigh wound does limit you getting around. Would you prefer I let you fall on your face?" His touch made a shiver race down her back.

"You aren't cold, are you?"

"Oh, no. I'm fine."

"Damn, we missed supper with the men! When we brand and castrate, we have a supper of mountain oysters at the bunkhouse with the fellows."

"What's mountain oysters?"

"It's the steer's genitals. Quite tasty."

"Then I'm glad I missed it. Doesn't sound too appetizing to me. I believe the music stopped, too." She tried to move away from him, but he held her tight.

"Oh...well, maybe I should get off this leg. You want to bring chairs out here?"

"No, I think you need something more comfortable. I'll help you to a chair in the parlor."

"Always the dutiful little woman, aren't you? Why don't you throw things, yell at me once in a while?"

"Did your wife do that? Mister McCallister, they taught us to be seen, not heard. And we answered when we were spoken to at the orphanage."

"Dammit, this isn't the orphanage! Yes, Anna Marie had a temper. She could blister my backside right proper, and that 'Mister McCallister' has gone far enough. I have a name, Maggie." His arm lay across her shoulder and he leaned into her, liking the lavender scent emanating from

her. She didn't smell horsey, like smoke or the earth as Anna Marie always had.

Maggie helped him into a chair and placed a small pillow behind his head. "Do you need anything else?"

"No, I'm fine. Where are you going?"

"To take a bath. Do you mind, Mister...Cutter?" She didn't wait for his answer, but flounced out of the room.

Cutter leaned his head back and closed his eyes. It hadn't been so bad having Maggie in the house. She had given it a woman's touch and wrought wonders with Melody Ann. She was a delightful child now, full of laughter and joy. Ace and Chiso, even West, fell over themselves to do things for Maggie.

He heard Maggie humming as she prepared her bath, then the door closed and all was quiet.

He wanted to be strong enough to go to the Cattlemen's Association dance next week. Maybe it would be nice to take Maggie and let her meet some of the other rancher's wives.

Maggie came out of the bathroom, smelling fresh and more like rosewater. She stopped by his chair. "I'll help you to bed now."

"You ready for bed?" He opened his eyes slowly and looked up at her.

"Yes. Come on." She placed her hand under his arm and lifted.

Cutter came to his feet, grunting slightly. "You're working hard with the garden and Melody Ann running and going."

"She's a busy little girl, all right." They walked slowly with his arm across her shoulders.

She sat him down on the side of the bed, unbuttoned his shirt and pulled the shirttail out. Peeling the shirt from

his shoulders, Maggie sucked in her breath. It was terrible just touching him.

“You’ll have to stand up, if I’m to help with your pants. Unbutton them, please.” She helped him stand.

He let the pants slide down over his hips and collapsed heavily on the bed again. “I’m not as strong as I think I am. This is hell, Maggie.”

“I know. You’ll be good as new in a few more days.”

“Why don’t you stay here with me tonight, Maggie. I need someone close.”

She couldn’t believe he had asked that. She looked deep into his eyes. “Oh, Cutter.” She knew she couldn’t refuse.

“I need you, Maggie.” He pulled her close, his mouth searching and finding hers. “You’re so sweet.”

Maggie felt lost when he untied the ribbons closing her wrapper and impatiently pushed it from her shoulders, still tasting her lips with small kisses.

He flung the wrapper toward the foot of the bed, and tucked her in beside him, scooting over to give her room. “I need to hold you. I’m not up to anything else.”

She remembered the other night she had lain in his arms, when he thought she was his deceased wife. Did he really know what he wanted tonight?

To get comfortable, Maggie scooted down further. “Are you sure about this? You ordered me out of your bed and your room.”

“I’d never do that, Maggie. You’ve been so good to Melody and me. Good night.” He kissed her, his lips skimming over hers.

“Night, Cutter. Are you comfortable?”

“Ummm...this is nice.” He patted her shoulder, his other arm going across her.

Maggie knew she wouldn't sleep. She wasn't used to sleeping with a man, such a virile man. She tried to lie still so as not to disturb him.

After lying there for a long time, she still couldn't sleep. She tried to ease out of bed, but Cutter brought her back into him, his arms anchoring her. She didn't like lying so intimately close with him, and again she tried to move away.

"Relax, Maggie, love. I won't hurt you."

She didn't know he was awake, or maybe he wasn't. Maggie closed her eyes tightly and tried to shut out this man. Did he know whom he held?

\* \* \* \*

When West came in with the milk the next morning and not finding Maggie in the kitchen and the stove cold, he went to investigate. The door was partially open to Cutter's room and he pushed it open farther. The sight he beheld made his eyes light up. Miz Maggie cuddled close in Cutter's arms. West turned quietly away and hurried out.

"You won't believe it, Ace. Miz Maggie was in bed with the boss and cuddled mighty close. She seemed to know that's where she ought to be," West reported breathlessly.

"Well, now maybe he's come to his senses after all. I couldn't see any reason for his crazy notions. My sister would want him to be happy."

"Now, maybe get another pretty baby?"

"Don't bet on it yet. He's gonna be mighty careful for a while, I think."

\* \* \* \*

Maggie finally came awake and finding Cutter had relaxed his hold, she eased away from him. Grabbing her wrapper, she hastened into the bathroom, her cheeks

flaming. She had felt his hardened manhood pressed into her backside. This was too much. If she wasn't expected to be a wife to him, she couldn't sleep in the same bed with him.

She needed to talk to someone badly. She knew she could never tell Beth of her problem. She would be the laughing stock of Cheyenne. If Cutter had a problem, was it normal that he could get still get a hardened erection like that? Maggie wished she knew more about the intimate things between a man and a woman. She had never had the chance to learn much.

Flushing heavily, Maggie went about her business. Breakfast was ready and waiting. She wondered if she should awaken Cutter and take his breakfast to him, when she heard him coming.

"Morning, Maggie," He hadn't taken time to shave and that gave him more of a manly look.

"Glad you're up. How are you feeling?" She poured coffee for him and set a plate of flapjacks and sausage in front of him.

"Good. I thought I'd drive in to town today. Would you want to go in and see your friends? Annika can watch Melody Ann." He reached for the butter, brushing her hand when she reached at the same time.

"Are you sure? I don't mind taking her."

"No. I'm sure it'll be all right." He wolfed down his flapjacks like he was starved.

"I meant are you sure you're up to it? Maybe it's something I could do for you."

"No, Maggie, dammit! I need to get away and I can't fork a horse yet. I have to take care of some things."

She lowered her gaze and finished eating, wondering how she could tell him she wouldn't be sharing his bed again unless she was a full-fledged wife.

When Cutter finished eating, he stood and grabbed his hat. "It'll be a couple of hours before I'll be ready to go. I'll talk to Annika when I check on Ace. He thought he would be able for some light work by now."

"He's a nice man. He and Chiso have been very helpful to me." She raised her coffee cup and took another sip.

"So I've noticed." He didn't like to admit he had been jealous of her turning to them, asking them instead of him, for things she wanted. He stalked out.

Maggie finished cleaning the kitchen, fed and dressed Melody Ann, and wondered what kept Annika. She was always in before now. She looked at the clock again, thinking that maybe she had made a mistake.

She changed into her denim-split skirt and vest, a light yellow blouse and her black boots. She wasn't riding, but it was a good traveling suit, too.

Hearing the buggy pull to a stop in front of the house, she walked outside with Melody Ann in her arms, expecting she would have to take Melody since Annika hadn't come in. She was surprised when Annika stepped down from the buggy and reached for the child.

"Give me baby. You didn't do any dusting or cleaning, did you?" Annika sullenly asked.

"I cleaned the kitchen as usual. I didn't have time for any..." Annika took Melody Ann and she started crying.

Maggie tried to soothe her. "It's all right, sweetie. Daddy and I'll be back soon."

"Take her in the house, Annika," Cutter said, his voice terse and clipped.

"Yes, sir," Annika answered, turning toward the front door.

Maggie looked after the crying baby. "I hate to leave her. Maybe..."

"Come on, Maggie." Cutter held out his hand to help her into the buggy. "She'll be okay."

Reluctantly Maggie stepped into the buggy and settled onto the seat beside Cutter. This was all so new and different to her. She had never had anyone who loved her or needed her. She sniffled and looked up at Cutter. "I hate to leave her."

He clicked to the mare and started the buggy down the road. "She'll be fine in a few minutes. You can't be with her every minute."

"But she's so little. She doesn't understand."

He didn't answer, but stared straight ahead, his mind in turmoil. Cutter knew he couldn't talk about last night, how he'd nearly made a fool of himself and told her his feelings. It felt good to be riding with Maggie. They ought to do it more often. It was his fault. He had run from anything that made him look like a husband.

"You need any money?" Cutter finally asked after they'd ridden some time in silence.

"No...no, I have plenty."

"Leave your list of supplies with Ira and he'll have it ready when it's time to leave."

She wanted to say 'Yes sir, no sir' to him today, not understanding what she'd done wrong this time. He sure wasn't talkative.

"I know. How long will you be?"

"About three hours, I guess. I have to go to the saddler, the bank, and hardware. If you want to meet me at

Monkey's Oyster Bay Restaurant around twelve-thirty, we'll eat, pick up the supplies, and be on our way."

"All right. I'll visit a while with Beth if she isn't busy." Not that she was particularly looking forward to it anymore. She couldn't tell anyone she had such a sham of a marriage.

He let Maggie out in front of Ira's store, clicked to the mare, and drove away. Maggie left her list with Ira and hurried to Beth's apartment. She'd just as soon not see Josie and Summer today, with Summer already expecting a baby and probably gloating over the fact.

She knocked on Beth's door some minutes later with her hands clenched. Waiting several minutes, Maggie was about to leave when the door opened. "Yes, who is it?"

Maggie turned back to the door, her mouth falling open. "Beth, is that you? What's wrong?"

"Maggie! Oh Lord, Maggie! Come in!" She caught Maggie's hand, pulling her into the foul smelling room.

"Are you ill, Beth? Your face...your hair..." Her hair didn't look like it had been combed in a week, and her eyes were puffy and red, her face swollen.

Beth pulled the drapes open, picked up dirty shirts and underwear, flung them in a closet. "Oh Maggie, I'm so unhappy. I'm not the woman Alex Murray needs. He's so tight with every penny and I can't go anywhere." She indicated for Maggie to take a seat.

"Then leave him, Beth. Get a job as a waitress or anything. You don't have to live like this. You're only sitting here feeling sorry for yourself and crying, aren't you?"

"Something like that. He's staying out late playing poker and drinking." She covered her face with her hands when the tears began again.

"I'm so sorry, Beth. What can I do for you? I have a few dollars you can have if you want to get a room."

Beth wiped her eyes and looked up. "We don't seem to agree on anything. Even our love life is non-existent, and...oh, I'm so sorry. Where's the little girl, and how are you doing?"

"I'm fine, Beth. We have a lovely home, and a good life. Cutter McCallister is a wonderful man," she answered in all honesty.

"I can't imagine. What did I do? I don't deserve this."

"Leave him, Beth. You can find a place to live and a job. There's money in this town. Cutter told me about the many fine homes, called Millionaire's Row. How many big ranchers live here in town rather than out on their ranches."

"That's it. Alex thinks I'm too dumb for anything. I'm a flirt and have an eye for the men. If he paid any attention to me, I wouldn't be interested in looking anywhere else."

They talked for over an hour and Maggie had heard all she wanted to. She kissed Beth good-bye, pressing twenty dollars into her hand.

Maggie wandered in and out of a couple of stores, bought buttons and seam binding and spent the last of her money. Sad about Beth's predicament, she felt that maybe Beth was at fault, too. Had she really tried? Maggie kept checking her lapel watch, not wanting to be late in meeting Cutter.

Just before reaching the restaurant, she saw Cutter limp down the steps of a small hotel with a woman on his arm. Maggie stopped dead in her tracks and her mouth fell open. Cutter bent and kissed the woman's cheek, patted her hand, and hurried up the street, still favoring his bad thigh.

Maggie'd had enough of a shock for one day, and she wasn't prepared for this. She stood glued to the spot on the boardwalk until Cutter was a few feet from her.

"Oh, here you are! Good timing."

"Was it? I didn't intend to interrupt your rendezvous with the lady friend. Are you sure you don't need more time?"

"Very sure. She's a friend of Anna Marie's and I bought her a cup of coffee."

Maggie didn't believe him for a minute. She had been too smug in her relationship with Cutter. It ought to have been plain to her. If he wasn't sleeping with his wife and getting his needs satisfied, he'd be going somewhere else. What a fool she had been.

He took her arm and turned her into the restaurant. Maggie jerked away. "Keep your hands to yourself, Mister McCallister! I'm quite capable of taking care of myself."

"I see. Try not to ruin our lunch, okay?"

"No, it isn't okay. I don't know what your game is, but I'm not playing." She slapped the small sack of buttons into his chest, turned, and hastened down the street to Ira's store. Climbing into the buggy, she sat down, prepared to wait for Cutter. She supposed he would go ahead with his lunch.

Ira evidently saw her. He and his helper brought the supplies out, and stowed them in the buggy.

"Guess that man of yours will be along in a minute. I told Josie you were in town and she went over to Beth's, but you'd already gone."

"Sorry I missed her, Ira. Yes, Cutter will be along shortly."

The words were hardly out of Maggie's mouth when Cutter materialized. He spoke briefly to Ira, then climbed

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into the buggy and touched the reins to the mare's backside.  
They were both quiet riding the eight miles to the ranch.  
Anger boiled in Maggie until she could hardly sit still.

## Chapter 11

Maggie waited to eat supper with Cutter that night as they had hardly seen each other the last few days. She had already fed Melody Ann and put her to bed. Maggie hoped they could at least be civil to each other.

She served him, and took her seat. "I gave Beth twenty dollars when we were in town. I guess their marriage is over. She's very unhappy, and I advised her to leave Alex and get a job."

"Oh...how many more of them are having trouble? What was wrong with her and Alex?" He hardly looked up, but went ahead with his eating.

"I don't know all the details, but she says he stays out late drinking and gambling. He's tight with his money and doesn't want her to go anywhere."

"So that's it. He hit me up for a personal loan."

"What does that mean? Is he going to pay her way back to Baltimore?"

"I doubt it. Probably owes a gambling debt. That has ruined many a good man."

"I thought he was a nice man. Guess I'm not a very good judge."

"I wondered why he hadn't built a house, or had anything. Maybe that's the answer. That's too bad."

“How are you doing? Your leg giving you any trouble?”

“It tires easily when I ride a horse. We start roundup next week to move some cattle to market. Part of my shipment of Durhams are coming in to be bred to my Longhorn bulls. They upgrade a herd.”

“I understand. Breeding is very important, isn't it?”

He raised an eyebrow quizzically. “Good breeding can make or break a rancher. It's important.”

“There's plenty of hot water,” she said, noticing when he first came in how hot and sweaty he was.

“Thanks, I'll use it.”

Maggie cleaned the kitchen and walked out on the patio. Stars dotted the dark sky and filled the warm night. She pulled out a chair and sat down, loving the light breeze. She wasn't ready to tell him yet that she was sewing on three dresses for people who had contacted her. She still had dreams of a dress shop one day.

Feeling Cutter's presence, Maggie looked up, although she hadn't heard him. Barefooted, he only wore low riding denim trousers.

“What are you doing?”

“Enjoying the night. Hoping for a little breeze.”

“It is warm, isn't it? Have you been upset about Beth and her problems?”

“Yes, she's my friend. I want the best for her, for her to be happy. She only came because of me, and we had such high hopes...”

“I wasn't, nor am I seeing a woman, Maggie. Inez Logan was Anna Marie's friend. They were close for several years.”

“Guess I should have known better. With your problem, I know you can't make love, and you should have

told me before we were married. Now, I'm tied to you and only Melody's custodian"

Cutter threw up his hands. "What fool nonsense are you talking about? I don't have a problem, and I can make love."

"Then that makes it even worse, doesn't it? I'm not a desirable person, or the woman you want, am I? Good night, Mister McCallister!" She came out of her chair like her skirt was on fire and pushed past him, nearly running to her room. Her face burned, and tears streamed down her cheeks.

"Maggie, wait! Maggie...don't..."

She didn't stop until she got to her room and slammed the door.

Cutter drew in a long breath and held it. That was the second time she had said something about his problem, having an accident and not able to make love. Was there talk in town that he had a problem and someone had told that to Maggie?

He shook his head, not understanding the situation. Cutter sat down in the chair Maggie had so quickly vacated and tried to think through this thing. What should he do now? Did he have to prove to her that he was capable of the act? He thought he had made it clear he wasn't ready for a woman in his bed, for all the entanglements that love brought. Had his kissing her and holding her that night given her mixed signals? He didn't need more hurt and his heart breaking again.

He had tried to be good to her, hadn't he? Maybe she saw that most of the other girls were happy with their men, had a good loving relationship, and she felt left out. Was she the only one who hadn't consummated her marriage? Did women tell each other such things? He bet all the men

were snickering up their sleeves at him. Men usually got it out of you somehow by their teasing and crude jokes about their prowess in bed.

Cutter listened to a night bird calling, heard a gentle rumble of thunder. He looked off to the west and saw faint lightning streak the clouds. "Maybe it's going to rain," he murmured.

Sitting on in the dark, he tried to find a solution. The only way he could see was to be fair and honest with Maggie. Feeling the first drop of rain hit his cheek, he set the chair back inside and closed the big patio doors. When he went down the hall, he looked in on Melody Ann. Finding her all right, he opened the door to his room.

Even in the hazy light from the window, he knew something wasn't right with his bed. He could faintly make out some object and he reached out, touching hair and flesh.

"Gawd-a-mighty!" He found a match, ready to light the lamp.

"No light, please. I'm not happy in this situation, Cutter. I feel like I've been betrayed. Read that ad in the newspaper! It said, 'Lonely and eligible men looking for the gentler sex—love and marriage,'" she lied, hoping he wouldn't demand to see the paper.

"I can't very well read it in the dark, Maggie. And I don't need to if you remember it so well." He paced back and forth in front of the bed, wondering what he was supposed to do now.

"You've cheated me out of what I've held most dear in my life. Love. I've never had anyone to love me or had anyone to love. I wouldn't have answered that darn ad to only be a caretaker for a baby again. I've cared for children all my life. I'm moving into town, Mister McCallister, and

I'll find a job to earn money to pay my way back to Baltimore." She came off the bed and started toward the hall.

"I can't let you do that, Maggie. Melody Ann needs you."

"Yes, she needs me and I need her. All through my life I've had to consider what other people needed. I've never had the opportunity to find out what I want. Since equal rights for women are recognized in Wyoming, this is my chance. I need to be a whole woman, to satisfy some of my needs." She didn't give Cutter a chance to answer, but left quickly, slamming the door to her room when she entered.

Now she had done it. She'd made a threat, could she live with it? Maggie crawled into bed and prayed harder than she'd ever prayed in her life.

She cried for a while and prayed some more. She hated to admit she had been a failure as Beth had been. But she hadn't been given the chance to be a wife or make a marriage work. How could she call this a marriage, even though they had stood before a minister and said their vows? Love, honor, and cherish be damned! She didn't have any of those things. Maggie wanted love above all. She'd always needed love.

\* \* \* \*

When Maggie came into the kitchen, she found breakfast already cooked on the stove and coffee ready. A note leaned against her coffee cup.

She tore the envelope open and read:

*Please take a few days to think about this, Maggie. You've done so much for Melody Ann and she loves you. It would really hurt her, and me, if you leave. I'll try to make everything better for you. Let's talk about it,*

*please. I'll probably be late getting home tonight—  
Cutter.*

Rain had fallen most of the night, a gentle rain. The air felt damp like more was to come. Maggie wasn't ready to admit she wanted to leave. She loved this place, the only home she'd ever had.

Not wanting to face Annika and more condemnation, Maggie closeted herself in her room with Melody Ann most of the day. She cut out the beautiful lavender lawn floral by looking at a picture and sewed on it. If she ever went to a social event, she would have something pretty to wear.

Maggie had nearly given up on Cutter when she heard him come in close to nine o'clock. She hurried to the kitchen to serve his supper.

He was grimy and mud-splattered. He had his shirt stripped off to wash. "Would you rather take a bath first? I guess supper can wait a while longer," she said.

"Oh, that sounds wonderful. I ache all over."

"Then take your bath."

"No, I'll eat. I might go to sleep in the tub. Don't think I slept more than an hour last night." He splashed water over his face, neck and arms and washed.

"I didn't do so good, either," she murmured, setting the steaks, gravy and bread, sliced tomatoes, and mashed potatoes on the table.

He finished washing and dried, came to the table, and nearly fell into his chair. "We really pushed today, getting the last of the cattle to Fort Russell."

"Why did you push so hard? Another day or two wouldn't have hurt, would it?"

"Yeah, it would. Had to get them there before this new fiscal year starts in July, and the boys deserve a break."

They've pretty much stuck around with me with Ace and Shorty all laid up. The Cattlemen's dance is Saturday night. You will go with me, won't you, Maggie?"

"Oh my!" Her heart fluttered wildly in her chest and she could hardly breathe. Why would he want her to go? Was this one way of trying to smooth things over? "I'll consider it, sir."

"Don't take too long." He stood and looked back at her. "Very good supper. Thank you."

"Thank you. Are you asking someone else if I don't go?"

"Don't say crazy things, Maggie. I want to make things better for you, and I've had to take some guff about keeping my new...my new wife hidden out here." Those were the hardest words he'd ever said and he choked over them.

"Wife? I'm not your wife, Mister McCallister! I believe I'm just the..."

"Don't push tonight, Maggie! I'm too tired. We'll try to do better, okay?"

"Better!" She grabbed a bucket of hot water off the stove and bumped it against the edge, sloshing water over her hands and wrists. "Oh, damn!"

"What the hell? Maggie?" He grabbed her arm and jerked her around, seeing the redness of her hands. Not waiting an instant, he pumped cold water into a pan and immersed her hands. "I'm so sorry," he murmured, pinning her against the cabinet.

"Stand still," he admonished. "I'll wrap them for you." He jerked open a drawer and pulled out a white cloth, tore it into strips, and bound her hands. "You'll have to be careful for a few days. There'll be blisters."

"I'm afraid so. That was so stupid." She looked up at him, tears glistening in her eyes.

“Hey, we’re all stupid once in a while.” He drowned in her eyes and couldn’t look away, his lips slowly coming to hers. With a groan, he pulled her into his body and held her tight, his lips roaming over hers.

Never had he known anything so wonderful, so sweet. He raised his head, caught a quick breath, and lowered his mouth again.

Maggie brought her bandaged hands up to push him away, but instead found them inching up his arms and around his neck, pulling him closer. She groaned softly and let herself melt into him. This felt so right, so wonderful, where she belonged.

“Oh, baby!” he ground out. “I’ve fought like hell, Maggie. I wasn’t ready for another woman...” His mouth found hers again for hotter kisses, his hands caressing up her back.

“Let me get that bath, honey. Can we finish this later?”

“Maybe. I’ll check on Melody Ann.”

He picked up two buckets of water and hurried to the bathroom with them, anxious to get a bath and feel clean again. Eager to know if Maggie would be waiting for him, Cutter emptied the last bucket of hot water and added a bucket of cold water. He impatiently unfastened his denim jeans and stepped out of them, already feeling the tightness and swelling in his groin. He had never looked forward to anything so much.

Maggie had him about crazy with her sweetness, her shy looks, the way she wore her riding skirt, the pert fullness of her breasts. He could nearly feel them filling his hand already.

\* \* \* \*

She tried to rationalize what happened. Did this mean he was ready to accept her as his wife, tell her he loved her?

Or was it just to be a one-night affair? Tomorrow he would shove her away again and reject her. She couldn't take that chance. She'd had rejection all her life, and she wanted no more of it.

Pulling off her wrapper, Maggie crawled into her bed and blew out the light. When Cutter McCallister was fully ready to claim her as his wife, give her the love she needed and wanted, then they would share a bed. Maybe he thought one night in his arms would make her more than willing to stay, to continue to be the caretaker of Melody Ann. Let him think again. She had rights, too.

Cutter finished his bath, shaved quickly so his whiskers wouldn't scratch Maggie's fair and tender skin, and applied his aftershave liberally. He wouldn't smell as nice as she always did. He'd never caught her sweaty or sticky. She was always dainty and womanly.

When he stepped out into the hall and looked toward his room, he fully expected to see a light and Maggie in his bed. Instead he found a dark room. Maggie wasn't in his bed. With her door closed, he knew that's where Maggie could be found.

What had he done? He thought everything was going his way for a change. She had appeared receptive to his kisses, hadn't she? Cutter hesitated briefly before walking into his room and feeling the emptiness wash over him. Maggie wasn't there.

Again he hesitated. Should he go to her? Would she even let him in the room? Slowly his ardor cooled and Cutter knew somehow that he had ruined the evening.

His mind made up now, he marched down the hall to her room and tried the doorknob. It opened beneath his hand.

“Maggie, I’m sorry. Maybe I’m mistaken, but I thought we had things to finish.”

The pale light of the moon shone across the foot of the bed. Maggie stirred, then sat up, pulling the blanket up to her chest.

“You’re mistaken, Mister McCallister. When you’re ready to acknowledge me as your loving wife and can freely give me the love I’ve been cheated out of, then we’ll share a bed. I will not be your whore for one night. Is that clear, sir?”

Cutter’s heart hit the floor with a heavy thud. She was going to be stubborn and insistent, was she? Well, two people could be stubborn. He would make her life so miserable she would wish she had left.

Then it hit him. He couldn’t do that. Already she’d threatened to leave. She just might do it. He couldn’t be laughed at and made a fool. She had to stay, not only for his sake, but also for Melody Ann.

“Very clear, Maggie. What can I do to make things easier for you?”

“Show me the consideration that a woman deserves, sir. I’m sure you can figure it out. You’re supposed to be a smart man, and a southern gentleman, aren’t you?”

“I’m a southerner all right. I don’t think as you Yankees do.”

“That’s another thing, Mister McCallister. I didn’t kill your brothers. For heaven’s sakes, I was eight years old when that war was declared. I can’t help that I was raised in the North.”

“I never said you killed anybody.”

“But you have no love for the northern people. I don’t meddle in politics, sir, nor have I ever tried to tell you where your loyalties should be.”

“I didn’t mean to stir up a fuss. Maybe I was mistaken about your kisses. They seemed to tell me I could expect more from you, Maggie.”

“You were very mistaken. Yes, I want love, understanding, compassion, and kindness as much as the next person. I believe we promised that when we repeated our wedding vows. However, I will not compromise myself just to satisfy your needs for one night, or become your plaything, Mister McCallister.”

Muttering to himself, Cutter left the room and slammed the door. She was a hard-boiled woman. He guessed he knew where that left him. For two cents he wouldn’t take her to the dance. He’d been frustrated too damned long already.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning was a day to make everyone delight in the beautiful sunshine and gentle breeze. Maggie hung up her washing and occasionally stopped to push Melody Ann in the swing. Her mind was very much on Cutter and why he hadn’t waited to eat breakfast this morning. Maybe he had eaten in the bunkhouse.

She heard a scream and turned quickly to see Melody Ann on the ground. What had happened? Oh Lord, she should have been paying closer attention.

Maggie rushed to her, gathering Melody Ann into her arms. “Please be all right, sweetheart.” She ran her hand over Melody Ann’s back and legs quickly, finding nothing broken.

Pushing Melody Ann away from her slightly, she saw the small gash on her head and felt the bump. Maggie sank onto the wet earth, her hands trembling. “Dear Lord, please let this baby be all right,” she prayed, and looked up to see Cutter striding across the ground from the barn lot.

“What happened? Is she hurt?” he asked, kneeling down beside Maggie.

“I’m afraid so,” Maggie answered, feeling the tears gathering in her own eyes.

“Why did she fall? Weren’t you watching her?” Cutter asked, jerking Melody Ann into his arms. He stood up quickly and started toward the house. “Don’t just stand there, do something. I can’t lose...”

Maggie wanted to scream, cry and kick something all at the same time. ‘Do something?’ he’d said. What could she do? Evidently he wasn’t even going to let her take care of the child. Guilt overcame her. Hadn’t she been watching her closely enough, or had her mind been too much on Cutter?

She slowly came to her feet and followed Cutter into the house. Catching up to him in Melody’s room, she silently watched him gently bathe the baby’s face, then turn toward her.

“What happened, Maggie? Why isn’t she coming around?”

“Let me see if I can do anything. I’m so sorry. I just turned my back for a minute to...”

Cutter’s resolve broke and tears fell. “This can’t be happening. First Anna Marie, now Melody Ann.” He clenched his hands into fists, acting like he was ready to smack someone.

Maggie stepped out of his way, and took the dropped washcloth. She wet it again and propped Melody Ann up a bit. “Here, honey, you’re going to be all right. It’s just a bump on your head,” she tried to rationalize, bathing Melody’s face and hands.

She pushed Melody’s baby fine hair out of her face and looked at the small gash closely. “Cutter, if you’ll bring me

that ointment, I'll doctor this. I think she's going to be all right. It doesn't look too serious."

Moving Melody's arms, then her legs, she was satisfied that she was all right. She gently slapped the little girl's face and turned her over looking for more bumps or cuts. She found nothing.

Cutter returned with the ointment and watched as Maggie carefully doctored the small cut. "Why isn't she coming around? What can I do?"

Maggie picked Melody up again and draped her across her shoulder, patting her back roughly. Maybe her breath had been knocked out of her. She heard Melody catch her breath and start crying.

"It's all right, sweetheart." She turned toward Cutter and handed the child to him. "Just hold her for a while. I think she's all right." Her knees were so weak she couldn't stand. She could feel the condemnation from Cutter and she had to get out of his sight.

## Chapter 12

When they rode into town Saturday night, Maggie was nervous. Her hands were encased in soft white gloves, and she felt pampered and soft from the good soaking bath. Tiny tendrils of hair curled around her face and a gentle smile played across her lips. She had seen the light in Cutter's eyes when she walked into the parlor and told him she was ready. Maggie hoped she didn't make a fool of herself. She had never been invited to mix with high society.

"Are you all right, Maggie?" Cutter asked, feeling her restlessness after they had ridden for a while.

"I suppose. I hope I'll be accepted."

"Don't worry. You'll be fine, and you're lovely tonight."

"Thank you." He was quite handsome, too, and she knew Pedro had set up a barbering service in the bunkhouse and manicured all the men. She stole another glance at Cutter, admiring his bushy mustache, his sun-bronzed features, the white shirt, black string tie and a deep maroon cloth coat. Ace, Shorty and Rusty rode behind them.

"Your hands hurting? I'll try to be gentle with them while we're dancing."

“They’re all right, but peeling. I thought the gloves would protect them.”

“That’s smart. Is this one of your new dresses?”

“Yes. It’s quite comfortable. The material is soft and colorful.”

“Very becoming, too. You’re quite the accomplished seamstress.” In a good mood, his smile lifted the corners of his mouth. Not only because Maggie was with him but also they’d finished the allotted work on the ranch in time, and Melody Ann was all right. He had been so afraid for her.

Cutter had a tender feeling in his heart, wanting to show Maggie off proudly. Not one rancher’s wife that he knew could hold a candle to her. She was beautiful, her glorious red hair shining tonight, her green eyes sparkling like she was excited. He hoped part of it was because she was pleased to be with him.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Cutter drew the buggy to a stop in front of the Armory and hopped out. He came to the other side and reached up to slip his hands around Maggie’s waist and helped her down beside him. She would be the envy of every woman here.

Walking in with Maggie on his arm, Cutter felt his chest expanding, his smile becoming wider.

“Cutter, you ole scalawag! Is this the lovely wife?” George Channing asked, clamping him on the shoulder.

Cutter nodded and introduced Maggie. “This is Maggie.”

George bowed and kissed her gloved hand, his walrus-mustached mouth touching briefly. “Lovely, my dear. Now, we know why he keeps you under wraps.”

They went on down the room, Cutter introducing her. Names and faces swam through her mind and in front of her

eyes. When they stopped in front of Inez Logan, Maggie froze. *That woman!*

"Inez, this is Maggie," Cutter said.

"Yes, how nice!" Inez answered, reaching up to kiss Cutter's cheek.

Maggie immediately saw where the dark-haired beauty's interest centered, and it wasn't on her. She just bet she itched to get her claws into Cutter. Maggie stiffened her backbone and her resolve grew. *That woman will not get my husband!*

When Cutter appeared to tarry, Maggie pulled him on. "There's more interesting people to meet, darling," she murmured, just loud enough for Inez to hear.

Cutter's brow drew into a frown. Just what in hell was going on? "Maybe we ought to get some punch and take a seat. We've got all night."

"Wonderful. I'm so looking forward to dancing with you again, Cutter. You're very handsome tonight." She reached up to straighten his tie and peered over his shoulder to see Inez watching them closely, just as she thought.

"Maggie, are you flirting with me? What's going on?"

"I never flirt, Mister McCallister. I'm a serious person."

"God, I hope so," he said, urging her toward the table for drinks.

Ace and Shorty stepped forward. Maggie walked around the table, looking over the trays of *hors d'ouvers*.

"Ace, will you do something for me? Dance with Inez Logan and keep her busy," Cutter asked, drawing a big breath.

"Hey man, don't do this to me. I intend to dance with Miz Maggie if she'll let me."

"I'm trying to avoid a catfight. I have a feeling there's something brewing." Cutter stopped and held out his hand when Maggie handed him a small plate of crackers and cheeses.

"Miz Maggie, may I have one dance with you at least? We don't want Cutter monopolizing you all night."

Maggie smiled sweetly at Ace. "Thank you, Ace. I'd be delighted, but I'm just learning."

"Don't worry. We could all use a few lessons, I'm thinking."

Cutter took her elbow and led her to a table, all the while looking over his shoulder to see where Inez Logan was. He wanted to steer Maggie in the other direction. He hadn't realized until tonight that maybe Inez had set her cap for him.

"You're the prettiest woman here, Maggie," he whispered, holding a chair and seating her just as the four-piece band began playing. Cutter wondered where Inez's husband, Justin, was? He was several years older than Inez, and they had never seemed like a close, loving couple. Maybe she had married him for his money.

Maggie took a sip of her punch and set down the cup. "Thank you so much, but don't feel like you have to butter me up. I know my limitations."

"I'm not buttering you up. I mean every word I've said."

"Then please accept my apologies, sir. I'm sorry if I thought you had an ulterior motive."

He laid his hand over hers. "Think nothing of it. Shall we dance, Maggie? We'll have to go kinda easy with my leg."

"I'm willing to try." Her heart fluttered faster.

They moved to the floor and into each other's arms. Determined this was going to be a wonderful night, one she would always remember, Maggie smiled to herself. She glided across the floor, following where Cutter led and trying not to make mistakes.

"You're good, Cutter," she ruefully admitted, knowing he'd probably danced a lot with his wife. Maybe this brought back unpleasant memories for him.

"Good...at what?" he asked, his mind seemingly elsewhere.

"Oh...at dancing. What did you think?"

"Sorry. My mind wandered." He looked at her sheepishly. She wouldn't want to know what was on his mind. For one brief moment he could visualize him and Maggie having a regular life, a loving relationship. Maybe babies of their own. She was so affectionate and giving with Melody Ann. He drew her into him, resting his cheek against her sweet-smelling hair.

\* \* \* \*

Inez looked for her husband, wondering what corner Justin had hid out in tonight to keep from dancing with her. She watched Cutter slip a protective arm around Maggie and pull her towards him. His hand caressed the full length of her back, his cheek pressed against Maggie's cheek and he closed his eyes. Fire built in her insides. She would not let that red-haired hussy fall in love with Cutter. She had to keep Anna Marie's memory alive in him, if she had to seduce him herself. Inez had long thought he would be a wonderful man to have in her bed. She had given up on Justin long ago.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter had hardly gotten Maggie seated when Ace showed up and pulled out his chair. "May I claim you for the next waltz, Miz Maggie?"

She looked at Cutter. Seeing his nod, she smiled at Ace. "I guess it's all right." Wrapped in a cocoon of warmth from the dance with Cutter, she hated for the spell to be broken.

"Don't look now, Cutter, but that infernal woman is headed this way. I can't dance with her," Ace said.

Cutter wanted to crawl under the table, and he hurriedly made an excuse. "I need to talk to Sam Campbell. Get Maggie back safely." He scrambled across the room.

"What was that all about?" Maggie asked, her gaze following Cutter.

"Inez Logan kinda makes a nuisance of herself, always hanging onto Cutter. He's trying to avoid her. Don't think he likes the woman worth a damn."

"Oh...I thought...wasn't she a friend of Anna Marie's?"

"She claimed to be, but I don't remember much association between them. Even Inez's husband avoids her."

"Well, looks like this is our dance. Are you sure you're up to it, Ace?"

"We'll give it a try, ma'am."

While they moved around the floor, Maggie scanned the crowd, finally finding Cutter in deep conversation with a group of men in a corner of the long room. She saw a bottle being passed around. Cutter took a long drink.

He joined them as soon as Maggie and Ace returned. Ace laughed and held the chair for Maggie. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it? Maybe we can give it another try, that is, if your husband doesn't object."

Cutter clasped Maggie's hand. "Are you enjoying this?"

"I'm not good at dancing, and I feel..."

“Then let’s go home and dance by ourselves on the patio. I’m not interested in staying if you aren’t.”

“Uh-oh,” Ace said, looking from Maggie to Cutter, wondering what had set him off. Memories of dancing here too often with Anna Marie, maybe?

“All right,” Maggie answered, not knowing what else to say. Something had sure upset Cutter.

He grabbed her shawl from the back of the chair, draped it around her shoulders, and ushered her out into the cool night air.

After they were in the buggy and headed out of town, Cutter reached for her hand. “I’m sorry, Maggie. I just couldn’t take that. I’ll make it up to you somehow.”

“Was it the memory of dancing there with your wife, or what? I don’t understand.”

“That’s partly it. Some of the men’s crude remarks got to me. I’m not being fair to you, and I can’t act the loving husband when I’m not.”

“I see.” But she really didn’t. Maybe she didn’t understand how men thought.

He tucked the lap robe across her knees although it wasn’t that cool.

When they drove into the house, he let Maggie out and drove onto the barn. Maggie took the pins out of her hair, let it fall loose around her shoulders, and put her shawl away.

She heard Cutter come in, pull off his coat, and hang it up. He stuck his head through her doorway and asked, “Are you ready to dance with me?”

“I guess so, but there’s no music.”

“We won’t need any. I’ll hum a tune. How are your hands?” He turned them over and looked at the redness, the peeling skin.

“They’re hurting a bit.”

“I’ll hold them gently. I like your hair like this.” He touched it gently, letting the silky mass slide through his fingers. They moved through the house, opened the big doors, and walked out under a starry sky onto the flagstone patio.

Cutter began humming *Red River Valley* and pulled Maggie toward him, enfolding her in his arms. They danced cheek to cheek, barely moving. He stopped, his arms coming down her back, holding her against him.

“It’s true. I’d miss your sweet smile, your little laughs, and your touch. You’ve become important in my life, Maggie. So important,” he whispered, his lips coming to hers.

His lips intoxicated Maggie, made her giddy, wanting more. She opened her mouth in a soft gasp and felt his tongue plunge inside, playing with hers. Never had she had such feelings. She knew she had to have this night with Cutter if she never had anything more. Her knees refused to hold her up, and she sagged against him, feeling the hardness of his arousal.

He swept her up into his arms, marched back through the house, and to his room. Setting her on her feet, he untied the big bow at the neckline of her dress and unbuttoned the three buttons, kissing her lips all the time.

“I need you, Maggie. I want you. Love me...love me and never let me go...” His voice was a soft whisper.

“Oh, yes...I want you.” She unbuttoned his shirt, pushing at it, wanting so badly to touch him, to feel his warm skin.

He slipped her arms out of her dress, and lifted the dress over her head, rubbing his hand along her bare skin. “You’re so lovely, my Maggie.”

His Maggie! Was she really his? Would he acknowledge that he loved her?

He brought down her petticoat and satin and lace panties, then the stockings, and slipped off her slippers. She stood before him bare to the skin, silhouetted by the silvery glow of the moon.

“So beautiful, sweet woman. I knew you would be.”

“I need to touch you...to see you, Cutter. Please, can you stand for me to touch you?”

He unfastened his pants and let them drop, pulling off his boots and socks. When he stood again, Maggie ran her hands down his hips, taking his underwear and trousers down together.

“Feel that,” he said, pressing into her. “I’ve been miserable, woman, since the first night I saw you. You drive me crazy.”

He fell back on the bed, taking her with him. “Oh God, how I’ve wanted you, sweet Maggie.”

She whimpered, meeting his lips for another long, searing kiss. His hands came to her breasts, circling the nipples.

“Touch me, baby. Love me...” He brought his lips down her neck, planting small kisses. Finally he circled one nipple, and then pulled it into his mouth.

Maggie shuddered as fiery sensations burst inside her, making her arch into him and grasp with her hands. She smoothed her hands down his sides, across his flat stomach. She tangled her fingers in the fine hair across his flanks, and found his pulsing manhood. “Oh my,” she gasped.

What did she do now? She wasn’t experienced in how to pleasure a man. Stroking softly outward, she found that didn’t hurt him, so she tried again.

“Lovely, sweet woman. That’s good.”

His fingers slipped inside her moistness, stroking, finding her inner core. She tensed and grasped him harder.

“That’s it, baby. Hang on.”

“Oh...oh...oh...I didn’t know.”

“It’ll be better yet.” He moved over her, spreading her legs.

“I’ll try to be gentle,” he said, entering her in one big thrust. Cutter closed his eyes, wondering if he’d gone to heaven. She was hot and tight, throbbing with passion, and he was ready to explode.

“Easy, baby, let’s go easy.” In a few seconds he was in control again and began a rhythmic thrusting. She matched him, wanting more of this wonderful thing. She had to have more.

As the tension built, she clung to him, then cried out, “Oh, God...oh...oh!”

“That’s it! Hang in there.”

With one final shudder, Cutter reached his satisfaction and grasped her buttocks into him. He held her tight as spasm after spasm raced through him. This was the greatest thing that had ever happened to him. How could he ever get enough of this wonderful and loving woman?

He collapsed heavily on her, holding her close.

Maggie moved, bringing them both back to the present.

“I’m sorry. Am I squashing you?”

“Something like that. You’re a big man.”

“Did I hurt you?” He moved off her, cradling her in his arms.

“I’m all right, I think. Somebody should have warned me making love was like this.”

He planted small kisses across her face, coming to her lips again for a long, searing kiss. "So loving and sweet. It'll only get better, too."

"What?"

"Our life, our loving. If you have good loving, you can whip the world. You've been so wonderful with little Melody, and I owe you a lot."

"Why would we want to whip the world?"

"Shhh...you talk too much, sweet woman. I won't want to let you out of my sight from now on." He wrapped his arms around her tighter, brought his lips down to her breast again. He laved, tasted, and then suckled the hardened nipple.

"You do things to me, pretty lady."

"Ummm, I like to do things to you."

A few more kisses, loving pats, teasing hunches, and they were making love again.

Finally Cutter turned her away from him and curved into her back, his hand resting on her breast. "I want to spend the rest of my nights with you like this," he whispered.

They dozed for sometime, and Cutter felt that familiar stirring. He pressed into Maggie more, wanting to be sure she could take more of him. He didn't want to make her so sore she couldn't walk.

Maggie turned into him, cradling his face. "What if we make a baby? Will you like that?"

"If you want it. I had a feeling sometime Anna Marie would rather ride horses and mess with them, than being a mother. She was a tomboy."

"Do you think that made her lose the babies?"

"The first one, yes. I don't know about the second one. She seemed to be more reconciled with Melody Ann."

"I'm sorry. I'll love a baby if it's part of you. You're a wonderful man, Cutter."

"Hey, you're dreaming. I haven't been so nice to you. We're gonna change that, okay?"

"How? What are we going to do?" She loved his sleepy drawl.

"We're going to have lots of nights like this."

A loud pounding on the back door startled both of them. "Dammit! What the hell?" Cutter exploded.

"Boss! Boss! Fire! Fire!"

Cutter recognized Shorty's voice and he hurried to the back door, seeing an orange glow already toward the bunkhouse. "Good God! What?"

"The bunkhouse. It's Ace!"

"I'll get my pants."

Maggie hastily pulled on her wrapper and rushed to him. "Where's Melody Ann?"

Cutter set her aside, his heart pounding. He grabbed his pants and jerked them up over his hips. Slamming his feet into his boots, he didn't even take time to get socks.

"Where's Melody Ann?" Maggie repeated.

"With Annika! I'll get her, honey! Make something cold to drink or some hot coffee, please. We may need it."

He kissed her lips quickly, grabbed his hat, a wet towel and rushed out.

### **Chapter 13**

Shorty, Rusty, West, and Chiso had a bucket brigade going when Cutter arrived. He grabbed another bucket and filled it at the horse trough and threw it on the fire.

Annika stood to one side with Melody Ann clasped in her arms. Cutter breathed a sigh of relief.

“Take her on up to the house, Annika. Maggie will put her to bed again. We may need you.” He looked around, trying to locate Ace. “Where’s Ace?” he asked of Shorty.

“He was about half lit, smoked a cigar, and went to bed the last I knew. I woke up with flames all around me. I dragged him out and dumped a bucket of water on him.” He pointed to where Ace sat against the base of a tall pine.

“Damned idiot! When is he going to learn?” Cutter asked, passing another bucket of water down the line.

His arms felt like they were ready to fall off, his skin burned when finally Cutter turned away and hobbled over to Ace. “You all right, old man?”

“I’ll make it. Not a complete loss, is it?”

“No, but guess it’s no thanks to you. Dammit, man, what are we going to do with you?”

“I’ve been thinking I’d go back to Texas for a while. Maybe I ought to go see my folks before they pass on.”

"Maybe so, Ace. You need a good woman to straighten you out. Let's go get some coffee."

Cutter surveyed the damage to the bunkhouse one last time. The kitchen was still intact, as were West and Annikas's quarters. Only the middle part had suffered any damage, the three bunks on the front side. It could have been worse. Ace could have burned to death, maybe Shorty.

When they walked in, Maggie looked up quickly, her eyes lighting up. "You all right?" she quietly asked.

"I'm fine. Not a hair singed," Cutter replied. "I'll wash up. Ace needs some coffee."

"Coming right up. Are you hurt, Ace?"

"No, Miz Maggie. Guess it was my fault. I smoked a cigar while I was setting on my bunk. Must have dropped some ashes." He shook his head like a shaggy dog and sat down at the table.

"Anyone hungry? Won't be long until breakfast time." Maggie watched Cutter as he soaped his torso, then splashed water to rinse and dried off.

"I'm starved, Maggie. Anything will do. I'm glad it's Sunday. We'll have to clean up the mess and try to patch it," Cutter answered, slipping into a chair.

Maggie handed him his coffee then walked to the counter to make flapjacks.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter wanted to go to her, pull her into his arms, and tell her everything would be all right. She looked tired.

"Melody Ann go back to sleep?"

"Oh, yes. She's such a good child."

Ace rubbed his eyes. "You've done wonders with her, Miz Maggie. She's truly found a loving mama in you."

Cutter gave Ace a sour look and lifted his cup to drink.

Ace had been gone for thirty or forty minutes, and still Maggie and Cutter sat at the table.

"Why don't you go back to bed, Maggie? I'll help get the mess cleaned up and the repairs started."

"I'll be all right. Melody Ann will be waking up soon. Can I do anything to help?"

"No, no! There are plenty of men available. I'll tell Pedro to start some bean soup and a ham bone or something substantial. It's gonna be a mess."

"I'm sorry." She laid her hand over his, feeling more comfortable in touching him now.

"Things like this happen. Don't worry about it. I'm just glad the men all got out, thanks to Shorty." He came around the table and pulled her to her feet, held her close, and kissed her rosy lips. "Thanks for last night, Maggie. That was truly wonderful."

He kissed her again, and again, seemingly not able to get enough of her.

"*Ahemmm*, boss! We need some instructions," Shorty said, twirling his hat in his hands.

"I'll be right there, Shorty. Always somebody buttin' in," he grumbled. He kissed Maggie again, and released her. "We'll talk later."

When Cutter finally came back to the house in mid-afternoon, everything was quiet. He washed up, looked in on Melody Ann and found her asleep. Then he went in search of Maggie. With all his heart he hoped she was in his bed, sound asleep.

She was, and his heart lurched. Never had his insides churned as they did when he looked down at her and felt like he could melt all over. Beautiful, enchanting, loving. He couldn't find enough words to describe her and she was his, wasn't she? Yes, she had threatened to leave, but he

didn't believe she would or could. He had to make her want to stay.

Cutter stripped off his pants and underwear, and crawled in beside her. Maggie stirred when he pulled her into his arms. "Sleep, my darlin'. I'm so tired."

He closed his eyes, breathing deeply of her womanly scent and the rosewater she had dabbed on her wrists.

Sometime later Cutter came awake, feeling small kisses across his face. "Wake up, Cutter. You won't sleep any tonight if you sleep longer."

"Who wants to sleep tonight? I might have plans for a certain lovely woman." He drew her into him tightly and kissed her lips, plunging his tongue inside her mouth.

"Ummm..." Maggie groaned.

He loved her sounds, the way her hands crept across his chest. He deepened the kiss, feeling the hardness of his arousal.

Maggie slid over on top of him, wanting to feel more of him. She brought her nipple into his mouth, needing the wonderful sensations he had evoked before.

"My sweet Maggie is learning," he said, and suckled greedily.

Maggie couldn't be still. She moved back and forth across his manhood, knowing she had to have that fulfillment. She rose up and positioned herself directly over him, then encased his hardened shaft. Groaning slightly, she moved again, bringing him in deeper. Why hadn't she known how wonderful this lovemaking could be?

"Oh, Cutter..."

"My little Maggie," he said, his voice deep. With one smooth motion, he swept Maggie underneath him and began hard thrusts, bringing her over the edge in minutes.

"Oh...my word! Love me..."

Love her he did, culminating with rocket exploding sensations sweeping over both of them.

"Maggie, Maggie, Maggie," he whispered. "You're so loving and exciting."

"I can't believe this is happening to me."

"Why not? You're a special woman."

"I've never been special to anyone."

\* \* \* \*

Twice lately, Cutter had made trips into town and hadn't asked Maggie to go. She wondered why, but didn't want to question him. When she announced at breakfast that she was going to town, Cutter raised an eyebrow.

"Why today? I can't go with you."

"I don't need you, Cutter. I won't take Melody Ann, so you won't have to worry about her, but I need to see Beth. She's my only friend and I want to know how she's doing." She also needed to return the three dresses she had finished and pick up more. One woman had indicated she needed several dresses made.

"But Pedro has things to do, and Shorty is building that line shack."

"I'll be fine. This is important to me, Cutter. Since you haven't asked me to go with you lately, I feel the need to know about Beth."

"All right, Maggie. When will you be ready to go? I'll have the buggy waiting for you."

"I know you're terribly busy with Ace gone, and trying to finish your fencing, so I'll be extra careful. I plan to be home by mid-afternoon."

"Be sure you check the creek before crossing. There have been heavy rains up north."

"That won't affect our stream here, will it?" She twisted her hands together to keep from reaching for him.

Since she had discovered how wonderful their loving could be, she found she wanted to touch him much more often. Maggie had enjoyed two wonderful weeks in Cutter's arms and in his bed, and she certainly didn't want to do anything to upset their relationship.

"I hope not, but just be careful," he said, pulling her up from her chair and into him. He brought her face up, claiming her lips for a long, hard kiss. "You're important to me, Maggie Ryan McCallister."

"I know," she admitted, but she still wished he could tell her he loved her. She felt that he did, but maybe he thought he would be betraying Anna Marie's memory if he actually said the words.

He kissed her again quickly, grabbed his hat, and hurried out.

Maggie went about her business, dressed and fed Melody Ann. She was growing so much and running her baby fat off now. Melody was an energetic and loving child, wanting to be in on everything.

"Annika, how are you this morning?" Maggie asked the Indian woman when she came into the kitchen.

"No good. Damn West cough all night."

"I'm sorry. Is he sick?"

"Maybe so, but no fever."

"I have to go into town and need for you to keep Melody Ann today." She turned to the little girl, still sitting in her highchair. "You'll be good for Annika, won't you, sweetie?"

Maggie hugged the child and lifted her from her chair.

Melody Ann pulled on Annika's skirt, saying, "Go see horsie."

"Later, little girl. Work to do now," Annika answered, moving away. "When you go?" she asked Maggie.

“About nine. I’ll finish cleaning the kitchen and get dressed.”

\* \* \* \*

Happy, Maggie hummed a little tune as she drove into town. For mid-July it was warm enough in the day, but the nights cooled off nicely.

She had been told this whole area was on a plateau of eight thousand feet. Maybe six inches of water flowed in the creek as usual. The water wasn’t muddy, but was clear and bright. Satisfied, she drove on into Cheyenne, pulling into Ira’s store.

“Morning, Ira. How’s everything with you and Josie?”

“Wonderful, and you’re looking fine. Ranch life must be agreeing with you.” He took her list of supplies and laid it on the counter.

“That it is, Ira. I love it out there, and Cutter’s little girl is such a delight. Does Beth still live in the same place?”

Ira frowned and pushed at a lock of hair. “No, that’s a sad situation. Alex hasn’t done right by her. She took a room over at Hutchen’s Boardinghouse and is working there, too.”

“Thanks, Ira. I want to go by and see her. She was my closest friend all through our days at the orphanage.”

“Yes, I understand. My Josie is in the family way, too. We’re real excited.”

Maggie grasped his hand. “Oh, Ira! That’s marvelous. Give her my best.”

“Thank you, Miz Maggie. I’ll tell Josie you asked about her. She’s been right poorly of a morning.”

“I’ve heard that’s how it happens. I’ll try to stop by and see her later. I plan to leave right after lunch.” She smiled and turned away.

Maggie walked into Hutchen's Boardinghouse, expecting to see a cowed and beaten-down Beth as she had the last time. Instead a smiling, radiant Beth came to meet her, hands outstretched.

"Oh, Maggie! It's good to see you. I knew you'd find me."

"Beth, you look wonderful. Are you happy here?"

"Come, have a seat. Your meal is on me. I haven't forgotten your birthday is Sunday."

"Thanks, Beth. Can you talk for a few minutes?"

"I'll see. We aren't busy yet with the noon crowd. Tea or coffee?"

"Tea, please. Oh, Beth..." Maggie pulled out a chair and sat down.

"I'll be right back." Beth smiled and hurried toward the kitchen.

When she came back, she carried a plate of fried chicken, potatoes, and gravy, and set it in front of Maggie. She then took a seat opposite her. "You look so happy. Your marriage is good, isn't it?"

"Yes. Cutter is really a good man, in more ways than one," she answered, blushing furiously.

"I'm glad, Maggie. If anyone ever deserved love and happiness, it's you. You've always done for others."

"I feel good about it. I wish you could come out to visit, stay overnight if you like."

Beth studied Maggie thoughtfully. "Cutter wouldn't object?"

"Why would he object? He wants me to be happy and to have friends."

"Oh, I see." She looked down and studied her hands.

"What does that mean? Is there something I don't know?"

"No, no! It's nothing..."

"Tell me, Beth. What's wrong?"

Beth clasped and unclasped her hands, then met Maggie's gaze. "He's been seen coming out of the Union Hotel with a woman."

"A woman by the name of Inez Logan? She was his wife's friend. I know he had coffee with her."

"Alex seems to think there's more to it."

"Oh...Alex? Are you and Alex seeing each other and talking?" Maggie bit her lip to control the quivering. She didn't like these things about Cutter going around.

"Once in a while. He stops to eat here once a week or so."

"Are you getting back together?"

"I don't think so. He doesn't need a wife, and like I said, he's tight with his money. Guess he thought marriage was cheaper and safer than seeing one of the whores."

Maggie was too upset to finish her meal and pushed her plate aside. "I guess I'm not very hungry, Beth. Thanks anyway."

"What will you be doing for your birthday?"

"Nothing I guess. I doubt Cutter even knows the date." Maggie pushed back her chair and stood.

"He knows. He asked me about it when we picked out that material for you."

"Well, he hasn't mentioned it, so..."

"I've said something to upset you, haven't I? I'm sorry. Be careful, Maggie."

Maggie looped her purse over her arm and turned away quickly, fighting the tears that threatened to fall. "Bye, Beth. Be happy."

Stumbling outside, Maggie felt desolate. Was everyone in town talking about Cutter and a woman at the hotel? She

wanted to believe Cutter, but this looked to be far more than she thought.

With her head down, she collided with someone. Looking up impulsively, she murmured, "I'm terribly sorry. I wasn't watching..."

"Oh, think nothing of it. You're Maggie, aren't you? Remember me, Inez Logan? I was just on my way to post a letter to Cutter. Will you deliver it to him instead? It's important that I see him right away."

Maggie woodenly accepted the envelope and stuck it in her purse, biting her lips to keep from screaming at the woman. "I'll see that he gets it. Pardon me, please, I have business..."

"Are you happy, Maggie? Is Cutter a good, loving husband?"

"I believe that's our affair, but yes, he's a loving husband." Maggie couldn't stand the smirk, the knowing eyes. Tears blinded her again, and she rushed down the street, not able to get out of town fast enough.

She kept Betsy at a fast trot, wanting to get away from what people thought. Throwing her purse into the box of groceries, Maggie couldn't stand to be close to the letter. She ought to tear it up and throw it away, but she knew Inez would probably ask Cutter about it later.

When Betsy hesitated at the small creek, Maggie whacked the reins down on her backside and urged her onward. She wasn't aware of the ominous roar, of the wall of water, sand, and debris bearing down on them. A huge boulder hit the buggy, making it tilt precariously, throwing Maggie out. She felt the muddy water and sand closing over her. She reached out for something, anything, to hold onto. Fear enveloped her. She didn't want to leave this world yet. She and Cutter had just begun to have a loving life together.

She didn't know how long or how far she had been swept in the water, when she found herself clinging to a small downed tree. "Thank God," she murmured, and tried to climb toward the bank.

The tree broke loose and went swirling round and round in the water. Maggie hung on for dear life. She found herself in a small cove, lodged with other limbs, logs, a raccoon, and a badger. Not daring to move, Maggie said a silent prayer afraid she was going to die right here.

The badger climbed out and ran away on its short legs and she was glad. She'd always heard they were scrappy when their territory was invaded.

Maggie hoped and prayed that Betsy and the buggy had made it safe. She should have been more alert, she realized. Cutter had even warned her. How long would she have to wait before the water ran down and she could climb out? It was still so swift she was afraid to move. Maggie was certainly glad now she hadn't brought Melody Ann with her.

Would this make Cutter more adamant than ever that someone had to go with her? She could see the wisdom of his words now, but who knew Inez Logan and Beth were both going to upset her? Why were these people trying to make it look like Cutter was seeing another woman? She couldn't believe he could be that two-faced. Still, he hadn't told her he loved her. He'd said all along that Melody Ann needed a mother but he didn't need a wife.

"Oh, God, don't let it be true. Please let me get out of here."

It seemed like hours later when Maggie heard her name called. She raised her head wearily, realizing she had no strength left.

Again the call came, "Maggie! Maggie!"

"I'm here," she answered, her voice a hoarse croak.

"Maggie! Maggie! Where are you?"

Was she imagining things? She could see no one. The big dun horse with black stockinged legs broke into the open, and Cutter stood in the stirrups peering into the limbs and debris.

"Maggie! Oh, Maggie, where are you?"

"I'm here. Please help me. I'm afraid to move."

"Thank God! Are you hurt?" He coiled his lariat.

"I don't know."

"Catch this. Hold on tight!" The rope sailed through the air.

Maggie relinquished her hold with one hand and tried to catch the rope. Her movements dislodged the small tree and she cascaded down the stream again.

"Good God!" Cutter exploded, re-coiling his rope and racing along the bank behind her. "Hang on! I'm coming!"

The tree spun crazily again, whirling around and around, finally hanging up in more debris.

"Take your time now. I'm throwing the rope again, Maggie."

He was more careful with his aim and this time put the rope right in her hands. Maggie grasped it with both hands. Cutter backed Boots up and held the rope taut as Maggie walked out.

When she collapsed on the bank, he was there with a blanket, wrapping her tightly. He handed her up into the saddle. "I'm going to mount behind you. Hang on!"

He settled into the saddle behind her and drew her into his arms. "Shhh...don't talk. Thank God you're all right."

He kicked Boots in the flanks, putting him in a fast gallop.

Maggie leaned into Cutter's strong chest, feeling protected and warm. She wanted to sleep and forget about the ordeal in town and this episode. For just a little while she needed to feel loved and cherished.

Cutter brushed her wet hair out of his face, and said, "Are you okay? I was worried, Maggie, when Betsy brought the buggy home with a broken wheel."

"It was my fault. Something happened in town that really upset me. I failed to check the creek carefully."

"Sh...I know. I read the letter that fell out of your purse. Why did you have that letter?"

"Because Inez asked me to deliver it. She says she has to see you right away. Beth told me you had been seen at the Union Hotel with a woman. I don't like..."

"Good God!" he retorted, gritting his teeth. "Why can't these fool people keep their mouths shut?"

Maggie groaned. It was all right if he went to a hotel with Inez. It just wasn't all right for anyone to tell her about it. What was she supposed to do and feel? She wanted to lash out at him, hit him over the head with the biggest thing handy, but her hands were entrapped. She couldn't even wipe the tears away.

## Chapter 14

Maggie took a hot bath, pulled on a warm gown, and crawled into bed. Her bed? She didn't own one thing. This was the bed Cutter had assigned to her the night she arrived. It would be hers until this mess was settled and she left. She would never share his bed again. Fearing she was already the laughing stock of Cheyenne, Maggie sighed heavily and snuggled down in the welcome warmth.

She didn't know where Cutter was, and right now she didn't care.

Maggie came awake when she felt someone shaking her shoulder. "Yes, what is it?"

"You awake, Miz Maggie? Cutter asked me to bring some hot soup and tea up to you."

"Where's Cutter?" she asked, rising to face Pedro.

"He was some mad and made a hurried trip into town. Said he had to straighten out something."

"I just bet he did. Thank you, Pedro. Where's Melody Ann?"

He looked at her nervously. "She's still with Annika, and I guess she'll stay the night since you're ailing."

"I'll be all right by morning." She didn't know what Cutter had told the men, and she didn't want to explain the situation any further.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter reread the damned note from Inez. Of all the nerve, sending something like that by Maggie. What if she had read it?

*My darling Cutter, I see you're avoiding me and I don't like it. We've been so close and you've helped me tremendously. I need your strong shoulder to lean on once again. Justin is being very difficult and threatening to cut me out of his will. Please come to me at your earliest convenience, my darling. I need you, Inez.*

Cutter saw red. This was carrying friendship in the name of his dead wife too damned far. He wanted no part of this farce. It was causing trouble all over town, and now with Maggie. Everyone was getting the wrong impression.

He brought Boots to a sliding halt in front of the beautiful, big Logan house. Cutter stepped from the saddle and draped the reins over the hitching rail. Hoping with all his might that Justin was home, Cutter intended to settle this nastiness once and for all.

A servant answered Cutter's knock. "I'd like to see Mister and Miz Logan, please. Cutter McCallister calling."

"I'll see if the mister is in. Miz Logan is upstairs."

"I'll wait right here. It's important that I see both of them."

"Very well, sir."

Cutter hung his hat on the hat rack in the hall and entered the parlor. He walked toward the fireplace, looking briefly at the thick carpets and deep wine-red drapes. It was a dreary-looking place as far as he was concerned. He could see nothing happy and bright about it.

"Afternoon, Cutter. Tillie said you wanted to see me," Justin Logan said, straightening his brocade vest over his big frame. His bushy sideburns and hair were a snowy white. He extended his hand and shook with Cutter. "Please have a seat."

"I want Inez here with us. I'm quite upset about some things..."

"Cutter, how nice!" Inez said, coming into the room, holding out her hands to Cutter and completely ignoring her husband.

"Is it? Sit down, Inez. I have something to say, and I'm only going to say it once." He didn't realize how disturbed he was until he heard his own voice, short and clipped.

"Please have a seat, Cutter. We'll have some tea."

"I don't want your damned tea! Justin, are you aware of the sneaky things your wife is doing? She sent this note out to me by my wife, and I won't have this sort of thing. I've tried to be decent to Inez because I thought she and Anna Marie were friends, but I won't tolerate this." He handed the note to Justin. "Read the damned thing!"

Cutter turned his back, wanting to throw things and curse somebody out good. Maggie had done nothing to hurt anyone, but she was bearing the brunt of it and he had contributed to the pain.

He heard Justin spluttering and turned around quickly.

"You conniving little bitch! I ought to throttle you!" Justin said, standing over Inez, his fingers closing around her throat.

Cutter rushed in, prying off Justin's fingers. He shoved him back in a chair. "That isn't the answer, Justin, although I would like to do the same thing. She isn't worth it. There has never, I repeat *never* been anything between Inez and

me, nor will there ever be. I have a new wife, and I'm quite..."

Inez rubbed her throat, and got her voice back. "You've been friendly and kind to me. I have nothing with Justin."

"Then that's your problem, Inez. Not mine. Settle it the best way you can, but I want a letter of apology now to my wife, telling her there's nothing between us!" His brow furrowed, and his dark eyes glittered.

"And if I refuse?" Inez laughed the sound harsh and bitter.

Justin whirled on her. "You won't refuse. There'll be ten thousand dollars in an envelope for you on that desk in the morning. You're to get out of town and I never want to hear your name again. Otherwise you go today without a cent."

Justin walked toward the door, and then turned back, "I'd like a word with you in my study, Cutter."

Cutter followed, not even looking at Inez.

"Write that letter, Inez, and it better be satisfactory," Justin repeated.

He closed the door behind Cutter before he spoke again. "I'm sorry about that. How long has this been going on?" He motioned for Cutter to take a seat.

"I never noticed that she was particularly interested in Anna Marie until after her death, then she began stopping me on the street, asking about me and the baby. A time or two, I bought her a cup of coffee. I certainly never expected a letter like this and sent by my wife, of all things."

"She's a treacherous, lying bitch, Cutter. When she makes up her mind she wants something, she goes after it by hook or crook. I was an old fool and bought it once, but it didn't take me long to see through her. We haven't had a

marriage; it's been a contest of wills. I've had enough of it long before now."

"Were you serious about her leaving?"

"Very serious. You aren't the only one she's tried to manipulate. Ask Alex Murray about it sometime."

"Alex, my God! What won't she stoop to?"

"My sentiments exactly. She's an evil woman. I hope you can square it with your wife."

"So do I, Justin. I nearly lost her in a swollen stream, because she was so upset over this. Will you see if Inez has written that letter? I don't want to see her again," Cutter said, moving restlessly. How could he explain it all to Maggie?

"I'll see if she's finished. Keep your seat. We'll read it together." Justin clamped Cutter on the shoulder and left the room, moving quietly for such a big man.

Cutter shook his head, not understanding how things could have gotten so out of hand. He had tried to be friendly with Inez, but she had used it to her advantage. How could he have been so blind, to not see what she was doing?

He stood when Justin returned, opened the letter and spread it on his desk. They both read:

*Maggie McCallister, I'm sorry if I caused trouble between you and Cutter. I'll admit I wanted him. I'm now in ruin and ordered to leave town, but I do owe you an apology. There was nothing between Cutter and me. He is a nice man, as I'm sure you know. Please be happy, Inez Logan.*

"Well, what do you think?" Justin asked, looking down at Cutter.

Cutter scanned the letter again before answering. "I hope she was sincere, and I don't want anymore trouble. I pray to God that Maggie believes it."

"So do I. If there's anything else I can do, please let me know."

"I'm sorry it came to this, Justin. You've always been decent to me, and I wanted no trouble between us."

"There won't be. I'm glad to get the woman out of my life. Maybe all of Cheyenne can breathe easier."

\* \* \* \*

When Cutter rode into the ranch at dusk, Chiso met him in the barn.

"You all right, boss?"

Cutter drew in a deep breath. "I hope so, Chiso. Had to make a quick trip into town."

Chiso helped him unsaddle, hung up the saddle and bridle. He then began brushing down the horse with a gunnysack. "Miz Maggie going to be all right?"

"I think so. Did Pedro take supper to her?"

"Oh yeah. Said she wasn't very talkative."

"No, she was scared. She's a good woman, Chiso. I've been blind as a bat."

"Yes, sir!" He didn't understand, but didn't question Cutter further, knowing he would tell him what he wanted to.

"Think I better get on to the house," Cutter said, his heartbeat quickening already at the thought of seeing Maggie.

Chiso raised his hand in a salute.

The quiet house washed over him when Cutter entered. He added a stick of wood to the stove and lit the lamp. Cutter saw the pot of soup, crackers and cheese, and

apple pie. He had some good people working for him, supposing Melody Ann was still with Annika.

When he finished eating, Cutter cleaned up in the kitchen and went to check on Maggie, deciding not to mention the letter tonight.

He knocked lightly and entered Maggie's room, leaving the door open so light from the parlor shone into the room. "How are you feeling, Maggie?" he asked, stopping by the side of the bed.

"I'll be all right." She straightened up and pulled another pillow behind her.

"Want to talk a bit, or would you rather wait?"

"I don't see as there's much to say. I'll try to make my plans within the next few days."

"Plans for what, Maggie?" He held his breath, knowing he wouldn't like the answer.

"How and when to leave, Mister McCallister. I won't stay with a man who's carrying on with another woman, although it hasn't been a marriage from the start. You'll just have to get someone else to care for Melody, won't you?"

"You don't...you can't believe that!"

"I do believe that."

Cutter turned quickly to leave, at a loss for words. He couldn't accept what she said. "I'll be across the hall if you need me."

"Why would I need you? I've been played for the fool, Mister McCallister, and I don't take kindly to that."

Cutter didn't wait to hear more. He couldn't. This was just too much. He walked into the parlor, blew out the lamp, and slumped into a chair. How would he feel if the situation were reversed? Would he believe her if he saw her come out of a hotel with a man, saw the man kiss her cheek? Would he believe it if someone told him she was

seeing a man? Would he think it was more than coincidence if a man sent a letter saying he had to see her right away? No. He would be jealous as hell and be ready to beat the man to a pulp.

Why wouldn't she be ready to fight for him, if she wanted him? That must be the answer. She didn't want him. Had he really given her a reason to stay and pretend to be his wife? He could plainly see where the fault lay, at his feet.

All his noble reasons had gone right out the window. He hadn't been sleeping with her and getting his needs taken care of, so naturally she would think there was another woman. Now that she really knew he had a big appetite for love, she would think that way more than ever.

"Oh God, what can I do?" If he showed the letter to her now, Maggie would only think he had coerced Inez into writing it to satisfy her. She couldn't know the truth behind it. Maggie would have to find that out for herself.

Cutter decided he would have to wait and see what she decided. He went to bed, doubting that he ever slept again. He left his door open, just in case Maggie did call out to him.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie lay there, miserable and wanting. She needed to be held, to be told she was worth something. All her life she had been made to feel she was worthless and nothing. How could she have any esteem when her own parents had given her up? Hadn't she been told that enough at the orphanage?

She loved this place, the sunshine and beauty. She loved Melody Ann as if she were her own. Yes, she loved Cutter as much as she hated to admit it. What good would that love do her?

If Cutter would only touch her, hold her again, and make her feel that he wanted her, she knew she would stay. She had nowhere to go. No one wanted or needed her. Here she knew Melody Ann needed and loved her, but was that enough? For the first time in her life, she had someone, a family. Could she give them up? Even the men accepted her as family and treated her with respect.

Turning over again, Maggie groaned. She had slept too much already. She wasn't sleepy now. Her body ached and she was sore and stiff. Maybe she could find the rubbing alcohol and rub her legs and muscles.

She came out of bed and stepped out into the hall, bumping into someone. Maggie screamed, fighting at whoever it was.

"Hey, Maggie, simmer down! Are you all right?" Cutter asked, holding her hands.

"You scared the daylights out of me. What are you doing?"

"You were groaning. I came to see if I could do anything to help you."

"My legs and back ache. I'll get the liniment and rub them."

He turned her into his room and to his bed. "Get in here. I'll massage your back and muscles. I'll bring a towel."

Although Maggie knew she should, she didn't question her sanity or reasoning. Instead she turned the cover back on the far side and slid into bed.

"I'll have to light the lamp, Maggie, so I won't spill this everywhere." He lit the lamp and came to the bed. "Turn over so I can put this towel under you and we'll need to take off your gown. It'll only get soaked."

She knew he was naked and she didn't want to look at him, but she couldn't help herself. Maggie stifled her gasp and removed her gown, turning to her stomach on the towel.

"This will be cold," he said, pouring the liquid into his hands. "You're all bruised. No wonder you're hurting." He stared down at her black and blue body. She should not have had to go through this.

Dark splotches were scattered all across her legs, shoulders, and back. He brought the liquid onto her body and began a gentle massage.

"Maggie, I'm terribly sorry." His voice broke. "You wouldn't have been hurt if it hadn't been for my stupidity."

"You may be right," she said softly, her body relaxing from his ministrations. This was heavenly.

After several minutes, he stopped. "How does that feel?"

Maggie didn't answer. She was asleep. Cutter blew out the light and crawled back into bed. He wanted her in his arms, but he was afraid to disturb her. This was only a necessary truce. There was still much to be said.

It was impossible for Cutter to sleep with a delicious and loving woman so close to him. His wife? It was hard to say the words. He hadn't wanted a wife, above all a sweet woman who pleased him, and one who made him feel protective and tender toward her. He guessed he'd wanted someone who would fight with him, make him mad and give him reason to send her away.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter lay there, very conscious of Maggie. Finally he couldn't stand it any longer. He turned her over and cradled his arms around her, bringing her onto his shoulder.

This was where a beautiful and loving woman was supposed to be, in a man's arms.

He breathed deeply of her womanly scent, the rose fragrance and liniment smell. Cutter hoped he had helped her bruises and aches. How could he tell her about what had transpired in town and make her believe it? He could see now why she would be suspicious of him, but he had done nothing to give her reason to worry. It all kind of slipped up on him, and he hoped to God it was over.

Sometime toward morning, Cutter felt Maggie stirring. She sat up and he reached for her quickly.

"Where are you going?"

"To my bed. There are too many things unsettled yet."

"Oh, you're right. We'll talk soon, Maggie."

"We'll see. Your actions, sir, have been far more outspoken than your words!"

Cutter sat up with his mouth open, not knowing what to say. He could understand her thinking in a way, yet he knew he had done nothing wrong. Would she even listen if he tried to explain?

He lay back, feeling a terrible sense of loss. Having her in his arms again had felt so right. He was human, wasn't he, and hoping that it would last.

Maybe he could cope with it if she didn't decide to leave. Would she give him a second chance?

\* \* \* \*

Maggie scrunched down in her own bed, knowing she wouldn't sleep. She had felt loved and cherished in his arms again. He was a good man, a wonderful man in many ways, but she knew she couldn't live with a man who was openly involved with another woman. She was sure if Beth knew about it many people in town would be of the same opinion. What choice did she have, but to leave?



## Chapter 15

Cutter and Maggie were having a quiet breakfast Sunday morning when Cutter said, "Don't plan any lunch. We'll be eating with the crew at the bunkhouse."

"Why? We don't normally do..."

"Once in a while we make exceptions. You'll enjoy it, I promise." He drained his coffee and set down the cup.

"What's the reason behind this?" She couldn't tell him it was her twenty-seventh birthday, and she had thought they might take a ride together or have a candlelight dinner in the dining room. She had hoped maybe this once he wouldn't ride out by himself or pitch horseshoes with the men.

He frowned and his dark eyes met her green ones briefly. "Does there have to be a reason, Maggie? I thought you might welcome not having to cook." Cutter wanted her birthday party to be a surprise. It would be ruined if he had to tell her.

"Oh, all right. I don't understand..."

"Maggie, I'll be back about ten-thirty and we're taking a ride. Have Melody Ann and yourself ready to go, please." He stood and reached for his black hat. Settling it on his head, he looked back at her, and then walked out.

Maggie heaved a big sigh. It was getting harder by the minute to keep her hands to herself, plus her thoughts. She wanted love badly, and she loved Cutter, but she couldn't tell him. He didn't want love. Melody Ann had been a pleasure and she had hoped she and Cutter might have a child. Her body ached for his love, but she couldn't sleep in his bed again until everything was right between them. He appeared to be in no hurry to set things right.

With her mind in a whirl, Maggie fed Melody Ann and dressed her. She cleaned the kitchen and checked her hair one last time, wanting to look nice. She knew she wasn't pretty, with her freckles and turned-up nose, but she did like to feel good about herself.

Maggie and Melody Ann waited on the back step for Cutter to bring the buggy around. He hopped down and held out his hand. "Would my two ladies like to join me?"

Melody Ann was excited and clapped her hands. "Ride Daddy? We ride?"

"Yes, sweetheart, we're going to ride." He picked up Melody Ann, held Maggie's arm while she entered the buggy, and handed Melody Ann into her lap. He settled on the seat beside her, smiling down at them. "Everyone ready?"

"Where are we going?" Maggie asked, suspecting something was amiss.

"It's a surprise. Just thought you needed to get out." He clicked to Betsy and started the buggy moving.

"Don't know why you have to be so mysterious. Everything is new to us."

"That it is, so look and enjoy. We're going up this way." He headed the buggy in the direction away from town.

"Good. I've never been this way. What will we see?"

“Lots of things. More ranches and cattle, a small settlement, and of course, the railroad.” He smiled and patted Melody Ann’s leg. “Are you liking the ride?”

“This is a nice day, but rather warm. Are you caught up a bit on work now?”

“The last of July and August are slow times, but it gives us a chance to dig a tank for another water hole, do repairs on the windmills, the machinery, saddle and tack. Always something, Maggie, but I love this life.”

“So I’ve noticed. You’re well suited for your work.”

They rode some time in silence and Maggie enjoyed the change of scenery and countryside. Melody Ann leaned into her and was soon asleep. Cutter appeared to be lost in another world or place.

A small band of pronghorns looked up from their grazing, then bounded away. Many of the wildflowers had faded away, but a few black-eyed Susans and blue lupines remained. Around a small pond several mustangs were drinking. Betsy perked her ears, but gallantly went on about her business.

Maggie watched Cutter closely, wondering what he was thinking. Why had he asked her to come on this drive? He had never before suggested a drive.

The steady clip-clop of Betsy’s hooves on the hard-packed ground, the lonesome wail of a train in the distance, made Maggie wonder about Beth. Was she still in Cheyenne, or did she plan to go back to Baltimore?

“I really ought to find out what Beth is going to do. Maybe we could make our plans together,” she said, her voice barely audible.

“What did you say, Maggie?”

“I was thinking and wondering about Beth. Maybe we could go back to Baltimore together.”

He frowned and gave her a sharp look. "I won't hear of such talk. Your home is here with Melody Ann and me."

"There are many things to be settled, Mister McCallister. You haven't cleared up anything..."

He laid his hand over hers briefly. "Let's not spoil the ride and today. We'll talk about it when the time is right. Have you seen enough?"

"I haven't seen much and you haven't been inclined to talk."

"I guess I haven't. Sorry. I have a lot on my mind right now. I don't know what's happening with Ace, when he's coming back."

Maggie was determined not to say anything more. It was evident he wasn't interested in her and her problems.

Cutter turned the buggy around and headed back down the same road. He glanced down at Melody Ann. "Why is she asleep already? She doesn't have a fever, does she?"

Maggie quickly felt of the baby's red face. "She's warm, but I don't think it's a fever. She was all right earlier."

"I hope so. I don't like to think of her being sick."

"Neither do I, Mister McCallister." She noticed how quickly she had reverted back to calling him Mister McCallister when everything wasn't right between them. It seemed easier to cope that way. Cutter wasn't someone close and loved, then. He was a distant person.

When they pulled in at the ranch gate again, Maggie looked around, bewildered. There were several buggies and horses at the hitching rail. What was going on? She looked at Cutter with apprehension.

"What's all this? Are you having a meeting of some kind?"

"Kind of a meeting..."

“Well, I wish you would have told me. I might have dressed up a bit more,” Maggie answered, her voice quivery.

“You look fine, Maggie. We’re eating out under the trees and it’s going to be a fun time, I hope.” He pulled the buggy to a stop on the far side of the house, hopped out quickly. He took Melody Ann and held out his hand to help Maggie.

“What am I supposed to do now?” she asked, taking his hand.

“I’ll put the buggy up, then come back for you. We’ll walk down together.” He wanted to tell her more for he could see her skepticism.

Melody Ann woke up and looked around. “Ride, Daddy?”

“We’re through riding, honey. You slept through most of it.”

Maggie sighed heavily. “I’ll wash her face, then we’ll be ready, I guess.”

“Good. Maggie, everything will be fine. Don’t be upset, please.” He squeezed her hand and hurried back to the buggy.

Maggie washed Melody’s face, changed her into overalls and shirt. She checked her own hair and patted at it.

Cutter came back in. “Everyone ready? The cook says he has some hungry people waiting.”

“I wasn’t prepared for a bunch of people, Cutter. You aren’t being fair.”

“Quit fussing, Maggie. I promise you’ll like this.” He took Melody Ann and they walked out together.

Maggie peered anxiously at the bunkhouse, trying to see what was going on. She could see two long tables set up

under the cottonwood trees. A spit had been built and a half of beef roasted over the fire. Several people milled around in the shade.

They rounded the bunkhouse. Beth, Summer, and Josie rushed toward Maggie. They hugged and kissed her, and wished her a happy birthday.

“Oh, Lord, I feel like kicking someone,” Maggie said, her smile wide and happy. “Who did this?” She looked from one to the other, her gaze lingering on a smiling Cutter.

Cutter stepped closer and kissed her cheek. “Happy birthday, Maggie.”

Maggie blushed furiously and was nervous at the kiss from Cutter, right in front of all the people. “Beth, how are you? Are you all right, Summer? I’ve been thinking about all of you so much,” she stated, her words rushing together.

“We’re fine,” Beth answered, “Even Alex and I decided to try again, Maggie. Maybe we can make it work yet.”

Maggie wanted to cry. “Oh, my goodness. That’s so wonderful. I want you to be happy.”

Cutter handed Melody Ann to Shorty. “Keep an eye on the youngun’. I’ll be right back.” He turned toward the barn.

“Yeah, boss. We’ll get along fine, won’t we, little girl? How you doing, sugar?” Shorty set Melody Ann on the ground and watched her reach for a sack.

Maggie was engrossed with her friends, laughing and talking. She wasn’t aware of Cutter headed in her direction. Noticing the funny look on Beth’s face, she whirled around to face Cutter and a golden Palomino horse.

“Maggie, my dear. This is Goldy and he’s all yours. He’s a three-year old gelding and the new saddle comes with him. Take a look. Do you like him?”

Maggie's eyes grew big and round, her mouth fell open. "For me. Oh, no! Why...why would..." Tears glistened in her eyes and trickled down her cheek.

"Yes, he's for you," Cutter said, placing the reins in her hand. "You need your own horse and saddle."

"I can't believe this. I've never had anything of my own."

Maggie walked up against the horse, leaning her head against his neck. "Oh, Goldy," she whispered, "You be good to me, and I'll be good to you." She turned to Cutter.

"Thank you so much. Why are you being so nice to me?"

"You deserve it." They were behind the horse and he tipped her face up with his thumb. "Be happy, Maggie."

Slowly his lips came to hers for a brief kiss.

"I won't ride him now. I'll wait until everyone has gone. Thank you again, Cutter. Now, I better see about our guests." She handed the reins back to him, and moved away reluctantly. "He's such a beauty."

Pedro rang the dinner bell. "Anyone interested in eating?"

Maggie picked up Melody Ann and hugged her tight. "Did you see that beautiful horse your daddy gave me?"

Cutter came back to Maggie and took Melody Ann. "You're the birthday girl and first in line for food. I'll hold her until you're situated."

"I just can't believe this. Why?" she asked again.

"Come on, Miz Maggie!" Pedro called. "The rest of us are starving."

"I'm sorry, Pedro. I'm just so excited." She walked forward and received the first plate of barbecue beef, potato salad, baked beans with molasses, and cole slaw. She took a tall glass of lemonade in the other hand and strolled back to the table where Cutter watched her.

Impulsively, he stood and kissed her again, nearly making her drop her plate. "Please, Cutter, let me set my food down."

He plopped Melody Ann down on a bench beside her, and winked at her. "Don't go away. I'll be right back."

\* \* \* \*

After everyone had gone, Melody Ann was asleep on a pallet being watched over by Annika. Cutter caught Maggie's hand. "Come on, let's try out that gelding. I'm anxious to see how you're gonna like him."

"And if that new hand-tooled saddle fits," Shorty said, a big smile enveloping his face.

"This has been a wonderful day. Thanks everyone," Maggie told the men and Annika. "You've made me feel very special."

"You are special, Miz Maggie," Shorty proclaimed.

Cutter handed Maggie up into the saddle and watched her settle in. "Feel all right?" he asked, before turning loose of the bridle.

"Feels wonderful."

He walked around to Boots and mounted. "Okay, let's take it slow and easy for a while. Then we'll let him stretch out a bit."

"Didn't you ride him? You know how he acts." She smiled at Cutter, very pleased that he would do something so nice for her.

"That was with a man. Horses handle differently with women."

She patted the animal's neck. "We're going to get along fine, aren't we, Goldy?"

They rode for several miles out across the prairie, the cool breeze caressing Maggie's cheeks, the wind lifting her hair. She now had something she could call her own.

Cutter stopped, looked over at her. "What do you think? Do you like him?"

"He's a beauty, and I'm pleased. Thank you so much, Cutter." Tears misted her eyes and she quickly looked away, finding it very hard to breathe normal.

Cutter caught her hand. "Maggie, I want you to be happy. We'll stop here, and let the horses breathe a minute. Just permit the reins to trail on the ground."

"All right." She dismounted and walked away from the horses. "What are we going to do?"

"Maybe it's time for that talk, if you're up to it. We won't be bothered here."

"Yes, it's time to get some things settled," she admitted, walking to a bank overlooking a dry streambed. She sat down.

Cutter joined her. "As I told you, Maggie, there's no other woman in my life, nor has there been. I'm just as disturbed as you are about the Inez Logan incident, and I was furious. I went to see her and Justin, her husband. He's known for some time she was a no-good bitch. He paid her off and ordered her out of his life. You're welcome to go talk to Justin if you like, but I asked her to write this letter of apology to you. Will you read it?" He fished it out of his shirt pocket and held it out to her.

"I don't think so, Cutter. Let me think about it for a while. I'm trying to be rational about this whole thing, but it bothered me that Beth and others had seen you coming out of the hotel with her."

"I was a stupid man, acting under the guise of Anna Marie's friendship with her. I would never have married you, Maggie, if there was another woman or if I intended to be involved with one. Can't you see that?" His dark gaze found hers and looked deep into the green depths.

"I'm trying to make sense out of this. Don't push me, and please don't expect me to share your bed again. I have to know I can trust a man."

"All right, Maggie. Fair enough. You tell me if and when you're ever ready for my kisses and more. I can be a patient man if I put my mind to it."

"That wasn't what you said in your letter."

"You were a stranger then, and I had no reason to be patient. Now, I respect and admire you. I can see what you've done for Melody Ann, how the men have taken to you. Everyone likes you, and I would hate for you to leave." He picked up her hand and laced his fingers with hers. "Everything okay now?"

"I hope so, but you'll have to be patient with me, too. This is all new to me, and I've never had family or anyone to love or accept me. Talk to me more, tell me of your plans and hopes."

"I'll try my best. Tell me what you want, too. I'm not going to send you back, Maggie." He kissed her hand and stood, pulling her up. "Ready to go back now?"

"I think so."

"Good. Give Goldy his head and let him stretch out. He'll keep up with Boots." He caught Goldy's reins and held her arm when she mounted.

As they rode back toward the ranch house, Cutter felt good about their life together. He could understand Maggie better and see changes in her. She appeared to be a calmer person, more comfortable with him. In fact, some times she almost blossomed. Maybe she felt more confident in her new life and about herself. Cutter had tried to back off and not be so critical. He knew he was far from perfect.

When they drew to a stop at the corral, Maggie's cheeks were flushed, her hair windblown.

Shorty stepped out of the barn to help with the horses. "How did he do, Miz Maggie?" His face creased into a big smile.

"Wonderful, Shorty, just wonderful." She handed the reins over to him.

"I knew you'd be pleased. We've had a hell of a time keeping him out-o-sight. The boss wanted it to be a surprise."

"It sure was. Everyone made this a very special day and I won't forget it. Where's that little child? I bet she needs to be fed."

"She and Annika walked down by the lake the last I knew. Maybe they're watching the ducks."

"Good, I'll go see if I can find them." She gave one last look at Cutter, as if to say, "I'm not through with you yet," and hurried away.

She found Annika and Melody Ann throwing breadcrumbs to the ducks. "There you are. Is Melody getting hungry?"

"Maybe so. She want to eat the bread."

"Then we better go see about some supper, little girl. You ready to go?"

"Go...Ma-ma!"

"Ma-ma...did she say mama?" Maggie was mystified. She had never called herself that to Melody Ann.

"Yes, we'll go. Thank you, Annika." Maggie grabbed Melody Ann up and whirled around. She wanted to hug Annika and dance. This had been a glorious and beautiful day.

"You happy, Miz Maggie?"

"Yes, I'm happy. Such a lovely home and child, a handsome husband, what more could I ask?"

"Maybe you stay a long time, no? Have many babies?"

"Maybe so, Annika." There was only one thing lacking...she had to have love.

Love wasn't something you could snap your fingers and say, "You're going to love me." It had to be a natural feeling, something the other person wanted, too.

What more could she do to make Cutter love her?

"Let's go see your daddy, sweetie."

"Daddy," Melody excitedly said, clapping her hands.

"Yes, Daddy. He's a nice man. He's good to us, isn't he?"

Maggie walked on to the house and entered the back door to find pans of beef, potato salad, and baked beans on the kitchen table.

"Looks like there's plenty of leftovers, sweetie. Now, if we just had a lemon meringue pie, that would be heavenly."

"Who you talking to?" Cutter asked, coming into the kitchen. He hung up his hat, stripped off his shirt, and dipped water to wash.

"Just thinking about a lemon meringue pie. Wouldn't that be marvelous?" Maggie watched the play of his muscles when he lifted the pan of water, then turned toward the back porch.

"Sounds good, but I like apple and pumpkin better. Can you make one?"

"Maybe, but I'll have to have lemons or get lemon extract first. The cook at the Judge's house used to bake the most mouth-watering lemon pies."

"Do you miss that life, Maggie?" He splashed water over his face and arms, reached for the towel, and started to dry.

“Not at all. That lecherous old Judge was always cornering me, pinching my waist or my bottom. I hated him.”

“Oh...I didn't know.” His gaze met hers over the edge of the towel.

“No, I don't talk about that life much. It's behind me. What do you want to eat?”

“Just some sliced beef and bread. Maybe some potato salad. I'm not too hungry.”

“Sounds good to me, too. No, no, Sweetie! You can't have the broom. You'll trip...” She hardly got the words started before Melody Ann fell over the broom.

Cutter laughed. “She wants to be helpful, I guess, but it's a little big for her. Maybe she needs her own broom.”

“Could be. She follows me around trying to do what I do.”

He hung up the towel and came to the table. “You've been good for her, Maggie.”

“I hope so. She seems happy anymore.”

“Ma-ma! Da-da!” Melody answered, laughing.

Cutter's dark gaze met Maggie's green eyes across the width of the table. He didn't know what to say, or how to react. He bit down on his tongue, to keep from saying something he'd be sorry for. His daughter called her *Ma-ma*.

## Chapter 16

“What did she say?” Cutter asked, nearly afraid to breathe. His daughter called Maggie *Ma-ma*?

“I didn’t tell her what to say. Maybe Annika talks to her and tells her I’m mama. I never refer to myself as her mother. We discussed that before.”

“We most certainly did. Do you mind that she’s picked up on calling you mama?”

“Let her call me that if you don’t mind. I know what it’s like not to have a mother, love, and affection.” She took her seat at the table, passed bread and meat to him.

He shrugged and tried to smile. “Did you like that your friends were here today to share your birthday? I had to do something to get you away while they arrived.”

“It was a wonderful day, and I do thank you. I’ve never had such a nice birthday.”

“Good. I’m going to Denver next week to see about some machinery. Would you like to go, too, Maggie?”

“Oh, my. Is this necessary?” She looked at him, and lowered her eyes. Afraid he would see her eagerness, the want and desire to share in everything with him.

“My trip is necessary, yes. You don’t have to go, but I thought you might enjoy it. The train ride will be nice, and there’s interesting stores and hotels.”

“But I have no money to spend on such a trip.”

“Maggie, please!” He was trying to be patient, but he had to admit more than he liked. “You’re my wife, aren’t you? It’s customary that a husband supports the wife and provides money for her.”

“Oh, I didn’t expect...since we aren’t really husband and wife.” She looked down at her hands to see them trembling. Was being called his wife that upsetting?

“Maggie, I made the commitment when we were married and I intend to stick to those vows. I know we’ve had problems and differences, mostly because of my stubbornness and inability to communicate with you, but we’re doing better, aren’t we? Maybe you couldn’t tolerate three days in a hotel and strange city with me. I’d understand if you couldn’t after the way I’ve treated you.”

“Will Melody Ann go, too?”

“I don’t think so. I’ll be having dinner at the Governor’s Mansion, and there’s no place to leave her.” He finished eating and pushed his plate aside. “She’d be better off with Annika.”

“But I thought I was supposed to be the one to take care of her.”

“You are, but it won’t hurt once in a while for her to stay with Annika, that is, if you want to go.”

“I’m not sure right now. We haven’t settled everything between us.” Maggie set her glass of milk down, stood, and walked to the cabinet. She stared out the window to see the orange globe of sun sinking behind the horizon, leaving a pinkish, orange glow.

Cutter encouraged Melody Ann to eat the last of her food, glancing every little while at Maggie. Maybe he shouldn’t have asked if she wanted to go with him. He thought she might enjoy getting away, but maybe the

possibility of spending time alone with him was too upsetting. He would have to tread lightly. He had promised he could be a patient man, now he had to stick to that regardless of the circumstances.

“Don’t fret about it tonight, Maggie. You’ve got two days to think about it. Want me to give Melody Ann a bath as I take one?”

“Would you mind? I’ll clean up in here and put the food away.” This would give her a few minutes alone, time to think. How could she go anywhere with him and not want to share his bed, revel in his kisses? It was too much.

Maggie heard laughter coming from the big copper tub, and it sounded like Cutter was having a good time with his daughter. Would he accept her baby as easily as he did Anna Marie’s? She suspected she might be with child.

She tarried in the kitchen as long as she could. Finally she walked into the parlor, lit a lamp, and sat down. Cutter brought Melody Ann in all wrapped up in a towel. Her damp hair and rosy cheeks made her all the more lovable.

Maggie caught her breath when her gaze swept over Cutter’s broad chest with the dark hair curling. His faded and worn jeans rode low on his hips, and he was barefooted. He handed Melody Ann to her.

“Tell me where to find her gown and I’ll let you get her ready for bed. I’m gonna shave.”

“Go ahead. I’ll get her gown. Did you have fun?”

“Best tussle I’ve had with a bare-assed gal in a long time,” he answered, laughing heartily.

“Don’t say things like that about this sweet child. Did you hit your daddy, honey? You should have.”

She stood and started across the room. Cutter caught her arm.

"I was only teasing, Maggie. Why are you so serious tonight?"

"Sometimes I don't know how to take your remarks. You can be so...so..."

"Crude?" he finished for her.

"Something like that." She walked on into Melody Ann's room, set her in the middle of her crib and turned to the dresser. Glancing back at the door, her gaze connected with Cutter's as he lounged against the doorframe.

"What are you going to do?"

"Maybe Melody Ann and I will sit outside for a while. I bet it's nice out."

"Mind if I join you?"

"No, it's your house, your ranch. You can do whatever you like."

"Ours, Maggie! Ours!"

"Nothing is *ours*. I don't resent that fact. You've worked hard for this place and you deserve a nice home." She jerked the gown out of the drawer and turned back to Melody Ann.

"What do you deserve, Maggie?" he asked, his voice deep and husky.

"I sure thought every woman deserved love and happiness, a good husband, but I guess not. It seems to elude me." Maggie pulled the gown over Melody's head and stuck her arms through the sleeves, not looking at Cutter.

"You give up too easy. I fight for what I want."

"Do you now?" She picked up Melody Ann and walked past him, through the dining room and outside. Settling into a chair, she gazed off into the darkening shadows. "It's a beautiful night, little girl. Look at the fireflies and listen to that old goose squawking. Something must be bothering her."

Conscious of Cutter standing in the doorway later, watching her before he said anything, Maggie smiled to herself. She inhaled the fresh and spicy scent of his cologne. Sometimes he watched her and it made her uneasy. She clapped Melody's hands together and did the pat-a-cake with her, then laughed nervously.

"Mind if I join the party?" he asked, stepping through the door.

"Not at all. It's a lovely evening."

"That it is. We should do this more often."

"I thought I did. I'm out here nearly every night, at least for a while."

"You like the outdoors, Maggie? Maybe you ought to go on round-up with us this fall, camp out, eat the chuck wagon food."

"Sounds interesting. Shorty mentioned the 'Son-of-a-Bitch' stew. I'm not so sure I'm ready to try it yet."

"Why, Maggie? Sweetbreads, marrow gut, and kidneys added to the best meat of the calf can't be all that bad. And Pedro always adds onions, potatoes, carrots and chili peppers. Quite tasty I think."

"There's just something about eating marrow and brains that doesn't set right with me."

"You're too sensitive. When you live out here, you have to toughen up. You'd fare even worse if you were captured by Indians or had to come out by wagon train."

Maggie hunched her shoulders. She'd heard of some of the atrocities inflicted on women that the Indians had captured. "I'm glad there isn't the possibility of being captured by Indians now. They can live their life, I'll live mine."

“Would you like to go to the reservation with me this fall? I always take them some beef and keep on good terms with them. They’re an interesting people, Maggie.”

Why all of a sudden was he asking her to do everything with him? This was a new Cutter, and she wasn’t so sure she knew where she stood with him.

“Maybe. You’re forgetting all the time I’m hired to keep your daughter for you, Mister McCallister. Are you dragging her along for roundup and to the reservation?”

“Wouldn’t hurt her a bit. She’ll have to learn what it’s all about one of these days.” Offended that Maggie questioned everything he tried to offer her, and she kept referring to being hired to take care of Melody Ann, Cutter raised his eyebrows. He wished he could get the point across that she wasn’t hired. Maybe that’s the way she felt not a full partner in a marriage. He knew that was his fault. He had told her over and over that he didn’t need a wife.

“When is round-up, and when do you go to the reservation? I need to plan for some things.”

If she were with child, that would prevent her from riding and doing anything hard for a while. She certainly didn’t want to lose the child, but her periods were always so erratic, she couldn’t tell what was going on.

\* \* \* \*

Two days later Cutter came in for supper, his clothes covered with blood.

Maggie nearly fainted when she saw him, thinking he was hurt. “Good Lord, what happened?” she asked, rushing to his side.

“I’m fine, Maggie. We had a hell of a time killing a beef, though, and getting it ready for the smokehouse. Have you made up your mind about going to Denver with me? I’ll need to talk to Annika.”

"I would like to go, but I hate to leave Melody Ann so much." She turned back to the stove and stirred the pot of green beans that cooked.

"It's only for three days, and she'll have to get used to it. You can't be with her every minute. Maybe we'll have another child someday, then what?"

Maggie didn't dare think that far. She couldn't tell him right now that she might be expecting. She had to know for sure, not get her hopes up or his, that is, if he was ready for a child. Maybe if she went to Denver with him, she would have a chance to see a doctor there and find out for sure.

"All right, I'll go. Will we have separate rooms?"

"I have a suite reserved, Maggie. I can sleep on the sofa if necessary."

"What will we be doing? Do I have the proper clothes?"

He peeled off his shirt and threw it across the kitchen toward the back porch. "Is this going to be an issue between us? Don't go if you think you'll not have a good time. I told you I have to sign a new contract for beef to the Army. We'll have dinner and dancing at the Governor's Mansion."

"Will we be leaving in the morning?"

"Yes, Maggie. As soon as I change clothes, I'll go tell Annika what is transpiring. She halfway expects it, anyway. I've already talked to West and Rusty. They have to take over for me."

"All right. Supper will be ready as soon as you get back."

\* \* \* \*

The next afternoon when they came into Denver, lights illuminated the houses and business places along the way. Dusk had fallen, and a purple haze seemed to linger everywhere.

Maggie had looked until her eyes were popping out of her head. "This is so different. I didn't know there were such high mountains."

"Wait until you see it in daylight. It's a spectacular sight, Maggie."

"I can believe it." The train came to a screeching halt and flung Maggie into Cutter's shoulder. "Sorry," she murmured.

He patted her hand and stood, stretching his long legs. "I'm glad we're here, and I'm hungry. How about you?"

"Yes. Where are we staying? I never even thought to ask."

"Will it make a difference? I chose the Pioneer, because I've stayed there before and I like it." He took their bags from the overhead rack and stood back for Maggie to precede him. "Be careful now."

Maggie lifted her skirt and walked up the aisle, still trying to get her legs to work properly. She felt like such a hayseed, not knowing how to travel or do anything right. What made her think a marriage with a complete stranger would ever work?

When they entered their room a short time later in the hotel, Maggie looked around with delight. The deep blue floral Persian carpets with matching drapes over sheer panels made her catch her breath. Such grandeur. She hadn't thought Cutter would choose such a lovely place. A bedspread of the same matching blue adorned the bed in the bedroom. A lighter blue sofa and love seat were prominent in the sitting room. But she could see right away both were far too short for Cutter's tall frame.

"How can you sleep on either of those? You're far too tall."

"Don't worry about it. I can manage if you can."

“Then you’ll take the bed. I can’t see you suffering and trying to scrunch up and be comfortable there.”

He set their bags inside a large wardrobe. “Need to wash up or anything before we go eat?”

“I’ll look in the mirror and see what needs fixing. This is quite lovely, Mister McCallister.”

He caught her arm and turned her into him. “Hey, can’t we dispense with that *Mister* stuff? I do have a name, Maggie.”

“I’ll try, but it seems right to call you that.”

“Forget about right. Do you want me to call you Miz McCallister?”

“Whatever suits you? I know what I am.”

He hung his head, and leaned into her. What had he done? Surely he hadn’t made her feel like she was nothing. “Then I guess I need to apologize once again. I always seem to get off on the wrong foot, don’t I? Sorry, Maggie. I haven’t meant for you to feel like the hired help, or just the baby sitter. I’ll admit it has taken time for me to get used to the idea of having a wife. I thought I’d been trying to make things better between us.”

“Then maybe its time I accepted that I am your wife, but it’s hard. I don’t have the rights or privileges of a wife.”

She extricated herself from his hands and turned toward the bathroom to check her hair.

He followed to the doorway. “What rights and privileges do you need that you don’t have, Maggie?”

“I’m not going to talk about it now and upset both of us. I’m still working on trust.”

“Okay. Trust, hmmm...”

After the delightful supper, where Cutter drank two glasses of wine, he helped Maggie back up the stairs to their room. He knew how damned hard it was going to be to

keep his hands to himself. Now, he wished he hadn't even asked her to come. He was tired of playing the good guy, and he wanted her with a vengeance. He was married to her, and she was legally his wife. Didn't he have any husbandly rights?

Maggie picked up her valise, found her night things, her hairbrush and cream for her face, and went to the bathroom. He watched the door like a cat watching for a mouse. What would she look like when she showed herself again? In his sight, she would never be ugly even if she had globs of cream on her face.

"If you'll move to the chair, sir, I'll make up my bed. Do we do have extra linens and a blanket?"

Cutter looked up at the sound of her voice and caught his breath. Her hair hung loose over her shoulders, her face shining with cream, but still she was beautiful. The flowing soft cotton wrapper revealed a light blue sheer gown lavishly trimmed in lace. How could he not want her in his bed?

"Do you really think this is necessary? Why can't we share the bed? We've slept together before, Maggie." He stood and took two steps toward her.

"And I believe we agreed, there would be no more until everything was right between us."

"I never agreed to anything, Maggie. You are my wife, and dammit, I need..."

She gave him a haughty look and turned away.

"What more can I do, Maggie? I offered the letter for you to read, and I explained the best I could about the situation. I have had nothing to do with any other woman." He jerked her into him, his lips coming to claim hers in a rough kiss.

Maggie beat on his chest, pushing at him. His kiss ignited fires she couldn't control, and her arms crept up around his neck, pulling him closer. "Oh, Cutter, you shouldn't have..."

"It's right, Maggie. I want you and need you. Please share the bed with me."

How could she refuse? She wanted him as badly, and she knew she wouldn't sleep without being in his arms.

He felt her acceptance of him, and he swept her up in his arms and carried her to the bed. "You're so sweet, my little Maggie." He claimed her lips again and sank down on the bed with her.

Untying the ribbon at the neck of her wrapper, he pushed it off her shoulders. His hot lips skimmed down her satiny flesh. "Will you let me love you?"

"Yes," she whispered in a tremulous voice. "I need you, too."

"I'm glad, sweetheart." He stood and removed his shirt, boots, and pants. When he came back, he gathered her to him again. "I'm so glad you came into my life, Maggie."

"Are you really?" She wanted desperately to hear him say he loved her, but the words didn't come.

"Oh, yes, I've wanted you since the first night I saw you."

*Wanted, but not loved.* Maggie gritted her teeth. Just once she wished he could say he loved her. She needed love. Would she always have to settle for less?

"Then by all means take your pleasure. I'm just the vessel for your..."

His hands fell away like he had touched a hot coal. What had happened? He couldn't make love to her if she

resented being in his arms, and thought he was only using her.

He sat up, pulling her up with him. "What did I say wrong, Maggie? I thought you wanted me?"

"I did, but I also want love, and that's something you've never offered me." She slid off the bed and grabbed for her wrapper.

"No, don't go. We can share the bed, and I won't touch you. I remember I promised that, too, didn't I? It wouldn't be right to take you now when you don't want me." He stood quickly and marched into the bathroom, slamming the door.

Maggie looked around, not knowing what to do. She couldn't sleep in the same bed with him and not want to be in his arms. Jerking the pillow off the bed, she found a sheet and blankets in the wardrobe. She made her bed on the sofa, and lay there when he came out of the bathroom.

"Maggie, dammit! I told you we could share the bed, and I won't..."

"This will be fine, thank you."

Cutter kicked at the leg of the library table and swore again. "Some people can be mighty dang stubborn!"

"Yes, they surely can."

Maggie settled back on the sofa, then turned over, trying to get comfortable. She heard Cutter moving around, smelled the smoke when he lit a cigar. He didn't smoke often, but maybe now was a time when he felt he needed one.

She knew he stood in the doorway before he spoke. "What can I say? You can't trust me to keep my promise that I won't touch you?"

"That isn't the issue here, and you know it." She beat her pillow and settled back again.

“You won’t sleep, Maggie. You need your rest.”

“You don’t know what I need, Mister McCallister.”

Surprisingly Cutter was the one who didn’t sleep. He looked in on Maggie three times, and every time she appeared to be resting comfortably and asleep. He walked the floor, tried to settle down, but every little while he was up, and paced more. What did the dang woman want from him? Hadn’t he treated her fairly?

He’d been far more tolerant of her than he’d ever been with Anna Marie. He could see that now. Maybe Maggie had gotten to his soft and vulnerable spot that Anna Marie had never been able to penetrate. He’d watched Maggie with Melody Ann, envisioning what she would be like with their baby, and his heart melted.

Still he wanted her with a passion that wouldn’t quit. How did he handle this? What could he do? Surely he didn’t have to act like she didn’t exist. Did he have to soften enough to say sweet words to her, tell her of the love that burned so fiercely in him? Couldn’t she feel it in his hands, in his lips when he kissed her?

## Chapter 17

Maggie hadn't slept well, and she hoped she never had to spend another such miserable night. The sofa was comfortable, but she knew every time that Cutter looked in on her, and heard him walking the floor. She had even heard him swear a couple of times. Was she being obstinate, not allowing herself to have what she wanted and needed? What would it hurt to lie in his arms, to feel loved and protected?

She woke up early and crept out of bed. Maggie took a bath and dressed before Cutter stirred.

"Did you sleep?" he asked, showing the ravages of his sleepless night.

"I slept fine," she lied, "how about you?"

"Worst night I've ever had. Maggie, I promised..."

"I know. Maybe I'm being stubborn. What are your plans today?"

"First, I go sign that contract. Then maybe we can take a carriage ride, do some shopping if you like."

"Sounds wonderful. What time will you be back?" She walked across the room and straightened the scarf on the library table.

“Let me get cleaned up and we’ll have breakfast. I’ll go directly from there. I should be back by noon, or shortly thereafter. What will you do?”

“Oh...I’ll take a walk, try to find a bookstore maybe.”

“All right. Don’t get lost.”

“I think I can find my way back to this hotel. Probably everyone around knows where it is.”

While they were having breakfast, Maggie looked up at Cutter. He had circles under his eyes, and he had cut himself while shaving. “Why did you cut yourself?”

“My hands aren’t too steady this morning.” He pulled a roll of bills from his wallet and handed them to her. “You’ll need some money. I hope you find what you’re looking for.”

“So do I. I want to get toys for Melody Ann, books for both of us to read during the winter, and maybe...”

“Leave some things for me to help with. You don’t need to be walking and carrying a lot of stuff.”

She glanced at him quickly. What did he mean by that remark? Surely he didn’t suspect. “I’ll be fine. I’m stronger than I look.”

Cutter kissed her cheek when he bid her good-bye in the lobby, and went his way. Maggie approached the desk clerk with trepidation. Would the clerk tell Cutter she had asked about a doctor?

“Sir, pardon me. I would like to know where the closest physician’s office is.” Maybe he wouldn’t recognize her.

The clerk smiled at her and pointed. “Go down the street about three blocks. There’ll be a sign on the window.”

“Thank you so much.” Maggie walked out feeling good about the whole episode. If he recognized her, he hadn’t let

on, but then she wasn't sure it was the same clerk who was on duty last night. She walked down the street with a light heart. Now, maybe she would find out for sure.

A while later, Maggie gasped out a big sigh, restless from the doctor's thorough examination. Why was it taking so long? Why did he have to keep listening to her heart? She folded her hands together and tried to calm herself.

"We're nearly through, ma'am. Try to be patient. I want to be positive on what I tell you."

"Yes, Doctor. I understand." She pulled at the open cape he had draped over her, wanting to be sure she was covered.

"I do believe you're anemic and need to eat a lot of fresh fruits and vegetables. Get a lot of rest. Is this possible?" He raised dark eyebrows to look her over closely.

"I live on a ranch and it's a busy place at times. But I thought I was eating good and getting enough rest."

"Try harder, maybe a short nap in the afternoon would help."

"Thank you, Doctor." She slid off the table and hung up the cape, ready to get dressed again when the doctor stepped out of the room.

Maggie left the doctor's office, her head in a whirl. He had given her a tonic to take. She definitely wasn't with child.

She wandered up the street and found a bookstore. Maggie carefully looked around before she entered, but it was a nice place. She browsed up one aisle, then down the other, finding several books about horses and dogs for Melody Ann, four for herself. She thought about Cutter, but he always appeared to be engrossed in his farm and ranch periodicals.

Breathing deeply of the fresh air when she emerged, Maggie felt good. The scents of pine and smoke hung heavy in the air. She looked across the street and saw a mercantile store, then started in that direction. When she stepped into the street, a shout went up into the air. A careening carriage came around the corner, heading straight at her. Maggie barely got back to the boardwalk in time.

With hands on her hips, she yelled, "You so-and-so, why don't you watch where you're going?"

"What's the problem, Maggie?" Cutter asked, materializing by her side.

She tasted the dirt whipped up by the charging team, and she spit. Cutter's hand was comforting as he took her arm. She wanted to nestle into him, smell his special fragrance of after-shave, but this wasn't the place. "That driver nearly ran me down. People don't watch where they're going here."

Cutter smiled at her discomfort. This wasn't Cheyenne. Denver was more of a bustling city, many more people on the streets. "Where are you going?"

"I thought I'd go across the street. I found a bookstore already and bought some books."

He took the sack and looked inside at the books. "This isn't enough to last you through the winter. Don't you want to get more?"

"I might. What are you doing here?" She had the sudden feeling that he had followed her.

"Got through earlier than I thought." They walked across the street without mishap and entered the store. Smells of candy, nuts, and pine wafted around them. "What are you looking for?"

"Toys for Melody Ann. Maybe a small broom and a doll."

He laughed a deep belly laugh. "Maybe we should get some pots and pans, too."

"Not yet, please. I don't want her getting burned."

"You're very thoughtful, Maggie. Always thinking of that little girl."

"She was given into my care, and I feel blessed..." She quit. What else could she say? She loved Melody Ann and had from the start.

"I know how you feel. She's quite a little girl, and I'm proud of her, as I will be of all my children."

She gave him a look of apprehension, raising an eyebrow. "How many do you plan, sir? I thought you had to have a wife in more than name if that should happen."

"Hey, let's not get into that now." He had done some soul-searching during the night. From now on they played strictly by the rules, not what he wanted. He had promised and he wouldn't pressure her to share his bed if that wasn't what she wanted. Her womanly scent and rosewater fragrance swept over him, and he felt the quickening in his loins. She had something that no other woman had ever had with him, the ability to make him feel protective and passion-filled.

"This looks interesting," she said, turning to a table of children's toys.

Before they left, they bought the broom, and tiny china dishes, a big ball, and a china-faced doll with real eyelashes and eyes that opened and closed.

"Now, it's time we looked for some things for ourselves. What would you like, Maggie?"

"Can you afford to do this, Cutter? I never know how to spend..."

"It's been a good year, Maggie, and I have some money."

Her eyes were big and rounded when she looked up at him. "Then it's true? Josie said Ira told her that you had made a lot of money."

"This last four years has gone well. We sell cattle to Deadwood, to the Fort, and some are shipped out to Kansas. I like it this way. We had some slim years when we first came to Wyoming, and maybe the next five years won't be so good."

"Why? Won't people always need beef?"

"Too many conglomerate ranchers from England and France have taken over the country. It's get big or go under." He ushered her into another mercantile store.

"Oh...I didn't know."

"No, we haven't had much discussion on the basics of ranching, have we?" He touched her arm and moved her down the aisle toward the lingerie. He had heard of the new fancy satin and silk gowns, corsets, and petticoats. He wanted Maggie to see them.

"Do you know what you're doing? This isn't proper for a man..."

"Proper be damned! Look, and if you see anything you like, we'll get it. You need some things."

Maggie reverently touched the silk fabrics of the nightdresses, lavishly trimmed in lace and ribbons. "Why, I would feel absolutely wanton in something like this."

He turned to the clerk. "We'll take three in different colors. How about some of the panties and petticoats, Maggie? They're..."

"Not appropriate for men to see, sir!" the clerk disdainfully told him, her spectacles riding low on her nose.

"She's my wife. I can help her pick out these things if I want to."

"Very well. What would you like, ma'am?"

“Cutter, I would never buy things like this. They’re too fancy.”

“We’ll take six pair of these, one of each color,” Cutter said, grabbing a handful of panties.

Maggie watched the clerk gasp and nearly swallow her tongue. She had probably never been faced with such an arrogant man, invading private territory.

Yes, sir! Will that be all, sir?”

“No, we want some petticoats and three or four camisoles. What are your favorite colors, Maggie?”

Maggie felt her face burning, her mouth going dry. She had never had a man so interested in what she wore underneath her dresses. “Anything will be fine. I’ve never bought like this, Cutter. I don’t know...”

“Then it’s time you did.”

Maggie was deflated already, and that was the final straw. Was he telling her she didn’t dress nice enough for him? She had never had any experience in buying pretty things for herself or having the money to do so. This was beyond her comprehension.

She swallowed hard, and said, “Whatever you like.”

“No, let’s make it something you like. How about this azure blue, the mist green, pink and ivory? Do you like those colors?” He read the colors from a card as new colors just introduced to enterprising ladies.

“They’re all lovely, but...”

“We’ll take them,” he told the clerk. “Now, lets get you a dress or two, and a traveling suit.”

“Cutter, my head is swimming. Why are you buying all these pretty things for me?”

“Because I want you to have them.” That was the only answer he could give her, but he was in an expansive mood, wanting to do everything he could for her. He had done

very little so far, and she had worked hard, put up with a lot from him.

Speechless when they left the store, Maggie sighed heavily. In her wildest dreams, she had never thought she would wear such lovely dresses.

"I can't believe this," Maggie said, settling onto the carriage seat beside Cutter. The parcels were to be delivered to the hotel for them.

"I promised a carriage ride, and we're taking that ride. What's so unbelievable about that?"

"It isn't the ride that baffles me. It's your extravagance. Where will I ever wear such beautiful things?"

"You can start tonight by wearing one of the dresses to the Governor's dinner and ball. Then there's the Christmas party and ball that's coming up. I can think of several events coming along."

"How come you're invited to the Governor's Mansion?"

"We're friends from Texas, and we were together in the War Between the States. I hope you like his wife."

"Did she know Anna Marie? Won't this be uncomfortable for you to have to introduce me as your new..."

"No, Maggie, it won't be uncomfortable. Don't worry about all this. I thought maybe you would enjoy the ride."

"Oh, I am. Tell me about all this?" She loved to listen to him talk, and he appeared to be informed on so many things.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie dressed in the mist green dress of faille and satin with rosettes around the low neckline. Already the absences of trains on dresses were taking hold in the West. She felt elegant and stylishly dressed. She turned in front of

the mirror one last time. Feeling Cutter's eyes on her, she met his gaze in the mirror.

Breathlessly, she asked, "Do I meet with your approval?"

"Very lovely, my dear. It's a good color for you."

"And you look nice, Cutter." He wore his gray pin-stripe trousers and waistcoat, a vest of light gray satin and white shirt. His new boots were black and sported a shine you could see your face in.

"Quite the fashionable couple, huh?" he asked, walking toward her. He placed a small kiss on her cheek, asking, "Are you ready?"

Smiling, she demurely replied, "As ready as I'll ever be. Do you realize I've never been to a real ball? I won't know how to act, and my dancing isn't good."

"You'll do fine, Maggie. We've danced a few times." He didn't want to get into that. The one abbreviated time had ended with him making love to her for the first time.

The ride in the carriage was short, but invigorating. The night sky was resplendent with stars. The newly installed streetlights marked the way perfectly. Maggie's breath caught in her throat when they stopped at the Governor's mansion.

"Oh...my, this is so..."

Cutter took her arm, and walked her to the front door. "You doing okay? They're just ordinary country people like me."

The magnificent chandeliers, the big room with drapes in red brocade and matching couches, left her speechless as they made their way to Governor Brown and his wife.

Cutter slapped the governor on the shoulder, then shook his hand. "Gerald, you old scalawag! How are you, Natalie?" He bowed over her hand and kissed it.

“Glad you made it, Cutter. Is this the wife?”

“Yes, Maggie. Governor Gerald Brown and Natalie.”

“How do you do?” Maggie said, shaking hands with both of them. The Governor was tall with brown mustache and shaggy sideburns. Natalie was dark haired with big brown eyes and long lashes.

“We’re going to be tied up here for a while, but make yourself at home. You know the way, Cutter,” the Governor replied.

“We’ll be fine,” Cutter said, pressing his arm onto Maggie’s. “Quite a place, isn’t it?”

“It’s fabulous, and so big. I didn’t realize you had such connections.”

“Connections? You wouldn’t have thought so if you’d seen where we grew up. Do you know anything about sharecropping in Texas? Gerald’s politics were just right for the state.”

“No, I don’t know anything about sharecropping. I never traveled or saw much.”

“That means you’re poverty stricken. You do whatever the man who owns the farm tells you to do. It wasn’t an easy life for a man with a house full of kids.”

“I understand. Does that still bother you?” Maybe that was why he liked the better things, some refinements of life now.

They walked around the room. Cutter shook hands with several people and introduced Maggie. They finally took chairs and waited for dinner to be announced.

Maggie looked over the resplendent table of baked turkey and dressing, candied sweet potatoes, apple and walnut salad, cucumbers in sour cream, succotash of whole kernel corn and lima beans, pickles and olives, and strawberry flummery. A big silver tray held whole wheat

quick breads with pats of butter with the design of a turkey on each pat. Goblets of wine and water were at each place setting.

"Very nice," Maggie muttered. She looked up when Gerald clicked his spoon against a glass and stood.

"Friends and adversaries, it's a delight to have you here tonight. It's always an occasion when my friend, Cutter McCallister from Wyoming, can be with us. Tonight he has his new bride with him, and we especially want to welcome her. Cutter and I grew up in Texas, then fought side by side in the War Between the States. We could tell you some tall tales, but we won't. Please enjoy your meal."

"Maggie, you're supposed to stand up and say thank you," Cutter whispered.

"Oh...sorry." She quickly stood. "Thank you for your kind welcome, Governor Brown." Blushing furiously, she sat down.

"Hey, you'll get used to this. Gerald always makes a big issue out of everything. Just wait until I have a second child, he'll feel like he has to throw a big christening party."

Maggie wondered about Cutter. Why was he constantly referring to other children?

They dined and danced, until Maggie felt like a broomstick. Not only had she whirled around the room with Cutter numerous times, but Gerald had claimed her for three dances. Her feet were tired and with no sleep last night, she was ready to drop.

"Whew, this is getting to me. I think I could use a break," she finally said.

"We might as well go. We'll just say goodnight to our hosts, then be on our way."

When they settled into the carriage, Cutter wrapped her shawl around Maggie's shoulders and held her against his side. "Quite a night."

"I realized tonight I don't know the man I married. More things keep happening all the time. What other big surprises do you have in store for me?"

"None right now but give me time. Surely I'll think of something," he answered, needing nothing more than to crawl into bed and rest his weary head. He desperately wanted his loving woman in his arms tonight, and he knew he couldn't ask that of her. She would have to do it on her own.

When they reached their room, Maggie dropped into a chair, kicking off her slippers.

"You're tired. Can I help you with anything?"

"Let me catch my breath, then I'll make my bed here."

Cutter frowned, grabbed a blanket and sheet from the chair. With a big flourish, he spread the sheet over the seat and back, so it would drape over her. Then he brought the blanket forward and spread it.

"Good night, Maggie. Like I said before, you could share the bed."

She didn't answer, but shook her head slowly. She was so tired she could hardly move. "Night, Cutter. It was a lovely night."

Maggie thought she would go right to sleep. She turned out the light, and undressed, trying to be as quiet as she could.

Somehow, she must have been overly tired. She couldn't find a comfortable place or way to lie. Turning over several times, she thought of the nice, wide bed. What would it hurt to share it with Cutter? He had promised not to touch her.

After another frustrating hour, she slid out of her makeshift bed. Tiptoeing to the bedroom, Maggie thought she could get into bed with Cutter without waking him, then they could both have a good night's sleep.

Carefully, she turned the cover back and scooted into bed. Settling down, she felt his arms come around her.

"Thank you, Maggie. Now, maybe we both can get to sleep," he said, snuggling into her back.

Maggie closed her eyes. This was what she needed and wanted. Why was she being such a stupid fool denying herself of this pleasure?

Cutter turned into her, pulling her more secure into his arms. "I thought you would never make it. I need you, my sweet woman." He kissed her long and hard, melding his tongue with her. Showing her what he would like to do to her. He raised her gown and lifted her to get it over her head. He liked it skin to skin, all her glorious skin.

"You're my sweet little woman, and I want you with a passion that won't go away, my love." He kissed her again, and again, then straddled her and filled her with his hardened arousal.

## Chapter 18

Neither stirred until the sun was high in the sky. The sounds of wagons, carriages and horses, and men swearing came to Cutter from the open window.

Slowly he opened his eyes. He had dreamed Maggie was in his arms, and she was. Could he kiss her lightly and move away from her, let her sleep a while longer if she wanted to?

He looked down at her, at the little smile playing across her rosy lips. She must be having a good dream, he surmised. He hoped he was in the dream. She was a beautiful woman and he was glad she was his wife, but had he ever told her that?

No, he had been selfish. He'd thought of his wants and needs above hers. Not able to control himself, Cutter pressed a small kiss on the corner of her mouth. She was soft and warm, felt so right in his arms. Another small kiss wouldn't hurt anything, he told himself. As his lips lingered, she turned slightly into him. Maybe she wanted more, as he did. He deepened the kiss, feeling his hardened arousal pressing into her hip.

"Maggie, you're so loving and sweet. I've missed you."

Maggie opened her eyes, her deep green eyes meeting his brown ones. "What are you doing?"

“Just saying good morning. Did you sleep well?” He scooted away from her, not able to hold her close and not want more.

“I slept. The bed is far more comfortable than that sofa.”

“So what big things do we do today? I thought we might attend the theater tonight. Would you like that?”

“I’ve never been to the theater, Cutter. You know far more than I what there is to do here. Do you have more business to take care of?”

“I’m going to look at a hay mower and raking machine. We need to cut more hay and grass for winter months. You want to go with me?”

“Might as well. I don’t have anything else to do, and I don’t know my way around.” Maggie wanted to follow him to the ends of the earth as long as she could be held in his arms and share delicious kisses with him. He was one potent man. “Ummm...this bed feels so good. I hate to move.”

His arm tightened, bringing her in close. “If you want more, you’ll have to ask for it.”

Before she could absorb that and answer, he jerked away from her and came to a sitting position, stretching big.

“I’ll shave, then you can have the bathroom all to yourself.”

She trailed her fingers across his back and watched him walk away from her, seemingly unaware of his nakedness. It affected Maggie. She felt the sheen of perspiration on her upper lip and a warm rush go through her body. What would he do if she shed her gown and walked into the bathroom and filled the bathtub?

No, she wasn't a flirt or tease. If she did that, she had better be prepared for the business that followed. Maybe tonight?

Sighing heavily, she scooted out of bed and grabbed her wrapper. It was getting harder and harder not to share everything with Cutter, to be his wife in all senses of the word. She wanted that badly. She hoped he did. He was opening up more.

"I want romance and love," she muttered to herself, and looked up in surprise when Cutter came out of the bath.

"You talking to me, honey?"

"No, I guess not. You through in there already?"

"Wasn't too bad. Remember I shaved last night before we went to dinner. What did you say about love and romance?"

"I said...I want romance and love, and a marriage in all senses of the word. I don't like this pretense, like last night." She didn't know how he would take that, but it needed to be said.

"Well, should we talk about it tonight? Right now, we need to get organized and have breakfast." He patted her arm and turned her toward the bathroom, knowing if they started making love, they just might be there all day. That wouldn't be bad at all, but he did need to see about this machinery. He wasn't planning to come back to Denver for quite some time.

\* \* \* \*

Ten days later, Maggie walked from room to room, looking out the windows. Lightning cracked, heavy thunder rolled, and the rain came down in buckets. Cutter was out there and she worried. She'd heard how easy the cattle stampeded during heavy storms. Was he protected, or out

riding herd on the cattle? She wished she knew what was happening.

Maggie knew she could trust Cutter. She hoped she never had to go through the agonizing days of Inez Logan again.

Maggie had planned to go on the three-day roundup with Cutter, but Melody Ann had a fever, sore throat, and earache. She cried every time Maggie got out of her sight. She hoped Melody Ann was still better tomorrow. Maggie planned to ride out to the camp and spend the last night with Cutter if she could. It all sounded so exciting and new to her.

Thinking of the many nice things Cutter had done for her, she wanted to be part of his life, participate in his work, and know what it was all about. Another sharp crack of lightning lit up the sky and Maggie flinched. A tall pine sparked and caught fire. She hoped it wasn't close to any of the buildings. Chiso was the only man left at the bunkhouse. The big house creaked as heavy thunder rumbled again. Would this never end?

\* \* \* \*

A bright new world greeted Maggie the next morning. It was soggy and wet, but at least everything was washed clean and smelled fresh.

Giving Annika last minute instructions, and checking with Chiso again to be sure she was clear on her directions, Maggie started out. The sun was warm on her shoulders and the scents of sagebrush and green grass swept over her. A lone eagle soared across the azure blue sky, then dipped low to get a better look at some rodent or rabbit in the grass.

The gentle wind whispered through the air and Maggie pushed her hat back. She liked the feel of it against her face and neck.

After riding for some time, she topped a small knoll and looked down on the camp. The chuck wagon was silhouetted against the green of the pine trees. A low fire burned nearby, the wispy smoke trailing in the air. Cattle bawled in a holding pen and she saw four riders, three of them trailing a small herd. She breathed a sigh of relief. The men were all right.

Touching the toe of her boot to Goldy's flanks, Maggie rode on in.

Cutter saw her coming and rode out to meet her. A smile touched his face, making him wince painfully at his cracked lip.

"Hey there, pretty lady! Need a job?" he asked.

"Maybe. What are you offering?" she playfully answered.

He reined in beside her and reached out to her. "A big hug, a few million kisses for starters. We'll talk about other things later," he said, his lips coming to claim hers.

Maggie closed her eyes, her gloved hand coming up to caress his face. A warm rush of enjoyment swept over her and she wrinkled her nose at the horsey smell.

"What happened to your lip? And your eye? Oh my, did the cattle stampede?"

"Something like that. It was bad out here. How was it at the house?"

"Sounded terrible, but the only damage was a pine tree. It was still smoldering when I left. Did you get trampled?" She still held onto him, her hand smoothing down his stubbled jaw.

"No, I got knocked sideways and landed hard on my shoulder and face. Shorty took the worst fall, but he's tougher than I am." He tried to laugh, but it hurt too much.

"I'm so sorry. What can I do?"

"Your gentle touch does a lot for me. I'm not sure how it'll affect Shorty, so maybe we'll make do with the doctoring I gave him. His leg will be sore for a few days. Stick close to me, honey. Some of these critters get riled easy, especially the Longhorn."

That's exactly what Maggie intended to do. She wanted to be as close to him as she could get. She watched as Shorty and Rusty drove the cattle into the holding pen. West roped several, snugged them up to a heavy post while Cutter inspected cuts or lumps. Most were sprayed for ticks and parasites. Notches were cut into some of the cow's ears before they were turned loose.

When Pedro rang the dinner bell, Maggie was more than glad. Cutter joined her and they washed up together.

"What kind of cattle woman would you make? You couldn't begin to rope a cow or throw her."

"I know I'm not very big, but I'm strong. I'm not planning to be a cattle woman. Why?"

He dried his face and looked at her over the towel. "What if something happened to me? I said a few prayers last night."

"Then I'll say a few more. I plan on keeping you around a while, Mister McCallister."

"Lord, I hope so, woman."

"We're going to doctor that lip when you're through eating, too. Why were you notching the ears of those cows?"

“They’re the breeding cows. We’ll bring them in closer to the ranch house. This makes them easier to cut out of the herd. Let’s get our food while it’s hot.”

Pedro filled blue enamel plates for them and they sat on the tongue of the wagon to eat. It was a lovely day and Maggie could see how all the men enjoyed their work, even though it was dirty and tiresome.

When they quit for the night and supper was over, Maggie leaned into Cutter’s shoulder. “Look at those stars. They seem close enough to touch.”

Rusty slapped his harmonica against his leg and began playing “Buffalo Gals,” then followed with “The Yellow Rose of Texas.”

“Let’s say goodnight, Maggie. I’ve got the midnight to daylight watch.” He stood and pulled her to her feet.

“Need another blanket, boss?” Pedro asked, smiling big.

“We’ll make do, Pedro. Thanks anyway. See you later.” He grabbed his bedroll and walked to the other side of the wagon with Maggie.

“I thought we slept around the campfire?”

“We usually do. Maybe I want my wife to myself,” he answered. He picked a place free of sagebrush, but there was plenty of tall grass. He spread his tarp, then a blanket. “We usually sleep in our clothes, honey, but you can be the exception if you want to.”

“I’ll remove my boots and riding skirt. Maybe I should keep the rest on.”

He didn’t say anything, but brought his jacket around and rolled it into a pillow.

“All the comforts of home,” Maggie said, settling onto the blanket and tugging off her boots. She stood again and unbuttoned her split skirt, letting it fall.

Cutter picked up the skirt and spread it over the tall grass. It might be wet with dew in the morning, but it wouldn't get walked on. He slipped off his boots, then his Levi's.

He slid in beside Maggie and cradled her in his arms. "I missed my loving wife these last three nights. Everything all right with you?"

"No, but Melody Ann is feeling better. She still cries a lot, but I needed to be with you."

"I'm glad." He smoothed her hair back from her face and found her lips. "So sweet, my Maggie."

"Ummm..." Maggie groaned. His lips ignited all the fires in her body. When his hand crept down to the buttons of her shirt and opened them one by one, teasing each nipple into a hard peak, Maggie knew exactly what he wanted. She was more than ready.

"I love you, Cutter. I need you so much."

As those words sank in, he stiffened briefly. Not answering, he brought his lips to her breast. He laved one nipple, making her arch her body into his. She brought her hands down his flat stomach, then into his drawers. Finding his hardened manhood, she gently stroked. Caressing his hand down her hips across her feminine mound, he moved her panties out of his way. Inserting a big finger in her moistness and teasing, he brought her to a thrashing climax.

"Easy, sweetheart. Not so loud," he whispered, then covered her mouth with his.

Cutter entered her in one big thrust, then stopped, savoring the moment. This was as good as it got. In his wildest dreams, he'd never thought he would find a woman who wanted lovemaking as much as he did. Anna Marie had tolerated him, sometimes lying there and not moving at all. Many nights she turned her back on him, and withheld her

loving if she was angry. Looking back, he could see she'd been mad a lot in their eight years of marriage. Why, he didn't know.

Maggie moved slightly and Cutter renewed his pumping, quickly bringing both of them to a wild and shuddering completion.

"Don't move, sweetie. I'll have to have more in a minute." His breathing was heavy and labored. He didn't pull away from her, but held her on his shoulder.

"You make me very happy, Cutter. I never knew lovemaking could be like this."

"Some men are selfish, honey. They only look for their own needs to be met. You make me happy, too, pretty lady." He kissed her slowly, trying to keep from hurting his split lip.

In a few minutes, Maggie felt his manhood becoming hard and she pressed into him, stroking with her hands down his back and buttocks. "This is wonderful. Out under the stars and protected by tall grass."

"Will you be all right here by yourself when I go on watch?"

She didn't get a chance to answer. His tongue plunged into her mouth and did a mating dance with hers as he finished their age-old ritual of lovemaking.

They both sank into a happy sleep. Maggie didn't know when West shook Cutter's shoulder to get him up for his watch.

The clattering of pots and pans, the aroma of coffee perking, and bacon sizzling brought Maggie awake. She sat up with a start. Who was in the kitchen?

Reality soon returned. She felt damp and sticky, but how could she wash?

Cutter stepped around the wagon and into her sight. He carried a wash pan and cloth. "Thought maybe you might like to wash in private this morning. How are you feeling?"

"Like something ran over me. You're magnificent, Cutter McCallister."

"Something good? Or something bad?" he asked, winking at her. He reached for her skirt and held it until she was ready to step into it. "Can't say as I've ever had such a nice filly along on my roundup. You were wonderful, Miz McCallister."

"Thank you, kind sir. Any snakes in my boots?"

He shook out the boots and handed them to her. "Nary a one. I'll pick up the blankets. Dump the water and carry the pan back to Pedro."

"Ummm. Breakfast smells good. All this fresh air makes you hungry."

He caught her to him, taking her lips for a kiss. "For more than food, sweet woman. I could make love to you all day."

"We'll have to try that sometime. Maybe then I'd get with child. Are you disappointed in me, Cutter?"

"Never, Maggie! That time will come. We don't have to hurry it."

\* \* \* \*

Cutter's machinery arrived, and the next three weeks were spent in cutting, raking, and stacking hay for winter. He didn't intend to be caught short if it was a bad and snowy winter as some had been.

Not hearing anything from Ace, Cutter was concerned. It wasn't like him to just go away and not come back, or even let anyone know about him. Cutter sent a telegram to Ace's parents.

*Worried about Ace. Expected him back before now.  
Everything all right?*

Three days later his answer arrived in person, with a new bride on his arm.

“Hell, Ace, you could have let us know! Where you gonna live?” Cutter asked, trying not to show the anxiety and disbelief growing in him. The woman, or girl, didn’t look to be eighteen years old and was pregnant if he knew anything about women. Her dark brown hair was scraggly and unwashed. Her face was blotchy and pimply.

“We’ll curtain off a portion of the bunkhouse until we can get something built.” They stood in the yard, close to the back porch. Ace looked around and his eyes lit up.

“That won’t work, and you know it. I won’t have a woman out there with those men, even if she is your wife. Where did you meet Ellen?”

“On the train going to San Augustine. Something, ain’t she?” Ace asked proudly, his arm tightening around Ellen. He grinned from ear to ear and looked well.

“She’s that, all right. Let me have a minute with Maggie, and we’ll see what we can come up with.” He strode into the house and to the kitchen where he found Maggie.

Annika slammed the back door as she came through. “Damned no-good, Ace! You come back, huh?”

“This is my wife, Ellen. We’ve got to figure out where we’ll be sleeping.”

“Cutter, my brother come get me. I go with him now to my people. Many sick and need me. West can stay in bunkhouse. Maybe you stay in our house if she clean it good. No want bed bugs and lice.”

Ace brightened. "We'll do that, Annika. Are you sure West won't mind moving out?"

"Go ask. I have to go now, Cutter. Come back when my people are well."

"All right, Annika. Thank you for offering your rooms. We'll see that they're cleaned good," Cutter answered. Ellen didn't look like she had ever cleaned anything in her life.

Maggie still sat, toying with her cup of tea and aimlessly picking up Melody Ann's ball when she threw it.

"You have anything to add, Maggie. You've been awfully quiet," Cutter said, glancing at her.

"I'm still in shock. I didn't know Ace was looking for a wife."

Cutter smiled and patted Maggie's hand. "I bet he didn't, either. I have the feeling..."

"No, you're wrong, Cutter. I knew exactly what I was getting into," Ace answered, moving restlessly.

Cutter watched Ace and Ellen walk out. He turned to Maggie and hung his head. "Lord, Maggie, I don't know. I think we're headed for real trouble."

## Chapter 19

Ranch life wasn't easy by any means, but Maggie had made the best of it. She didn't like to hear the constant complaining of Ellen. She didn't want to carry water to do the washing. Ellen claimed she wasn't strong. She was too tired to get up in the morning and wanted to sleep until noon. There was nothing to do and she was bored. On and on her complaints went.

Maggie had enough of it when she started once again. "Why did you marry Ace, Ellen? I'm sure he explained this was a working place and a bit secluded. I find plenty to do, and I'm happy here."

"He lied to me, too. He said it was his ranch. That cowboy didn't tell me he had a partner who controlled everything."

"I beg your pardon!" Maggie came out of her chair at the kitchen table and slapped her hands on her hips, facing Ellen. "That's a situation between Ace and Cutter. They've been partners for twelve years or more. You'll have to get used to it."

"When are they going to build us a house as nice as this one? Don't we deserve a house, too?"

Maggie sucked in her breath and counted to ten to keep from exploding with Ellen. "I don't control that either,

Ellen. Tell Ace your problems. I'm sure he and Cutter will work it out. Now, do you mind? I've got work to do."

"But you've got help and a beautiful home."

"Do you see any help? By the goodness of Annika's heart, you're living in her rooms. Maybe this isn't the place for you, Ellen. Is Ace happy with it?" Maggie wiped the cabinet top and turned to the stove. "I'm also going to bake bread today. Would you like a loaf?"

Ellen pushed at her straggly hair and levered herself out of the chair. "Oh, that sounds heavenly. I love fresh bread, butter, and preserves."

"Then you better learn how to bake. When is your baby due?"

"January or February, I think. How did you know?"

"Look at your stomach, Ellen. Does the baby belong to Ace?"

"That old coot couldn't make a baby if he tried. No, it belongs to my boyfriend."

"Why didn't he marry you?" Maggie washed the stove and put her dishrag in the pan of soapy water.

"He may. I thought Ace had money and could take better care of me."

"Oh, Lord, Ellen! This is impossible. Please go now. I have too much work to do. Melody Ann will be waking up any minute."

"She's a sweet child. I hope my baby is as nice."

"Goodbye, Ellen. Talk to Ace, please."

Maggie drew a deep breath when she had Ellen out of the way. She measured the flour, baking powder, salt, milk, and starter for the bread and mixed it. When the mixing was finished, she covered the pan with a clean white cloth and set the mixture aside to let it rise.

Thoughts of Ellen kept coming to her. What on earth could Ace have been thinking? Was he that desperate for a woman of his own? She knew he could have done better.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter had already had one short conversation with Ace, and he tried once again when they rode into the barn.

"I know it's none of my business, Ace, but I'm still puzzled about you and Ellen. Surely she isn't the woman you want or..."

"Stop it, Cutter! I have a right to a woman. You married the one you wanted, so just let me be."

"I would if I thought you had all your senses about you. What did she throw in your face that could possibly make you want her? I think that heart problem addled your brain, man. Did your folks approve of her?"

"That has nothing to do with anything. They're too old to know what a man needs. Ellen and me get along fine, and she'll make a good wife to me."

"You're ready to raise somebody else's kid? I'm not blind, Ace. She's too far along for it to belong to you." He hung the bridle and uncinched the saddle, looking at Ace over the back of his horse.

"Let me and Ellen worry about that. We made a bargain, and we'll stick to it. I know I'm way too old for her, but she wanted me."

"God, Ace! You should have gotten one of those girls who came out when Maggie did. Most of them have worked out well, and they're all pretty besides."

Ace straightened quickly, his eyes shooting sparks at Cutter. "You saying my Ellen ain't pretty? I ought to throw you down on this floor and thrash the daylights outa you like I usta. You're getting far too big for your britches, Cutter McCallister!"

"Maybe so! I don't think you can do it now, Ace."

Ace came around the horses and grabbed Cutter's arm. "I just might try. What you got against Ellen?"

Cutter shook his arm off, jerked the saddle off the Appaloosa and hung it over the pole. "I don't know Ellen, but I do know she isn't keeping Annika's place clean like she promised. She doesn't appear to be happy here, Ace."

"It's none of your business. You got your life, and I got mine. I'm ready to start building her a fine house."

"Suit yourself. I'll help all I can, but I've got work that'll come first. I don't understand you anymore, Ace. We used to be so close. What happened?"

"You turned against me! You're too high-faluting anymore." Ace removed the saddle and blanket from his own horse and hung them in the proper place.

"I wish I had a good feeling about this, Ace, but I don't. You just don't seem fitted," Cutter said, gritting his teeth.

"We'll see! We'll dang shore see, Cutter McCallister!" Ace said, and stomped away toward the bunkhouse.

\* \* \* \*

Cutter and Maggie had nearly finished breakfast the next morning when Shorty pounded on the back door then came in. "Come quick, boss! We've got big troubles. Ace has been shot and is bleeding badly. Ellen is gone with his horse."

"Good God! When did this happen?" He grabbed his hat and followed Shorty at a run.

"Round four o'clock, I think. I remember hearing a horse," Shorty explained, breathing heavily.

"You didn't hear the shots? Were they arguing?"

"Have no idea, boss. He didn't come in for breakfast and I went to wake him. God, what a mess in there." They stepped up on the small porch and pushed the door open.

Cutter's gaze quickly swept the room, finding Ace on the bed among the litter. Ace was covered with blood, as was the bed. He picked up a feather pillow, seeing a hole surrounded by powder burns. "That's why you didn't hear a shot."

He threw the pillow across the room angrily. Turning Ace, he felt for a pulse at the base of his throat. "Did you send someone for the doctor?"

"Rusty is saddling up and ready to go, just waiting for word from you."

"Then get Rusty on his way. I'll see if I can do anything for Ace. He's lost a lot of blood."

Shorty rushed out, and Cutter knelt by the bed, burying his head against Ace's shoulder for a moment. "Damned Ace, why did this have to happen?"

The wound in his neck was still bleeding, and Cutter knew Annika kept clean white cloths for bandages. He just had to find them. Opening three drawers of a small bureau, he found the cloths and folded one into a compact square. Holding that over the wound, he tied another strip of cloth around Ace's neck. He had to be careful he didn't get it too tight and choke off his breathing. He was weak already from the loss of blood and Cutter was afraid he wasn't going to make it. He knew his heart disease wasn't completely under control and might cause more trouble.

Cutter doubled up his fist and slammed it against the wall by the doorframe just as Shorty came in.

"Don't take it out on me, boss. I didn't do it, although I didn't like that Ellen. She was nothing."

"Isn't this a mess? Annika will be upset. We ought to try to get him in the bunkhouse. At least it's clean and not as cluttered. What do you think?"

"I'll get some boards and round up West and Chiso. Damn, this is a hell of a fiasco."

"I'm going to run up to the house and tell Maggie. I know she's anxious to know what's going on. Be right back."

Cutter didn't stop, but took long steps as he hurried to the house. He grabbed Maggie around the waist as she stood at the sink.

"Maggie, honey, it's not good. Ace was shot in the throat and bleeding badly. He may not make it. I never saw such a mess in there. Evidently Ellen lit out on his horse."

Maggie turned into Cutter, smoothing her hands down the sides of his face and pulling him into her. "I'm terribly sorry. What can I do?"

"Nothing. You'll have to stay and take care of Melody Ann. Rusty rode in to get the doctor. We're moving Ace into the bunkhouse to get out of that mess. That Ellen wasn't much as far as I'm concerned."

"I'll be out later." She kissed Cutter on the lips and squeezed his shoulders.

Cutter sprinted back to help move Ace. They worked methodically, but carefully, trying to keep the bleeding from starting again. Easing Ace onto his old bunk, Cutter pulled the covers up over him and sat down by his side.

West took the boards back to the barn. Pedro came in with coffee for Shorty and Cutter.

"How's he doing, boss?" Pedro asked, his face grim.

"Don't know yet, Pedro. He's lost a lot of blood."

"I sure didn't like that Ellen. Nothing but a slut. She offered herself to both Chiso and me. Of course, she wanted money."

"Gawd-a-mighty! Pedro, why didn't you tell me?" Cutter asked, coming to his feet.

"Didn't want to start a war. I knew you'd explode with both her and Ace. I'm glad she's gone."

Ace moved restlessly, reaching out his hands. "Ellen, honey...Ellen?"

"She isn't here, Ace. Can you tell me what happened?" Cutter asked, bending over Ace.

"Wanted money...hundred dollars...my pants."

"I bet you two to one it's gone now," Shorty said, hurrying toward the door.

Cutter laid his hand on Ace's shoulder. "Just take it easy now. Rusty went to get the doctor. We've got to get you well again."

Ace quieted, and Cutter breathed a sigh of relief.

Shorty came back in quietly, Ace's pants hooked over his finger. "No money to be found. Not even a damned copper."

"Well, guess Ellen got what she wanted. We'll have to report it to the sheriff. Surely she won't try to ride that horse back to Texas," Cutter said, grimacing.

Shorty shrugged. He didn't know what to think about the whole sorry situation. He knew if Ace lived, he was far better off without that Ellen.

Two hours later the doctor had been there, doctored Ace and the wound. Rusty had brought in Ace's Appaloosa. Said he found it just outside town.

Cutter surmised Ellen couldn't be charged with horse theft since the horse had been found. But he was going to see that she was charged with murder if Ace didn't make it. The doctor hadn't given a good prognosis.

When Cutter didn't come to the house for supper, Maggie went to see about him.

She handed Melody Ann into her daddy's arms and sat down beside him. "How's Ace?"

“Not too good, honey. I feel real bad about this. I kinda chewed him out last night about Ellen, and I still don't understand the attraction there.”

“It isn't your fault. Won't you come to the house and eat, and then you can come back for a while? You need a break.”

“Yeah, I guess I do. I know I'm not helping any by sitting here, but we've been buddies a long time.” He kissed Melody Ann's cheek and snuggled her close. “Let's go, little girl. Are you hungry?”

“Hungry, Daddy.”

“Yes, it's past time. Sorry, Maggie. You and Melody should have eaten.”

“Wouldn't have been the same without you. We're family, remember?”

He put his arm around Maggie and walked beside her. “You've made it so. I'm sorry about Ace. Maybe he was looking for love and companionship too hard.”

“You mean he was willing to accept the first woman who showed any interest in him?”

“Something like that. He backed away from a good woman four years ago. Said he couldn't offer her the kind of life she was used to. I suspected she would have settled for less if she had love and a reliable man.” Cutter opened the back door and stood back for Maggie to enter.

“Should you let his family or anyone know about his condition now?” Maggie washed her hands and set food on the table. They pulled out chairs and sat down. Melody Ann was in her highchair.

“Smells good. I am hungry, and didn't realize it. I'll wait a day or two before I notify Ace's parents. They're up in years and not in the best of health themselves.” He hoped by then that he'd have better news to report.

"I understand. Is there anything I can do?"

"I'm gonna see if Pedro has a chance to clean up some of that mess in Annika's rooms tomorrow. I'd really appreciate it if you could help him or kind of supervise."

"I'll do it. Does West know when Annika'll be coming back?"

"No, she comes and goes as she pleases. He seems content with the situation."

"They're so different from what I thought the Indians would be." She handed Melody Ann another piece of bread and held the glass of milk for her to drink.

"They're good people, all right. Very loyal to me, and I appreciate them." He finished the last of his steak and green beans, and reached for his glass of water.

"I miss her all right, but I'm washing a little every day and not letting it stack up. Seems to work better for me, and I don't get so tired."

"Are you feeling all right, Maggie?"

"Oh, yes!" She gave him a quick glance to see what he meant by that remark. "I'm careful not to get overly tired."

"You're a good person, Maggie McCallister. Don't wait up for me, but if Ace is resting quietly, I won't stay long." He stood, bent over and kissed Melody Ann. "You be a good girl." Coming around the table, he helped Maggie to her feet and into his arms, claiming her lips.

"Ummm...I needed that," she whispered when he released her lips. "Tell Ace we want him to get well."

"I'll do that, honey." He kissed her again, reached for his hat, and walked out.

Pedro spoon fed some hot broth to Ace, wiped his chin with a cloth, and picked up his bowl. "He seems to be a bit more alert, boss. He hasn't said anything, though."

"Thanks, Pedro. I'll sit with him for a while." Across the room, Rusty played a tune softly on his harmonica. Shorty and Chiso were engrossed in a game of checkers. "Where's West?"

"Don't know. He ate with the rest of us and left," Pedro replied.

West came in with a gunnysack over his shoulder and set it on the floor. "These are Ace's things. Got to have new mattress now. That one all blood-soaked."

"We'll get one tomorrow, West. I was going to have Pedro and Maggie clean your rooms," Cutter said, watching Ace to see if anything registered with him.

"No problem. I need to be busy. Miz Maggie has much to do with that baby."

"That's true. Sorry everything was such a mess."

"Not your fault! That was a no-good woman," he muttered, not wanting Ace to hear.

Cutter shook his head. All the men appeared to have the same opinion of Ellen. Why couldn't Ace have seen it? Maybe he could, but didn't want to admit it. He guessed Ace needed a woman's loving touch and soft body close to his the same as any other man.

When Cutter slid into bed beside Maggie around eleven, he gathered her into his arms, resting her head on his shoulder.

She inhaled deeply of Cutter's special scents and the aroma of soap he'd used. "How's Ace?" she murmured sleepily.

"He's resting easily. Maybe he's out of danger."

"I hope so. This was so senseless. Ellen wasn't the kind of woman he needed."

"West did some cleaning up tonight. Even burned some cedar in there to freshen the smell. I'll have to go into

town tomorrow and get a new mattress. That one was ruined with blood.”

Maggie snuggled into Cutter, running her hands up to frame his face. “I love you, Cutter. I’d be devastated if anything happened to you.” She claimed his lips for a long, slow kiss, wanting to take away all the hurt.

Sparks sizzled and ignited in Cutter’s frustrated body. Why did Maggie have the power to make him forget everything with her kisses and soft body? He didn’t like that she had such a hold on him.

“Oh, Maggie!” he whispered, plunging his tongue into her mouth to taste all her sweetness. His hand caressed down her side, pulling her satiny gown up so he could feel her warm skin.

“My Maggie, my sweetheart.” He kissed down the slender column of her neck, across her shoulder and into the top of her gown. “We could take this off, couldn’t we?”

“Oh yes. I love you so much. I need you.”

The gown and his underwear were discarded toward the end of the bed. Cutter swept her into his arms again, and moved down to lave and suckle her nipple. Maggie arched into him, marveling at how well he knew how to satisfy her.

Her hands gripped his shoulders, then restlessly moved down his back and across his buttocks. His skin was soft, but slightly textured. She felt the scars, and found his arousal. The satiny appendage held a glorious fascination for her. Lost in the heady sensations Cutter aroused, Maggie wasn’t conscious of the groan that escaped from her.

“That’s it, baby. I can’t wait.”

He straightened her on the bed and moved between her legs, entering her with one big thrust. Cutter slowed, allowing the wonderful tightness of her body to grasp him,

to hold him. Then he began a rhythmic pumping, bringing both of them over the brink.

Shuddering heavily, Cutter collapsed on her, but quickly moved off. He brought her over against him, her head on his shoulder.

"I thank God for you, honey. You've helped me keep my sanity," he said, after his heavy breathing had subsided.

"Oh! I didn't know you were having problems with your sanity. Maybe I should have looked into that further before I married you."

"We didn't take much time, did we? Did you want me as much as I wanted you?"

"I didn't want you, and I was scared to death. I did find you attractive and I wondered how it would be to make love with you. You're very masculine."

"You're not sorry? Would you like to have gotten one of the other men?"

"No way! I can't see as I would be suited to any of them, especially not Alex, Ira, or Jake. I don't know the others. I'll keep you, I guess."

He playfully swatted her behind. "You guess? You mean there's a possibility you won't?"

"I'm still waiting for love, Cutter. I do need love."

"We just did it all backwards, honey. First comes love, then marriage. I'm working on it, aren't I?"

"Yes, I'll have to admit that. Just takes you longer." She kissed his lips slowly, curled into his body more. Sighing heavily, she said, "Goodnight."

"You going to sleep already? I'm just getting started."

"I somehow knew that." She was ready. His touches always made her melt.

## Chapter 20

Two days later, Cutter and Maggie were sitting by Ace's bed just at dark. Melody Ann was engrossed in the domino game between Shorty and Chiso. Rusty played a plaintive tune on his harmonica.

Ace fumbled with the blanket, and Cutter laid his hand on his arm.

"What do you want, Ace?"

"Tell him...to shut up that...caterwauling, afore...I start crying. Don't need...no sad songs." Ace squeezed his eyes shut tighter, but a tear slid down his cheek.

Cutter made a quick motion with his hand and Rusty stopped playing. "You feel better, partner? This scared the devil out of us."

"I'll be all right. She's gone...ain't she?"

"Fraid so, and took some money looks like. We found your horse."

"Damned heifer...I kept thinking...she'd settle down."

Cutter scooted closer to hear Ace's frail and scratchy voice. "Why did she shoot you? Did you have an argument?"

"Said I...lied to 'er. Wanted money...said she was...was going...back to Texas. I told 'er...no, this...was our home."

"Don't push yourself. There's time to talk about it later. You just get well now." Cutter turned to Pedro. "Could you rustle up some soup? 'Bout time he had something a little more filling."

"There's some on the stove. I'll be right back. Thank God, he is better," Pedro replied, and hurried toward the kitchen.

Ace opened his eyes and looked around quickly, motioning for Cutter to come closer. "I want...to send...a telegram. That bitch...took my money."

"Don't get all worked up. There's time for that. You'll need to talk to the sheriff..."

"No! No!"

"All right, we'll talk tomorrow when you're stronger."

"Get my...tablet. Write...Sandra Owens...San Augustine. Her mother...she's a good woman."

"Think about it tonight, and we'll do it in the morning. You'll feel better then."

"Tonight, Cutter!"

Cutter didn't want to argue with Ace and upset him further. He withdrew the tablet from a drawer in the small table, and fished out a pencil. "Now, what do you want me to say, Ace? Just take it easy."

"Damn Ellen...she stole my...money, and...shot me...nearly bled to death. Took my...horse, too. Pressing charges...against her." Ace closed his eyes tightly and gripped the blanket with both hands.

"It's all right, fellow. You want this to go as a telegram?"

Ace nodded, his eyes still closed.

"Okay. I'll take care of it. Now, you eat and get stronger. We'll see you tomorrow."

Cutter collected Melody Ann, wrapped a light blanket around her and walked out the door with Maggie. Millions of stars winked down on them and a quarter moon hung low in the western sky. An owl hooted from the trees behind the barn and a horse whinnied lightly.

"The nights are getting cooler. You need to go into town for anything tomorrow?" Cutter asked, escorting Maggie upon the back porch and through the door.

"No, but I've got a list of supplies that we need. Can't think of a thing I need to do."

"Thought maybe you wanted to see Beth or Josie."

"You can find out how they're doing. I'll check on Ace again, and I have to do some baking."

"Always plenty to do, isn't there?" He set Melody Ann down on a chair and pulled off the blanket. "I'll take her to her room and undress her."

"I'm right behind you. Are you upset?"

"No! No! Just wondering why Ace wanted to send this message to Ellen's mother. Does he think she's going to send his money back?"

"Never can tell what he's thinking. Is he going to be all right now?"

"I sure hope so. He's gaining strength, and there's no infection."

Maggie took a gown from the bureau and pulled it over Melody Ann's head, then stuck her arms through the armholes. "Good night, angel." She kissed Melody Ann.

Cutter kissed his daughter and tucked her into bed. "You sleep tight, sweetheart."

He took Maggie's arm and blew out the candle, directing her toward their room. They undressed and crawled into bed, Maggie turning into his arms.

\* \* \* \*

Several weeks later, as they drove twenty head of sleek cattle to the Sioux Reservation, Cutter marveled at Maggie. He had known countless women, but never one like Maggie. His hunger for her had been whetted until he knew he would never have enough of her, no matter how many times they made love. With no other woman had he ever given completely of himself, and Maggie had taken from and given to him. She was all that he'd ever wanted and dreamed of in a woman, but thought he would never find. She was the other half that made him whole, the mate he needed to soothe his restless seeking, body and soul.

Maggie was all woman, his woman. Cutter had reason to believe she was with child, although she hadn't told him. But he knew her body as well as he knew his own. He'd seen the darkening aureoles of her nipples, felt the added fullness of her breasts. As of yet there was no morning sickness, but she did want to sleep more. Her lips had blossomed like a dew-kissed rosebud.

Cutter had tried to talk her out of coming, wanting to protect her and the baby if she was with child. Maggie had insisted, telling him he had promised. He relented, wanting her with him and knowing he and Rusty would be taking their time. There was no need to push the cattle. He was glad Annika had returned two weeks ago and he had insisted that Melody Ann be left with her, thinking to give Maggie some rest.

They slowed, letting the cattle graze on the good grass as he saw Maggie once again head for a clump of trees. "Going to pick her flowers," he surmised. Cutter tried to keep an eye on her, but Rusty called out to him.

"Boss, come here!"

He kicked Boots in the flanks and rode up beside Rusty. "What's going on?"

“Unshod ponies, several of them.” Rusty pointed to the tracks. “Just thought you ought to know.”

Cutter looked around nervously, trying to spot Maggie. She was nowhere in sight. “Dammit it all! Hold the cattle here. I’ll see where Maggie went.”

He caught his breath sharply, whirled Boots and rode toward the clump of trees and a small stream. He found Goldy, his reins trailing.

“Maggie, Maggie, honey! Where are you?” He got no answer, but something caught his eye. Maggie’s hat lay in the grass across the stream.

With his heart in his throat, Cutter waded across and grabbed her hat, looking around carefully. Why would she cross the stream?

Cutter saw a swath of grass that had been trampled and ran toward a small knoll. He spotted five Indian ponies, ridden fast by Sioux warriors. Maggie was face down across one of them, her arms and feet dangling.

“Oh, God no!” escaped from his mouth. Why would they take Maggie? He would have gladly given up part of the cattle if only they’d made their wishes known.

Racing back across the stream, he jumped on Boots and rushed back to Rusty. “Big troubles, Rusty! Five renegades took Maggie. They’re heading northwest.”

“What about the cattle?”

“Let them be. They won’t go far. We’ve got to get Maggie. Come on, man!”

Cutter whirled Boots and started back the way he had ridden. He grabbed Goldy’s reins and tied him to a tree.

They rode hard. The trail was easy to follow. Cutter prayed all the while that Maggie wouldn’t be hurt and that they would stop and make camp soon. He tried to stay out

of sight and far enough behind that they could surprise the renegades.

Cutter's lips were clamped in a hard line. Over and over he asked why this would happen. He had tried to be friendly enough with the Indians, supplying them with beef for the winter. Maggie had never done a bad thing to anyone. He knew she must be scared senseless. Cutter told himself over and over that he should have gone with her, kept a close eye on her. Then he thought of how she'd insisted on some privacy.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie shuddered. She was getting the daylight's jounced out of her. She should have told Cutter she suspected she might be with child, but she wanted to be sure. She didn't want the disappointment she'd had when they'd gone to Denver. Surely Cutter knew. He knew her body as well as his own. Hadn't he worshipped it, made love, and ran his hands and lips over every inch of her body dozens of times? He would know of any changes, but he hadn't said anything.

Her arms were numb. After pounding on the Indian's leg, he'd bound her hands with a rawhide thong. Her stomach hurt and her legs ached. How much longer would they ride like this? The sun was sinking now. She knew Cutter had missed her and she was afraid he'd come after her and fight the Indians. Maybe even get killed. Maggie couldn't bear to think of that.

Surely these Indians weren't his enemies. Cutter had been good to them, furnishing beef to keep them from starving in the winter. He'd also said there were still some ruthless renegades, who plundered and stole from the ranchers. They hadn't accepted reservation life.

Maggie wanted to cry and scream, but what good would it do? The Indian would probably only stick some filthy rag in her mouth to shut her up. Already his leg, a naked leg, was across her back to hold her in place. She didn't know how much more she could take. She was dizzy and her stomach churned. What if she started vomiting?

She felt the horse slowing and the Indian pulled up beside a stream. Her eyes swept across a high sandstone bluff behind the stream. Several cottonwood and alder trees lined the banks of the creek.

The Indian vaulted from the horse, grabbed the back of her rawhide jacket, and jerked her off. Maggie's knees failed to hold her upright and she sagged to the ground.

"Wash face, drink water!" the Indian growled, his voice low and coarse.

At least he talked English. Maggie asked, "Why me? Why did you take me? I haven't hurt anyone."

"Shut mouth! No answers! Move!" He pushed at her shoulder.

Maggie struggled to her feet and held out her hands. "I need my hands free, please."

"No! Wash face!"

She didn't have much choice and stumbled to the edge of the stream. Streaks of pink, purple, and deep blue spread across the Western horizon. Maggie breathed deeply of the crisp evening air.

If she took a drink of water, it just might come back up the way her stomach churned. She knelt on the bank and dipped the cold water with her hands, bathing her face. Seeing her reflection in the cold water, her hair was disheveled. She could see the tall Indian standing behind her, watching.

Maggie looked up when the horses splashed across the stream, led by two of the Indians. They were unsaddled, and then hobbled on a patch of grass. Two of the Indians gathered sticks. She supposed they were going to build a fire. They talked among themselves, with grunts and a language she didn't understand.

She started walking toward the trees, holding her stomach. Suddenly, the Indian rudely jerked her around by the shoulders.

"Go! Up there!" He pointed to the sandstone cliff.

"I'm with child. I have to go..."

"Go nowhere! I watch," he told her, a smirk on his face.

"No, I need privacy. I'm Cutter's wife. He's a fine man, good to your people."

"Cutter no have wife. You lie!" He drew back his hand like he was ready to strike her and Maggie cringed.

"No, please! I am Cutter's wife. We were taking cattle to the reservation for your people. You have to let me go."

"Can't let you go. Go behind bush. Cutter will pay many horses for you if you good wife."

So that was it. She was to be traded for horses. What about now, and until they could contact Cutter? She couldn't believe that Cutter wasn't trying to find her.

Hurriedly Maggie followed the Indian up the incline to the protected ledge. A small, smokeless fire burned, and Maggie sank down with her back to the rock wall. She drew her legs up and rested her head on her knees. Maggie was prepared to sleep there. She would not share a horse blanket with the Indian.

Maggie listened to the four speak in low monotones. She supposed one was standing guard. She had been sure there were five of them when she'd been so rudely yanked

off the ground and across the horse. Closing her eyes, Maggie leaned back against the rock. She didn't feel in any danger.

A soft footstep beside Maggie made her tense. She felt her shoulder shaken and something poked at her. "Eat!"

Maggie quickly looked up and accepted the pemmican. She was hungry. "Thank you," she murmured.

Eating a little of the ground meat, berries and nuts, and melted suet, Maggie laid the rest of it on a rock. Closing her eyes again, Maggie realized how tired she was. Her body ached all over, but she was afraid to go to sleep. Oh, if only Cutter would come and get her. She would never complain about anything again.

The Indians had eaten and let the fire die down. When the Indian who had been responsible for grabbing her spread his blanket close to her, Maggie quickly came to her feet.

"I need to take a walk. I won't be long," she said, hoping he would let her go by herself.

"Be quick. We sleep now," he answered and pushed her along in front of him. Maggie didn't stop at the edge of the overhang, but plunged into the darkness.

"Stop! That far enough!"

Maggie heard a stifled gurgle and saw the Indian crumple to the ground. Not knowing what happened, but realizing she couldn't escape, she ducked into the bushes to take care of her personal needs.

"Hurry up, Maggie. We have to get out of here before they miss you."

"Oh, Lord, Cutter! Is that you?"

"Come on, honey. How do you feel?" He hugged her close and kissed her lips when she joined him. "We've got to ride, sweet woman. Are you up to it?"

“Oh, my...yes, but won't they...”

“Shhh...Rusty ran their horses off. Careful now.” He led her down the incline and across the stream to their horses in the trees. He handed Maggie up into the saddle and mounted behind her.

Quietly they started from the trees and Rusty rode in beside them. “It'll take them a while to find those horses.”

Cutter tightened his arm around Maggie, pressing his hands over her stomach. “You all right, honey? Talk to me.”

“I'm fine, I think. I'm very glad you came. Why was I taken?”

Thankful that she was okay, he inhaled deeply of her special scent. “Probably going to trade you for horses, or sell you to a mountain man.”

“He said he was going to trade me for horses.”

“For once I'm glad nature called you. Don't you think you better tell me about this?” He patted her stomach and rested his face against hers.

“I'm not sure, but I think I'm with child.”

He kissed her cheek quickly and melted into her back more, trying to absorb some of the jolting. “I know you are. Your body tells me beautiful things. I'm happy, honey.”

“I thought I was when we went to Denver, but I wasn't.”

“We're more ready for a baby now. Hang on, we're going to travel fast for a while.” He kicked Boots in the flanks.

Maggie relaxed, leaned into Cutter's shoulder more, feeling a oneness with him. They were family, husband and wife. She loved him and maybe soon he could tell her that he loved her. For now she would take whatever he could offer and be happy with it.

\* \* \* \*

Maggie stirred sleepily, feeling they had stopped. Cutter's voice echoed in her ears.

"Honey, wake up. We're going to camp here for three or four hours, then we'll start the cattle out at dawn. You're exhausted, aren't you?"

"I'm tired and sleepy."

He lifted her from the saddle and set her on a rock. "Sit tight for a minute. I'll hobble Boots, then spread your blankets."

"Cutter, I've got to take a walk. I'll be right back."

"Woman, you're not getting out of my sight again! You'll just have to endure me being around." He took her arm and walked a short way with her.

"It's a beautiful night. I'm so glad you're all right, Maggie. I was worried sick when I saw you draped over that horse and taking a bouncing like that."

"I was scared at first, but then I got the feeling that I wasn't going to be hurt."

He hugged her close when she joined him. "Do you think the baby is all right?"

"I hope so. I want your baby very much."

"And I want you and this baby. You're my woman, Maggie!" He buried his face in her hair, his heart so full he couldn't talk. Never had he felt such overpowering gentleness and protectiveness flowing through him.

He released her, took his bedroll from behind the saddle, and spread it with hers. Cutter unsaddled Boots, led him a short distance, and hobbled him. He could hear the cattle stirring, one lowed and another answered. A coyote howled at the waning moon.

## Chapter 21

Rusty joined Cutter where he waited for Maggie. "Miz Maggie all right?"

"I hope so, Rusty. How far did you run those Indian's horses?"

"Several miles, and I scattered them. They won't be found easily."

"God, I was worried, Rusty. She's with child, and I hope all this bouncing around doesn't cause problems."

"Well, damn, boss! That's wonderful. I guess you're happy."

"I am if she's okay. We'll have to leave by daylight, Rusty, so let's get some sleep."

"All right. 'Night boss. I'm spreading my blankets a short distance away."

"Good night." Cutter hurried back to find Maggie had already removed her boots and was curled into the blankets. He didn't bother to remove his boots, but lowered his hat over his face, shifted his gun belt, and scooted in behind Maggie.

He gathered her into his shoulder and kissed her face. "My little Maggie is all tired out. Sleep well, sweetheart."

"You too, Cutter. Thank you so much for rescuing me."

“I’d have gone to the end of the earth for you, honey. I was afraid I was going to have to fight all five of them. We took care of one of them down by the horses and the other by the bushes. I don’t think the other three even stirred. Good night, love. Sleep tight.”

Cutter turned her slightly and slid his hand over her shoulder. He loved the smooth touch of her skin. It was soft and silky. He found her lips for a slow, drugging kiss. Sighing heavily, he breathed deeply of her special lavender fragrance, kissed her again lightly, and closed his eyes.

\* \* \* \*

The stars were fading from the sky, and it was that special time just before dawn when Rusty brought up the horses. Cutter saddled Boots and Goldy while Maggie rolled the bedrolls.

“We’ll move out quietly and travel for about an hour. Then I’ll feel better about building a fire for coffee. You sure you’re up to riding by yourself, Maggie?”

“I’m fine, Cutter. Kind of sore in my stomach, but it’ll pass.”

“If you have any problems, let me know. Okay?”

Maggie staggered as she started to her horse, grabbed her mouth, and quickly turned away. She felt nauseous.

Cutter wet his clean bandana from the canteen and pressed it into her hand. “Can I do anything else?”

“No! Give me five minutes, please.” She was embarrassed and upset. This was a fine way to start a morning.

Cutter came back for her in a few minutes and helped her mount Goldy. “You all right now?”

“I’m okay. Quit worrying. I’ve been told this is normal procedure.”

He grinned good-naturedly, showing his white teeth. "So I hear, honey. Be careful now."

Cutter mounted and they joined Rusty, who had started the cattle moving.

"Everything looks normal. Don't see any sign of those Indians."

"Just don't get too complacent. They may be waiting up ahead. Maggie, for God's sake, honey, stick close to me."

A cool breeze drifted down the canyon, ruffling the leaves on the trees. A mourning dove called, and a big jackrabbit, startled from its burrow, skittered across the trail.

Pinkish rays appeared in the east. This was going to be a glorious day. Cutter felt it in his bones.

Some hours later the cattle wound through the small canyon in the foothills of the Laramie Mountains. Cutter kept a wary eye on the rocks and trees that would provide cover for an ambush. He handed Maggie a pistol.

"Use this if you have to. Just be careful now."

"Why will I need this?" She met his gaze, her eyes big and round.

"Can't ever tell what's waiting in these hills."

"Surely you don't think..."

A shot rang out, too close for comfort. "Trouble, boss!" Rusty shouted.

"Make 'em run, Rusty. Get 'em through." He fired a shot in the general direction where the shot had come from, glancing over his shoulder to see Maggie raise her pistol and fire. A painted Indian tumbled from the rocks.

"Good girl!" Cutter called to her.

The cattle were running, Rusty shouting, and dust boiled up around them. Maggie pulled her bandana over her

mouth to keep from choking on the dust. She answered another shot and rode behind some huge boulders, momentarily blocking her view of Cutter and the cattle.

She panicked when she realized she was cut off. Kicking Goldy in the flanks, she emerged from the rocks to see Cutter, rifle to his shoulder, peppering the backsides of three horses and two riders while they beat a hasty retreat.

Maggie reined in beside him. "I hope that's the last of them."

Cutter eyed the horses, then looked to the boulders both right and left. "I hope so, too. You all right?"

"I'm fine. Did I really hit that Indian?"

"Must have. I wasn't shooting in that direction. Let's see if we can catch Rusty and the cattle." He planted a quick kiss on her cheek, vowing he would make up for all these discomforts later.

"Thank you," she whispered, her eyes glowing with love. "Why did they leave so suddenly?"

"Didn't want to get shot, is my guess. I recognized one of the horses and I think they're the same group that abducted you. They weren't after the cattle, but wanted revenge."

Maggie shuddered. She wanted no part of them and breathed a sigh of relief when she saw Rusty riding toward them.

His boyish face broke into a big grin. "I got the cattle through and came back to help, but you've taken care of it."

"Maggie helped. She was responsible for one, maybe two. Guess they were out for revenge."

"Same bunch, huh? Must have found their horses. Bet two of those guys had a healthy headache, though."

"Expect you're right, Rusty. Cattle all right?"

“Oh yeah! They’re grazing peacefully in a little meadow. Nice place to camp if you’re ready.”

“It’s two hours ’til sundown, but maybe we better. We can still make it by noon tomorrow. Are you tired, Maggie?”

“No, I’ll be all right.” She really wasn’t, but she didn’t want Cutter to know. She felt exhausted and dizzy. Was it the anemia acting up again? Or were there problems with the baby? She was scared. She so wanted to have Cutter’s baby.

When they reached the cattle, Rusty rode on ahead to check out everything. Cutter hurried to Maggie’s side to help her. Lifting her off Goldy, he held her in his arms. “I’m afraid this is too much for you, honey.”

He gingerly placed her on the ground, her back against a tree. Kneeling beside her, he drew her head over on his shoulder, slowly kissing her eyelids and moving down to her mouth. He traced her lips, and claimed her mouth for a loving kiss.

Releasing the long kiss, he patted her shoulder. “You rest. Rusty and I’ll take care of everything.”

“Thank you. You’re quite nice, did you know that?”

“I’m glad you think so.”

A sharp twinge in Maggie’s stomach made her wince. She gasped, “Oh...oh!”

“What is it, honey?”

“Cramps in my stomach. They’ll go away in a minute.”

Cutter saw her trembling lips, the bead of perspiration on her upper lip. “Like hell they will!” he muttered.

Without another word, he strode to his horse and stripped off the bedrolls. Cutter spread the blankets, picked Maggie up and placed her on the bed. He pulled a blanket over her.

“Rest, sweetie. I’m worried about you.”

“Don’t. I’ll be...”

He took her words in a slow kiss, stilling her thoughts.

When she relaxed and lay back with her eyes closed, Cutter stood, shaking his head. She was too stubborn for her own good.

Maggie hadn’t stirred in some time. Cutter dipped a plate of stew, made from dried beef, carrots, potatoes, and onions. He gently shook her shoulder, saying, “Try to eat, Maggie. You need this.”

Wearily she raised her head and met his gaze. “Not now, please. My stomach is still churning.”

“At least try, honey. If it comes up, okay.” He steadied her as she sat up, helping her to lean against a tree. “Want some coffee?”

“No! No!” She pressed her hands against her stomach for a minute. “Maybe some cold water.”

“Want me to feed you? You aren’t making much progress.” She had taken the plate and rested it on her knee, but made no effort to taste the food.

“I can do it. I’m just waiting for my head to quit spinning.”

“Why are you so dizzy, Maggie? What are you not telling me, honey?”

“I’m anemic and I have these spells occasionally. I think it was all the bouncing yesterday.”

Cutter picked up the spoon and brought food to her mouth. “Come on, try this. You have to eat, woman, to keep up your strength.”

“I know. I’m sorry I’m being a problem.” She took the mouthful of food, chewed, and swallowed.

“Eat now. I’ll get your water.”

Maggie ate most of the stew and some crusty bread. Finally she lay back on the blankets, her stomach still queasy.

“Rusty will be sleeping closer tonight. We’ll alternate on taking watch, so call out if you need anything.”

“We’ll see.” She sighed heavily.

“Maggie, I’m sorry. I had hoped you would enjoy this more.” He patted her arm, then bent and kissed her forehead.

\* \* \* \*

When they reached the reservation the next day, Cutter and Rusty drove the cattle into the corral, then went on to the chief’s house.

He helped Maggie from Goldy and held her close for a minute. “I’m glad you’re feeling better. I was really worried. I’m going to ask Annika’s sister to make a tea for you. It’ll be as bitter as gall, but please drink it. I think this will help settle your stomach.”

“All right. What’s it for?”

“To build up your blood. Maybe keep you from losing the baby...our baby.”

Maggie watched him stride away to the second house down from theirs. A woman came to the door when Cutter called out and there was a quick conversation.

He walked back, confidence showing in his walk and the set of his shoulders. “Okay, now let’s see Gray Wolfe. Ola-Golla will bring the drink to you. She wishes us well with our baby.”

Placing his arm around Maggie’s waist, he rapped on the door of the chief’s house.

“Ah, Cutter! It is good! Enter please,” the tall chief with flowing gray hair answered.

“We brought twenty head of cattle. Our gift to you, Gray Wolfe, but we had some trouble. Five renegades abducted my wife. Rusty and I went after them and got her back. We gave two of them big lumps on their heads, and my wife is having a problem. She needs to sit down, please.”

“Sit! Sit! I’m glad you honor us, Cutter’s woman.”

Maggie sat where he indicated, her gaze sweeping over the tall chief, his graying hair held back with a red bandana, His skin was bronzed and leathery-looking, his eyes an obsidian black and sharply assessing. He sat down cross-legged across from her, his heavily fringed buckskin britches pulling tight across his knees.

The woman with the tea for Maggie called out, “I bring tea for Cutter’s woman. May I enter?”

“Yes, come in, Ola-Golla. Welcome.”

She bowed slightly in front of Maggie and handed her the drink. “Drink, please, while it’s hot. Then won’t be so bitter.”

“Thank you kindly.” Maggie drank from the pottery bowl and grimaced. This was terrible. She gave Cutter a resentful look.

Cutter smiled back at her. “Yes, you need to drink it. Please, Maggie.”

She didn’t question further, but lifted the bowl and drank, finishing all of it. Handing the bowl back to the woman, Maggie felt she might be sick. She gritted her teeth, trying to calm herself.

Maggie shook herself. “Ohhh...that was terrible.”

“Make stomach feel better,” Ola-Golla replied, showing a toothless grin.

Cutter clasped Maggie’s hand. “We’ll stay the night and leave early. My Maggie needs rest.”

Gray Wolfe frowned and looked from Cutter to Maggie, then back. "Those renegades cause problems with your woman?"

"Maybe. They didn't harm her physically, but threw her over a horse and rode fast for several miles. Too much bouncing for her. She carries our baby."

The old chief grinned, his leathery face wrinkling. "That much good news. Big, strong man like you, Cutter, make many sons."

Cutter laughed. "Yet I have a daughter. Maybe this one will be a son."

"Ola-Golla will show you where to sleep. There is extra house. Thank you much for cattle. Maybe save more of our people."

Cutter stood and helped Maggie to her feet. He shook hands with the chief. "We'll leave early and we thank you for your hospitality."

"Much good mans, Cutter. Pretty womans, too."

\* \* \* \*

Maggie breathed in heavily the pine scent and a fragrance she didn't recognize. She finished washing her body and pulled on Cutter's shirt to sleep in. He had gone to check on Rusty and to be sure he was all right. Maggie turned back the blanket on the bed and crawled in, hearing the gentle creak of the ropes underneath. At least the Indians were learning some of the white man's ways. There was a table, stove, two willow chairs, and a bed in the one room cabin. A low fire burned in the stove and a pan of fragrant oil simmered, giving off the pleasant scents.

Cutter came in, closing the door softly behind him. "Rusty is fine and already in his bedroll. Said he won some money in the game of chance with the young bucks. He's happy."

"That's wonderful. Did you get all your talking and visiting done?" He sat down on the edge of the bed. "Didn't see much of you this afternoon."

"I was trying to stay out of your way, so you could take a nap. Yes, I had a lot to talk about. I told them about the new haymaking equipment. They were fascinated."

"They're an interesting people. Ola-Golla is Chief Gray Wolfe's second wife?"

"Something like that. Do you think I ought to take me a second wife?" He laughed and winked at her.

"I doubt that will be necessary. There's more hot water if you want to wash."

"I think I will. Probably smell like cows. What's cooking?"

"Ola-Golla left it. It's an oil to make the room smell nice."

He stripped off his shirt and underwear top. "Very pleasing, isn't it?" Cutter washed, stepped out of the rest of his clothes and came to bed. "Now, how's my lovely wife doing?"

Cutter gathered her into his arms, claiming her lips for a loving kiss.

"Not too bad. My stomach feels better."

"Good." He ran his hand up under the shirt to fondle her burgeoning breast. "You feel up to this, honey?"

Breathlessly, Maggie whispered. "Oh yes. I love you, Cutter."

"I know, sweetheart." His lips came back to hers, his tongue delving into her mouth to taste all the sweetness. His hand found the secret core of her femininity, lingering, caressing, and stroking with his thumb to keep pace with his tongue.

Maggie moaned, opening herself as his fingers slowly, torturously, dipped full length, then withdrew to spread her honeyed elixir. He plunged deep again and again, making Maggie moan and gasp for breath, her passion sharpening. She had to have more. This wasn't quenching the terrible, burning ache within her.

His lips left hers to scorch across her cheek, to her temple, to her silken hair. He muttered a low groan against her heated skin. "My sweet woman! Do you want me?"

"So very much, my love," she whispered, trembling with the need.

He moved her underneath him, his hardened manhood finding her, stabbing hard and true into the hot depths. Joined to her, letting her accustom herself to his aroused length, he pulsed and throbbed inside her. He filled her to overflowing, then pressed her back down on the bed. He withdrew, drove hard and deep, again and again.

It was always like the first time he had made love to her, his body taut with desire. With his hands beneath her hips, he lifted her to meet him, each strong and vibrant thrust. The firelight from the stove danced over their fevered bodies, sealing them together for now and always.

The sweet, musky scents of their lovemaking mingled with the pine and smoke scents. Headlong they spiraled through a wild and dark canyon that burst into a dazzling light, burning and charring, until they collapsed in silence.

Cutter held Maggie close, his arms both protective and possessive. "You are mine, forever and always, my sweet Maggie."

## Chapter 22

Ace was up and about. More than once he had ridden into town and stayed overnight. Cutter hated to chastise or complain since he wasn't needed that bad anyway. He happened to be in the barn when Ace rode in about midday.

"You run into problems, Ace? I expected you back last night."

"Nope, nothing I couldn't handle. But I don't suppose you're going to let me get by with an answer like that, are you?" He grinned when he said those words.

"Not hardly, and I can't help but worry. What's going on?" Cutter looped the bridle he repaired over the pole by the tack room door, and stood.

"Well, let's see. I filed for divorce from that no-good Ellen. I even went to see Rose again. She's a good person to talk to."

"Yeah, I always thought she was a good woman, Ace. Now that she's a widow again, are you spending nights there, too?"

"What if I am? That's our business, I would say." He threw the saddle from his horse over the pole and draped the blanket behind it.

"It's your business all right, and I'm not complaining one bit. You should have married her four years ago."

“Couldn’t see it, Cutter. Maybe I can see a lot of things now that I couldn’t then. Not all women are alike by a damned sight. You sure found a good one.”

“That I did, Ace. She’s quite a woman.” Tears misted his eyes just thinking about her. He gave thanks every day that Ace had put his name on that list for a woman.

“I know you’re tickled over this new baby that’s coming, and I’m happy for you. I don’t see why it took you so long.”

Cutter’s eyes darkened. “None of your damned business, partner. I’ll take care of my woman the way I see fit, and you take care of yours. Our partnership doesn’t extend that far.”

“Okay, okay! You’re mighty damned touchy. What’s eating you now?”

“I don’t have one problem where Maggie is concerned. I’m just hoping you’re gonna stay healthy for a while. You’ve been as worthless as teats on a boar hog, Ace.”

Ace clamped a hand on Cutter’s shoulder. “I know that, and guess I brought most of it on myself. Sometimes it takes an old dog a while to learn new tricks.”

“New tricks or not, I don’t want you getting shot anymore. Did you ever hear from Ellen’s mother? Thought she was gonna send your money back?”

“I told her to consider the debt paid. It was worth it to get rid of that bitch. I sure learned a lesson the hard way with that one.” He ran his fingers through his graying hair and laughed lightly.

“I’ll say you did. So what about you and Rose?”

“Don’t know yet. We’re doing a lot o’ talking.”

“No action, huh? Where you spending your nights?” He grinned and moved impatiently.

“Never you mind, Cutter. I don’t infringe on your lovemaking, just stay outa’ mine.” He flipped the brim of his hat and walked out.

Well, so much for that. Rose was a good woman, and no one could be prouder if Ace did get serious again. Cutter couldn’t help but wonder if this wasn’t too sudden. Ace ought to give himself time to really know what he wanted.

Finishing with his work in the tack room, Cutter ambled over to the blacksmith shop. The days and nights were both cooler now, and the sky was a leaden gray. Looked like November might bring in the first snowstorm of the year. He’d heard geese flying south for quite a while. Even the ones that usually hung around the little lake had disappeared. The new thoroughbred cattle had arrived and he was watching them closely to see that they adjusted.

The big forge was hot with coals, and Chiso squinted through the dim light at Cutter. “What’s going on, boss?”

“Not much with me. This isn’t the day to be working in such light, Chiso.”

“Nope. Gonna snow, you reckon?”

“Could be. Maybe we’ll have snow for Thanksgiving instead of Christmas. Maggie has sure been busy with her baking lately.”

“She ought to slow down, boss. She’s not a big strong woman, and she’s been sick so much I hear. Annika tells everything, you know.”

“Yeah, I know. Maggie insists she’s feeling fine, though, and she wants to be busy.”

“Maybe I’m just worrying because your Anna Marie had so much trouble.”

“Don’t put your eyes out in here. Light the lantern, Chiso.”

Cutter went to the house, looking forward to seeing Maggie again. Sometimes it was hard for him to stay away from her for two or three hours. He had never known this kind of feelings, and he hardly knew how to deal with it.

The stove was cold in the kitchen, and no sounds could be heard. That was unusual. Most times Maggie and Melody Ann were laughing and chattering away. Cutter hurried into the parlor and found Maggie crumpled on the floor in front of the fireplace. Melody Ann was by her side.

Cutter froze. What had happened? No, this couldn't be, not his Maggie. The woman he loved with all his heart, body and soul.

"God, baby, what happened?" he asked, kneeling by Maggie's side. Melody Ann started crying and he patted her. "It's all right. It's all right, sweetie. Mommy is sick."

Hesitantly he turned Maggie's head and saw the blood, a big, blue spot forming. Had she fallen and struck her head on the hearth? "What happened, honey? Did Mommy fall?"

Melody Ann nodded. "Her fall, Daddy."

"Oh God!" Cutter quickly felt for a pulse and found one.

She must have gotten dizzy while she was dusting the mantel. He gathered her into his arms and stood. "Let's put Mommy to bed, then we'll doctor her head," he told the little girl.

Gingerly he eased Maggie onto the bed, removed her dress, then her shoes. He covered her, then brought a basin of water and bathed her face. He kissed her face and lips.

"I'm so sorry, Maggie. Please be all right."

Wiping the blood away, he could see a small gash, but it was still bleeding in a vulnerable spot, her temple. Cutter swore under his breath. He smeared the cut with Witch

Hazel and bandaged it. He slapped Maggie's hands, bathed her forehead, and tried to revive her. This wasn't good.

"Maggie, my love, talk to me. Are you all right?"

Her eyelids fluttered then she opened her eyes.

"What...what are you doing?"

"Trying to see about you. What happened, sweetheart?"

"Happened? Did something happen? Who are you?"

He opened his mouth in astonishment, and finally said, "I'm Cutter, your husband. This is our daughter, Melody Ann. You know who we are."

Maybe the blow to her head had been worse than he thought. He'd heard of these things happening.

"Where am I?" She nervously looked around the room.

"This is our bedroom. Maggie, look at me."

"What did you call me?" She let her gaze meet his. He had the darkest brown eyes she had ever seen.

"Maggie, that's your name. Be sensible, honey. You're scaring me."

She started crying, big tears running from her eyes. "I don't know my name or where I am. She's my daughter?" She pointed at Melody Ann.

"This is Melody Ann, our daughter. Maggie, sweetie, I can't stand this. You've got to be all right. Rest now, I'll fix you something to drink."

He needed desperately to talk to someone, but whom? Would any of the men know what to do for her? Pedro and Chiso were the only two men around. He supposed Ace had ridden out to check the cattle, and Annika and West had gone to town to buy supplies.

Cutter found some chicken broth, built the fire in the stove, and heated it. Melody Ann came in wagging her big doll. She was seldom without it.

“Mommy cry.”

“I know, honey. She isn't feeling good. She'll be all better soon.” He poured the broth in a cup and took it back in to Maggie, Melody Ann following him.

Maggie stirred nervously when Cutter walked up beside the bed. “It's all right, Maggie. I brought you some broth.”

Her eyes were big and rounded, and her cheek showed a darkening smudge from the bruise.

She scooted up on the pillow and Cutter placed another one behind her so she could sit up straighter. He handed the cup to her, purposely touching her fingers.

Acting confused, she jerked her hand away. “It's all right, Maggie. No one is going to hurt you.”

“I don't understand this. Why am I in bed and why are you waiting on me?”

He pulled up a chair and sat down, lifting Melody Ann onto his lap. “I'm Cutter McCallister, Maggie. This is Melody Ann, my daughter. We've been married since March and you're expecting a baby. You fell today and hurt your head. Were you dizzy?”

“I don't remember. Please don't ask me any questions now.” She wanted to close her eyes and blot out everything. The haunting dark eyes of this good-looking man bothered her. He said he was her husband, but that couldn't be. Then she saw the gold band with rubies on her finger. Oh, Lord, maybe he told the truth.

“Sleep, Maggie. You'll feel better soon.”

\* \* \* \*

Cutter tried to keep busy, working on his books and keeping an eye on Melody Ann. He even cooked supper and took a tray into Maggie, bathed Melody Ann, and put her to

bed. Now, it was time for him to go to bed and he felt awkward about it.

Would Maggie throw a fit if he crawled into bed with her? Dammit, she was his wife and they'd shared a bed for quite awhile now. He wasn't going to be the putout husband. He wanted to be with her, to hold her close if nothing else.

He knew she'd been up, had even taken a bath. Cutter offered to help her in anyway he could, but she'd declined, telling him she was used to waiting on herself.

Walking into the darkened bedroom, Cutter sensed she was still awake. He purposely walked to the big dresser and lit the candle, then began undressing. He turned to catch her gaze going over him.

Since she didn't protest, he snuffed out the candle and sat down on the edge of the bed, kicking off his sheepskin lined slippers.

"You all right, Maggie?" he asked, lying back and pulling the sheet and light blanket over him.

"Still have a slight headache. Are you sleeping here?"

"Yes, honey, we have a loving relationship and share a bed." He turned toward her, wanting to pull her into his arms.

Her voice was low, barely audible. "How long have we been married?"

"Since March and this is November, so that makes eight months. Thanksgiving is in a few days. Beth and Alex are coming out, remember?"

"Who are Beth and Alex?"

"Oh, Lord, honey! Beth is your best friend. You grew up in the orphanage together. You answered the ad in the newspaper and came to Wyoming and married Alex and me. Surely you remember Beth?"

"I wish I did. Why can't I remember?"

She started crying and he soothed his hand up and down her arm. "You will. Don't worry about it. Now, may I kiss my sweet wife good night, and hold you in my arms like I usually do?"

She rose up on her elbow and looked down at him. "If you did that, I'd remember, wouldn't I? You're a very handsome man."

"Thank you, and I'm indeed lucky to have such a loving wife." He eased her down and over against him, resting her head on his shoulder. He felt her stiffen, and he caressed down her arm again. "It's all right, sweetie. I'll just hold you tonight."

"What do you usually do?" She inhaled deeply of his musky man scent and spicy cologne.

He kissed her mouth slowly. "We do a lot of that, lots of cuddling and making love. We're well-suited together."

"I can't believe this. Where's the child?"

He brought his hand down to caress her stomach through her cotton gown. "Our baby is growing right there. We're happy about this baby. My daughter, Melody Ann, is asleep in her bed."

"How come you have a daughter and I don't?"

"Honey, please don't tax yourself tonight. It'll all come back to you in a day or two." He caressed up and down her arm and she nestled into him more. Cutter kissed her forehead, across her cheek and down to her lips. He claimed them for a long, loving kiss. "Goodnight, sweetheart. You'll be better tomorrow."

"I hope so. This is terribly confusing." She liked his kisses and returned them. "Night," she murmured.

Sometime later Cutter awoke. Maggie was practically on top of him, moving against his hard thigh. She stroked

and massaged his hardened manhood, and small murmurs of pleasure escaped from her as she kissed across his stomach and to his chest.

“Whatcha doing, honey?”

“Loving you,” she murmured.

“Do you know what you’re doing? Who am I?”

“You said you were my husband. Aren’t I entitled to love you?”

“God yes, but I thought...”

She moved over him, rocking back and forth. She bent forward, thrusting one breast into his mouth.

“Ummm...wonderful,” he whispered, before suckling hard.

Deep sensations swept through Maggie, making her ache for more. She felt the wetness between her legs, her inner core crying for fulfillment. She raised herself slightly and came down over his hardened shaft, sheathing him perfectly with her hot femininity.

This was sensational. She threw her head back and sighed heavily, a shudder going down her back. When she started moving up and down, round and round, Cutter thought he couldn’t stand it. Their lovemaking had always been special, but never like this. Maggie was in charge tonight, getting all her fantasies fulfilled.

He grasped her buttocks and hunched into her wildly. Not able to stand it another minute, he turned them with her underneath. “God, baby, this is...”

Cutter drove into her hard, withdrew, and plunged harder. His mouth sought hers and his tongue matched his wildly erotic strokes. He was on fire, not able to get enough, his body hard and aching. He raised her hips to meet his thrusts, still plunging his tongue into her mouth.

They rode the crests to a shuddering climax. "Maggie, honey, did I hurt you?" he asked, his voice thick with emotion.

"I think I'm all right. What happened?"

"What happened? Maggie, sweetie, I woke up with you all over me, stroking me. You wanted to make love, didn't you?"

"I must have. I felt so empty and incomplete. That seemed normal and right."

He let his lips roam over hers, nibbling at her lips. "You're my precious wife, and anytime you want to love me, that's fine with me. You're one sweet woman, and you're mine."

His arm tightened around her, settling her into him more.

"You're a darling man, Cutter."

He sighed heavily, hoping she was all right.

\* \* \* \*

Three days passed slowly. Maggie acted like she was in a daze, questioning Cutter as to why that Indian woman was washing and cleaning. She also asked him over and over about how she met him, where they were married, and why wasn't Melody Ann her daughter if they were married?

Cutter tried to be patient with her, telling her again about them and how they had married. He was glad today was Thanksgiving. Maybe seeing Beth would bring her out of this daze.

He had reminded her earlier that it was Thanksgiving, bringing the turkey in early for her to put in the oven. He had also told her again that Beth and Alex would be coming for dinner. Cutter watched as she got out the best linen tablecloth and napkins, and the good china, and set the table. He had even offered to help her, but she appeared to

be insulted, telling him quite sharply she could do some things on her own without him looking over her shoulder every minute.

With that he took Melody Ann into the parlor to wait the arrival of the guests. He breathed a sigh of relief when he heard the buggy.

Opening the door, Cutter exclaimed, "Come in, folks. Not snowing yet, is it?"

Beth's nose was red from the cold, but she laughed and took his hand. "Good to see you. I'll give you my coat and see if I can help Maggie."

"Maggie, honey, Beth and Alex are here." He turned to Alex. "Have a seat, Alex."

Alex smiled big, his white teeth flashing against his sun-tanned skin. "Boy, that fire looks good."

Maggie came in, her face flushed from the heat of the stove, her red hair beginning to straggle around her face. She looked from Cutter to Beth and Alex, hesitating.

Beth didn't wait for her to make the first move. She grabbed Maggie's hands and hugged her. "Maggie, it's so good to see you. How are you?"

Maggie looked flustered and backed up. "You're Beth, and we were in the orphanage together?"

"That's right, and we came out here on the train together to marry these ornery men. It'll come back to you, honey. Don't worry. Now, what can I do to help?" She took Maggie's arm and turned her toward the kitchen. Cutter watched them go, glad he had made the trip into town earlier and told Beth about the situation.

"The turkey and dressing are cooking, pies and cakes are ready. Maybe we could have a tray of pickles and beets. You can mash the potatoes, too." She turned away from Beth, her shoulders trembling.

Beth saw her reaction and quickly put her arm around Maggie's shoulders. "Hey, it's all right. You'll be fine in a few days. Didn't the doctor say it wasn't anything to worry about?"

"I feel so stupid. I can't remember who I am or who that man is. He says he's my husband and I'm wearing a wedding ring. Why can't I remember? Has he been a good husband?"

"Wonderful I hear, and you told me this yourself. He's a loving man and thinks you're pretty special. He's done a lot for you, Maggie. Better than what the rest of us have."

"Oh...I didn't mean...will I be all right? He says we're expecting a baby, too."

"Oh, Maggie darling, that's wonderful. Alex and I are, too. He's really a concerned and settled man now. Where's the potato masher?"

"Cutter says I'll have to go see the doctor next week." She handed Beth the potato masher, feeling better about Beth now.

"Good. We're expecting our baby in April or early May. Isn't this marvelous?"

\* \* \* \*

Dinner was over, kitchen put back to rights, and Alex and Beth gone. Cutter put his arm around Maggie and led her to the sofa. "Let's sit in front of the fire and have a glass of wine. It was a lovely day, Maggie, my love."

"I shouldn't drink wine. It always puts me to sleep."

He poured the wine and handed her a glass, glad she remembered that much at least. "You need to sleep. Did you remember about your life with Beth while you were in the orphanage?"

"Some things seemed to be normal for me. I wasn't nervous with her, like I've known her for always."

“Alex says he’s settled down, quit his drinking and gambling. He’s ready to do right by Beth and the baby.”

“I’m glad. Beth needs a good husband. She said you’ve been very good to me, too.”

“I try, honey. We’re gonna take you to the doctor Monday and be sure you’re all right. Does that tonic Annika makes for you seem to help?”

“I feel better. Why do we have this Indian woman helping me?”

“Her husband, West, works for me, and she’s always worked in the house. I thought you liked her.” He sipped his wine slowly, watching her. The shadows of the flames danced across her face, but she looked tired tonight. Maybe this had been too much.

“I don’t remember.” She set her almost untouched glass on the end table and stood. “I’m going to bed. Goodnight.”

“I’ll be in shortly. ’Night, honey.”

Cutter finished his drink and took the glasses to the kitchen and rinsed them. He blew out the light and banked the fire in the fireplace, replacing the black mesh screen. Walking into the bedroom some minutes later, he expected to see his wife in bed waiting for him. But Maggie was nowhere to be seen.

## Chapter 23

“What the hell?” Cutter stammered and looked again, then in the bathroom. He still didn’t find Maggie. Cutter opened the door to Melody Ann’s room, but Maggie wasn’t there. He was sure she hadn’t left the house. That only left the room where she used to sleep. He knew he’d been too engrossed in these new cattle dying. He was slowly losing his shirt.

Steeling himself, Cutter pushed open the door.

“Maggie, are you here?”

“I’m in bed,” she answered, rising up a bit.

He slowly walked into the room, and to the bed, wondering how best to handle this. “Are you all right?”

“I’m tired.” She sighed heavily and pushed at her hair curling around her face.

“Why did you decide to sleep in here? I thought you liked for me to hold you close and be with you?”

“I’m all right here, and I remembered this was my room.”

“Oh, I see.” A crazy moment of uncertainty raced through his mind. If she remembered things like that, that was a good indication that her memory was coming back.

He sat down on the bed and clasped her hand in his.

“Are you upset with me?”

She leaned back into the pillows, sighing heavily. "No, but I'm confused. What am I supposed to do?"

"Do about what, honey?"

"Everything. You and me? I don't understand."

He bent to kiss her. "I guess I've been too tied up with these new cattle, Maggie. I'm sorry, but we've lost more'n half of them, and there goes my money right out the window. I borrowed money from the bank, and I may have to mortgage the ranch."

"I'm terribly sorry. Anything I can do?"

"Not unless you can say a prayer that will do some good, or hand me a big chunk of money."

"I remembered that you gave me some money. Maybe I've saved nearly most of it and I made a little making dresses. It's yours if you need it."

He buried his head against hers. "Oh, Maggie, Maggie. That's a wonderful gesture and I love you for it. I'd feel better if you were in my bed with me. There's nothing nicer than having you in my arms."

"Do you love your wife, Cutter?"

He caught his breath sharply. Cutter knew he should have told Maggie a long time ago of his love for her. She was his life, the other half of him. She was the one person who made his life worthwhile.

"Oh, Maggie, my love. I do love you. I should have told you sooner, but I'm a stubborn old coot. I couldn't even admit it to myself, honey."

"Thank you," she murmured softly.

He bowed his head again and touched her lips for a soft, fleeting kiss.

Maggie wanted more, and her hands closed over his shoulders, holding him close. "Maybe you could stay here with me until I go to sleep."

"I have a much better idea." He threw back the covers and scooped her up.

"Cutter, what are you..."

"Taking my sweet wife to our bed where she belongs. I'm more comfortable in that big bed, and I want you with me."

"But I thought this was my room..."

"Not for a long time. You belong in *our* bed and in my arms, lovely woman!" He set her on the side of the bed, then tucked her in, bringing the covers up to her shoulders.

"Why would I think I belonged in that room?"

Hurriedly, Cutter undressed and slid into bed beside Maggie, bringing her into his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. "You slept there for a while after we were married. I kept telling myself I didn't need a wife or a loving woman in my life. I was wrong. You're my life, my love, my Maggie."

"Do you need me?"

"So very much, and I hope you need me."

"I think I do. Do I love you?"

"You've told me so several times. I believe you do. You give me love and happiness, Maggie darlin'."

\* \* \* \*

Several days later, Maggie was cleaning the kitchen counters when Ace charged in. He grabbed her around the waist, whirled her around a couple of times, then set her on her feet.

"Hey, Maggie, I'm thinking I'll get married. I popped the question to Rose and she said yes."

Maggie grabbed her head, her mind in a whirl. "I thought you were married."

“What’s wrong?” Her knuckles were white as she gripped the back of the chair. “You aren’t gonna faint, are you?”

“No, no! But you were married to Ellen and she left, didn’t she?”

“Yeah! No-good slut! Sorry, Miz Maggie. I want to marry Rose. She’s a real nice woman I’ve known for several years. Cutter likes her,” he assured Maggie.

“Now I remember. Ellen shot you and you’ve been seeing Miz Rose, the woman you used to like.”

She quickly sat down and reached for a glass of water on the table. “Tell me about this,” she continued. “Will you stay on here at the ranch?”

“You all right, honey? You’re looking kinda funny,” Ace asked, concern in his voice.

“Funny? I don’t feel strange. I’m a pregnant woman and the doctor says I’m all right.” It was amazing. She had no discomfort with Ace and she knew who he was. Had her memory returned in full? “Am I acting right, Ace?”

“You sure are, honey.” He laid his hand over hers briefly, and removed it just as Cutter came through the back door.

“There you are! This all you got to do, Ace? Sit around and hold hands with my wife?” His voice came out a low growl.

“Just telling her my good news. I invited Rose to marry me and she said yes. Now, I got plans to make, and I’ll talk to you when you’re in a better mood. I don’t see how Maggie puts up with you! Always as grouchy as an old bear. He slapped his hat back on his head and left in a hurry.

Cutter poured a cup of coffee and dropped into a chair, becoming concerned when he didn’t hear Melody Ann jabbering and laughing. “Where’s Melody Ann, honey?”

“She went with Annika. Cutter, I remember...”

He nearly upset his coffee in jumping up from his chair. Grabbing her, he pulled her up and into his arms. “That’s wonderful, sweetie. What happened?”

“I don’t know. All of a sudden I remembered Ace and what he went through with Ellen. He says he’s getting married again.”

“So I heard.” He hugged her tighter, and set her down again. “You’re sure you’re all right?”

“I’m fine. Is it lunch time already?”

“I’m a little early. Don’t worry about it. I’ll just make myself a sandwich. Where did Annika and Melody Ann go?” He turned back to her and laid his hand on her shoulder.

“She said the sun was shining so pretty, and it’s warm so they walked down to the lake. It’s about time they were coming back.”

Cutter breathed a prayer. It was good that Maggie had remembered. Maybe now their life would get back to normal.

\* \* \* \*

That night after they were in bed, Cutter gathered her in his arms, kissing her eyes, and then coming down to her mouth.

“Maggie, darlin’, I’m so glad you’ve regained your memory. I’ve really felt bad about all you’ve gone through. The new cattle are coming out of it, so I think everything is going to be fine. Do you regret coming to Wyoming and marrying a man you didn’t know?”

“There were some moments of uncertainty, when I wanted to leave. Then I would think I’d never had a family, and you and Melody Ann, and the men were my family. A wonderful group of people whom I loved, and I couldn’t do it.”

“You’ve been an extraordinary wife, so loving and giving of yourself. I’ve been a stubborn bastard, not knowing what I wanted or needed. I love you, Maggie Ryan McCallister, and don’t you ever forget that!” he said fiercely.

“I’m glad you love me. I’ve needed and wanted love for so long. It’s an exciting feeling, and you’re quite handsome, my husband.” She ran her hand lovingly down the side of his face, touching his mustache briefly. Her hand moved on down his neck and into the curly mat of hair on his chest.

“Our life will be better, honey.” He moved his hand down to cover her stomach. “With this little tyke coming, we’ll be more of a family. I do love you so much, Maggie.”

He tried to show her exactly how much as his kisses, murmured words of endearment, and the fulfilling ecstasy of their lovemaking far outshone any previous times.

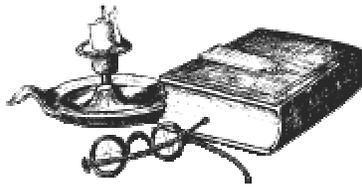
Maggie had found love, the most wondrous gift of all. She was indeed Cutter’s Woman.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Weta is a Texan by birth but has lived in many places. She is a long time resident of the Missouri Ozarks and proud of it. Writing and reading is her life and she is proud to have published *Arly's Wish*, *Oh Lonesome Me*, *Sweet Missouri Winds*, *Love Is All I need*, *Rosie's Dilemma*, and *Second Chances*. *Honey's Love*, *Dakota Dreams*, and now *Cutter's Woman* are available from Whiskey Creek Press. She hopes there will be many others.

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