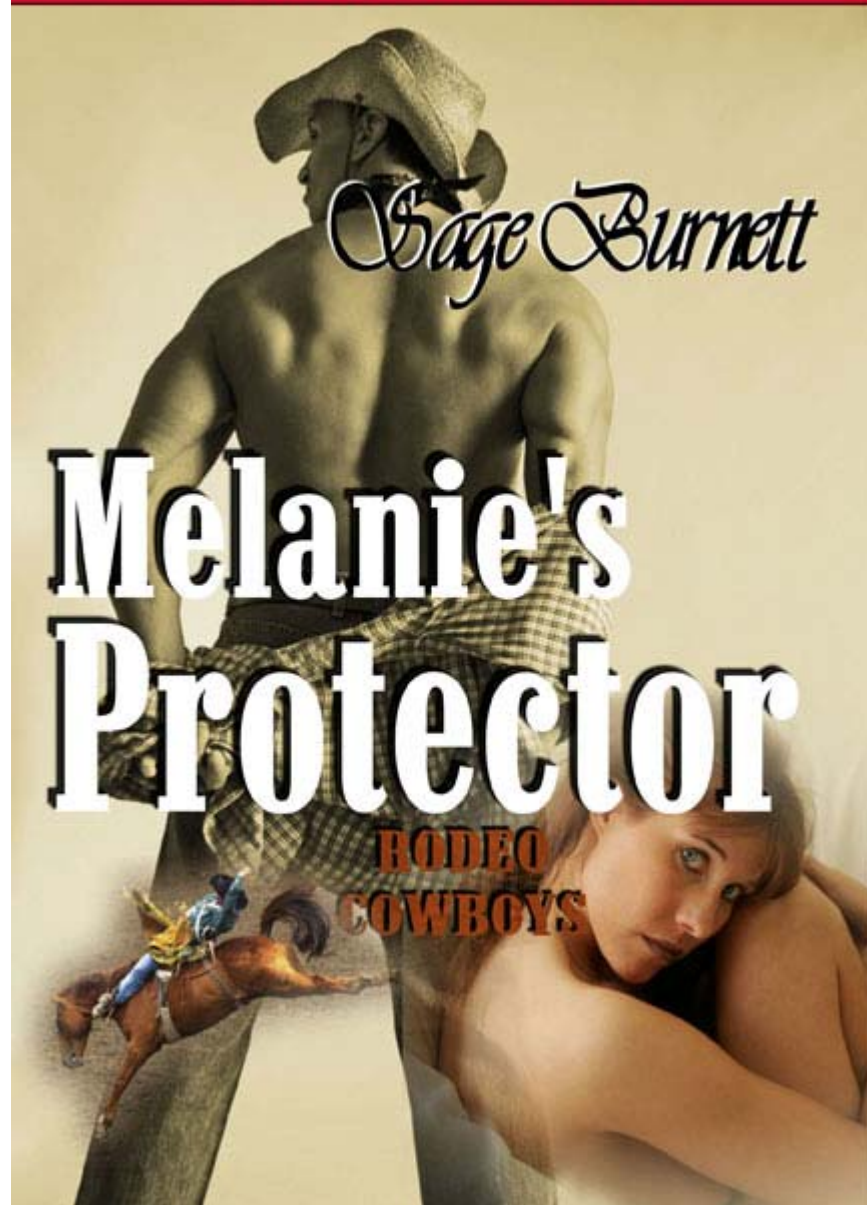


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MELANIE'S PROTECTOR
Rodeo Cowboys: The Series, Book 1

SAGE BURNETT

Warning

SEX RATING: SIZZLING

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STEAMY: Heavy sexual tension; graphic details; may contain coarse language

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SCORCHING: Erotica; contains many sexual encounters; may contain unconventional sex; will offend delicate readers

SEXTREME: Excessiveness; many instances of unconventional sex; may be hardcore; not for the faint-hearted

Sage Burnett

Rodeo Cowboys: The Series, Book 1

Melanie's Protector

Melanie "kidnaps" Steve McCall, the big, rugged saddle bronc rider, because he looks like an honest man.

What she hasn't planned on is the instant, sizzling attraction rampaging through her body whenever they look at each other.

As a speech writer for the governor, Melanie accidentally stumbles across a cover-up concealed in the inner sanction of the Capitol. Steve not only agrees to protect her but also offers Melanie refuge and delicious erotic pleasures.

The protective wall around her heart crumbles as Steve entices her with his cowboy charm. As they explore their mutual attraction while hiding out at Steven's ranch, danger lurks in the shadows, waiting for the right moment to strike...

MELANIE'S PROTECTOR

Rodeo Cowboys: The Series, Book 1

Sage Burnett



Siren Publishing, Inc.

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Melanie's Protector

Rodeo Cowboys: The Series, Book 1

By Sage Burnett

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Chapter 1

As the dust floated to the arena floor and settled, Steve noticed a flaming redhead staring at him from the first row of the grandstands. Even though her eyes were hidden by dark glasses, he felt her gaze burning him with its intensity.

The crowd moaned in empathy as he snagged his hat off the ground. He smacked it against his thigh to dislodge the dust and muck. He'd stayed on the bucking horse for a lousy three seconds.

The redhead watched him like he'd just grown a third eye or something. So what if she figured he was a washout in the saddle bronc competition? Steve strode over to the gates, shouldering his way through the tangle of cowboys behind the chutes. He forgot about the redhead when a couple of other riders patted him on the back with curse words of sympathy.

* * * *

After saddle bronc rider number twenty-three, Steve McCall, disappeared behind the chutes, Melanie jumped up. She wove her way through the crowd toward the grandstand exit.

He's the one. Her feminine intuition told her she could trust him. She had to trust the stranger because there was no one else to trust.

Melanie waited near the exit where the cowboys wandered out after finishing their events. She hiked her purse strap up her shoulder and kept one foot on her tote bag sitting on the dusty ground. Impatience clawed at her, and she prayed she hadn't missed the cowboy. She drummed her fingers on her purse while another five minutes dragged by. Then she spotted him walking with another bronc rider, number seventeen. The two men stopped at a concession stand, each buying a large bottle of water. They stood near the stand talking for a few minutes before her cowboy headed off in the direction of the parking area.

McCall reached behind him, ripping off the paper number taped to his back and tossing it into a trash can as he sauntered past. Melanie grabbed her tote bag and followed, keeping a reasonable distance behind him. She lost sight of him a couple of times because of the large crowd milling around the rodeo grounds and carnival. This was her first attempt at shadowing someone and trying to stay inconspicuous. The way her luck was running lately, McCall probably knew he had a tail. She sure as hell wasn't a CIA operative.

Relief bubbled up inside her when she watched him stride through the rows of parked trucks, some with campers and others with camp trailers hooked to their bumpers. He angled over to a Dodge king cab four-wheel drive with a camper sitting in the bed. Without a doubt, he had the perfect setup for her plans.

He unlocked the door of his camper, hoisted himself inside, and left the door open behind him. Melanie couldn't see what he was doing, but a few minutes later, he leaped to the ground, munching on a candy bar. She noted he didn't lock the door.

When McCall glanced in her direction, she ducked down behind a dark blue Chevy truck. Peeking over the fender, Melanie watched him as he walked to the front of his truck and unlocked the driver's door.

Heart slamming against her chest, she sprinted the short distance to his camper and hoped the cowboy didn't glance in his rear view mirror. The diesel engine gurgled to life just as she grabbed for the camper door. Melanie opened it and tossed her tote bag inside. Scrambling into the camper, she got the door closed just as the cowboy started backing the truck out of its slot. Her palms clammy, she crouched down on the floor, afraid that if he glanced at his inside rear view mirror, he would see her standing inside his camper.

* * * *

A little after midnight, Steve steered his truck onto a wide shoulder next to the empty highway. Scrubbing a hand down his face, he turned off the ignition. Fatigue and overuse of his muscles made for one hell of an aching body. Five rodeos in four days, zigzagging across half the state...His sore muscles hollered in protest as he climbed out of his truck, desperate for a few hours of sleep before he drove the last two hundred miles to his ranch.

Steve dragged his tired butt into his camper, took one step, and tripped over something in the sooty darkness. Losing his balance, he smacked his forehead on the handle of the refrigerator door. "Shit! What the hell is that?" He fumbled for the light over the sink.

As the light flickered to life, he saw a black leather tote bag on the floor.

"Don't move."

His gaze shot to the bed over the cab of his truck. The redhead from the rodeo stands held a pistol pointed directly at his chest. He'd been too cranky after losing the competition to fantasize about what color eyes she had. Turned out they were a vivid shade of green. She knelt on his bed with her arms stretched in front of her, gripping the .22 in both hands.

"What the hell?" Steve rubbed his forehead, knowing he'd probably sprout a goose egg. "How did you get back here? And why are you in my camper? I don't recall inviting you."

"You left it unlocked. And...I want you to take me to Bozeman. Now."

His crankiness twisted into anger. "Oh, you do, do you?"

"Yes. I have to be there by six this morning."

"If you want to rob me, I'll give you the few bucks in my wallet. Then you can get the hell out of my camper."

She shook her head, causing her long, silky hair to sway back and forth. "I have no intention of robbing you. I need to get to Bozeman."

"Ever hear of driving, bus, airplane, lady?"

She shook her head again. "I want you to drive me."

"Now, wait a minute." Steve held up his hands. "I'm not a damn taxi service. If you want to shoot me, do it. I'm already dead on my feet."

"I don't want to shoot you. I want you to drive me to Bozeman."

"Sorry, no can do. I'm almost out of gas. The next town is thirty miles up the road, and the gas station doesn't open till six."

The redhead's brows knitted together into a frown. "This is a big truck. It has to have dual tanks."

Tank number two was filled but he wasn't about to tell her that. "Forgot to fill it."

Still frowning, she watched him with a skeptical glint in her eye. Steve rubbed his forehead again, avoiding her eyes. He hated being dishonest, even to a wacky redhead with a gun pointed at him.

She let out a long, frustrated breath, then stared down at the gun for several moments.

"Why don't you put the gun away?" Steve suggested. "We'll forget this ever happened."

Her gaze collided with his. "No. I have to get to Bozeman."

"It's a long walk. And a lady can't be hitchhiking at night on this lonely road. So, it looks like you have to spend the night on the side of the road with me." He wasn't sure if he relished that idea. Sure, she was attractive, with that flaming head of hair, but the fact that she had a gun pointed at him tended to put a damper on things.

She shook her head. "No, no, no."

"What's so important about getting to Bozeman by six?"

"I need..." She pressed her lips together in a tight line for a moment. "I need to catch a plane." Fear swirled in her eyes.

"Listen, why don't you put the gun away?" He held up his hands again. "I'm an honest guy. You can trust me."

"That's why I picked you."

Steve laid his hand on his chest, eyes widening. "You picked me to drive you to Bozeman?"

She nodded.

So much for honesty. If he looked like a low-down rat, he probably wouldn't be standing in his camper with a gun pointed at him. "What's your name?" When she didn't answer, he said, "I'm Steve McCall. Now, you tell me yours." She still didn't volunteer her name. "Okay. I guess it's Red."

She frowned at him, clearly not liking the nickname.

"How about I make some coffee?"

What he really wanted was sleep, not caffeine. Since Red was in his bed, he didn't have much choice. If she didn't have a pistol sighted in on him, he'd crawl up there with her.

He kicked her tote bag out of the way and grabbed the small container of coffee off the cupboard shelf. After he measured the coffee, he glanced over at her. "Your legs will go to sleep kneeling like that." He turned on the propane burner. "Your arms have to be getting tired."

Red lifted her chin and raised the gun a notch.

Steve shrugged as he pulled a couple of mugs from the cupboard. "If you picked me to be your chauffeur because I look honest, then you don't need to be pointing that gun at me."

"I said you looked honest. I didn't say you were."

* * * *

Her legs tingled, just like the cowboy had predicted, and her arms hurt from holding the gun straight in front of her. And she could use some coffee. Her body craved it. McCall ignored her while he waited for the coffee to perk. She did feel bad about him bumping his head as she watched him rub it again.

When he reached up to run his fingers over his forehead, his black tee shirt strained against his sturdy shoulders. Definitely the typical rugged cowboy, not pretty-boy handsome. And he filled out a pair of faded jeans like a man should. He was probably thirty-five or so, a few years older than she was. It wasn't a good idea to be having ideas about this man. If she weren't in such a pickle, running for her life...

Fear and panic buzzed around her like angry hornets while a lump inched up her throat. An overwhelming urge to cry and wail like a newborn swept through her.

Melanie wasn't sure how much longer she could hold the gun. She shifted her position slightly to give her tingling left foot some relief. It was sound asleep, like she wished she was.

"Told you."

The cowboy leaned against the counter with his arms folded over his chest. She could tell he hadn't bothered to comb his tangled, rich black hair after he'd taken off his cowboy hat. He must have just raked his fingers through it. Damn. The cowboy definitely had appeal. Even from a distance, she had noticed that about him, but up close, he was even more enticing. She cursed her pulse for racing.

"You're going to have to put the gun down to drink your coffee."

Melanie struggled to fight back the powerful attraction growing inside her. This wasn't part of her plan. "Who says I'm having any?"

"You look like you need it worse than I do."

She didn't take offense at what he said because she'd noticed the dark circles under her eyes today in the restroom at the rodeo. Melanie was positive her long hair drooped with as much weighty fatigue as she felt in each muscle of her body. Sleep had been elusive the past few nights because of her recent and unwanted companion—*bone-chilling fear*.

"I might have a cup," she finally conceded. Who was she kidding? The aroma of the fresh, hot coffee made her mouth water.

He opened the small fridge door. "I'm out of cream. That means I have to drink it black. Hell, I'm probably out of sugar, too."

He said these things to himself, not to her. "Black is fine by me."

"Glad I can oblige."

Guilt nudged her conscience. It was obvious how worn out he was, but at least he was a gentleman and made coffee. Melanie watched him fill the big mugs with masculine ease. At the rodeo, she'd been scared, constantly glancing over her shoulder and searching. For whom, she wasn't sure. Steve had looked honest and tough, and he'd taken his loss like a man.

He turned from the stove, a steaming mug in each hand. "Now, how are we going to do this, Red?"

His camper was a newer one, with the booth and table to the side. "You can put mine over here on the edge of the table, then step back." He didn't look happy at her suggestion. In fact, he looked downright disgruntled. She figured he'd hoped she might put her gun away. The cowboy might look honest, but she had no way of knowing at this time if she could trust him. She would like nothing better than to toss her gun out the window. Steve took two big steps and slid the mug onto the edge of the table before he backed up.

Her right foot tingled now, too, so she desperately needed to get out of her kneeling position. She shimmied around until she was sitting, letting her legs dangle over the edge of the bed, then reached down with one hand and plucked the mug off the table. Steve sat down behind the small table at the opposite end as she lowered the hand holding the gun to her thigh.

"Sorry, I don't have any little tea cookies to serve with it."

Melanie wanted to apologize because he truly did strike her as a nice guy. "I'm not hungry." The last thing she had eaten was a hot dog at the rodeo hours ago.

He sipped his coffee. "I guess that's something I can be grateful for."

The cowboy was starting to get to her. His eyes were slightly bloodshot, while his rugged face was lined with fatigue. She knew the life of a rodeo cowboy. Her older brother, Jack, followed the summer circuit. Five or six shows in three or four days, all over the map, could really take its toll on a man.

After she took a sip of the hot coffee, she closed her eyes in appreciation for a moment. Not good to let her guard down. Glancing over at him, Melanie caught him watching her.

"Don't worry. I'm not going to try to wrestle the gun from you. Although the thought has occurred to me."

An awkward silence settled around them as they drank their coffee. After a time, Steve said, "Now that we have our tired brains fired up, why don't we talk. You tell me all about yourself. Why you climbed into my camper. Why you insist on holding me at gunpoint."

No one had to tell her she was committing several crimes by holding him at gunpoint and stowing away in his camper. Maybe she could get off with trespassing, since he'd left the door unlocked. The coffee turned to acid inside her stomach.

"Who are you afraid of and why are you running?"

Melanie locked eyes with him. The hard angles of his face showed concern. Swallowing the pesky lump that inched up her throat again, she shook her head.

"I'm not going to hurt you, Red." His husky voice lowered. "I'll help you if you need help. My mama taught me pretty good. Always help a lady that's in trouble."

She stared past him at the camper door, hearing the truth in his words. It was nearly her undoing. Wrestling with the salty tears crowding her eyes, she brought her gaze back to him. "The less you know the better."

"I'm a big, tough guy. I can take care of myself."

No question about that. "Are you married?" She hoped he didn't have a wife and kids waiting at home for him because she was more attracted to him than she should be.

"Now, we're making progress." Steve took another drink of coffee. "I came close once. But I figured there wasn't enough love between us to last a lifetime." He paused to rub his forehead again. "When I get married, it's forever. That's just the way it is for me."

Steve's words struck a chord deep inside of her. Her ex-fiancé couldn't even make it to the altar before he'd cheated on her.

"How about you? I can't believe an attractive woman like you isn't married."

Was he flirting with her? Or was he just trying to seduce her into putting down the gun?
“I’m not married.”

“It looks like all the single guys in your life lost out.” He drained his mug with one long swallow. “Since you’re not going to tell me your favorite color and birth sign, I figure we better get some sleep. You can even tie me up if you want.”

A wicked gleam flashed in his eyes. So, Steve felt the attraction, too. She was on the run, but the cowboy had managed to get heat roiling between her legs. It was obvious she wasn’t going to make it to Bozeman by six in the morning, which meant she would have to take a later flight. She could hang out in the ladies’ room if she had to.

Melanie stifled a yawn, saying, “Go ahead. Sleep.”

It was going to be a long night.

Chapter 2

Steve blinked a couple of times and struggled to dislodge the spongy feeling from his brain. It was dark outside and he couldn't figure out why he'd left the light on over the sink. Turning his head, he remembered what was going on when he saw the redhead sleeping in his bed above the cab. He'd been given the honor of sleeping on the table that folded out into a bed, the cushions from the booth supposedly constituting a mattress. The gun rested near her hip, still clutched in her hand. Fighting his exhaustion to come fully awake, he stared at the woman.

Red's face was relaxed in sleep, her thick wavy hair fanned out across the pillow. His hormones started bucking like the horse that had thrown him at the rodeo because her breasts threatened to spill out of her tank top. Red was a shapely woman, not thin.

Just right for riding.

For all he knew she could be a serial killer, although Steve doubted that.

Watching her sleep, he tried to figure out a way to get the gun away from her. The last thing he wanted was her waking up in a panic and shooting him in the head. He lowered his eyes and discovered he was still dressed, except for his boots, which were kicked over to the side of his bed. He had no idea how long he had slept.

He swung his legs over the side of his uncomfortable bed, making every effort to keep quiet. One wrong move and he would be singing with the angels. She was running scared. That's why Red had a gun. Whether or not she knew how to use it was a moot point. Either way, experienced or not, she could still do him bodily harm.

Holding his breath, he inched toward her and hoped like hell she didn't wake up. One more step put him within grabbing distance of the gun. He reached out and circled his hand around her wrist. Red came awake like a firecracker exploding on the fourth of July.

"Damn you!" Her other hand fisted and clipped him on the jaw.

"Ouch! Goddammit. Take it easy."

Steve kept one eye on the gun as she tried to wrench her wrist from his grip. He tightened his hold. When Red gasped in pain, he hated himself for hurting her. Her fist came at his face again, but he was able to duck the blow. She raised up and butted him with her body. Geez, she was a fighter. Somehow he managed to get his arm around her waist. Red lost her balance, toppling against him.

They landed on the floor with a heavy thud, their bodies tangled. He heard the gun skid across the floor. Red made a mad scramble for it, but he wrestled his arms around her hips. He rolled her over and pinned her body to the floor with his. With hands balled into fists, she beat against his chest.

"Come on, honey, take it easy. Stop hitting me. It's against my morals to hit a woman."

"Don't you dare call me honey," she hissed. "Get off of me. Now."

Steve tussled with her until he gripped her hands between their bodies. Judging from her expression, he had a feeling she might spit in his face. Her green eyes blazed while her body trembled with anger beneath him. He felt his cock swelling. What a time for him to get a damn hard-on. He needed to think straight, and not with that particular part of his anatomy. "It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you. You have to trust me."

"You are hurting me. Let go of me."

Steve eased the tension on her wrists, but not enough that she could break free of his hold. "Let's go over this nice and calm-like. Number one, you crawled into my camper uninvited. Number two, you held me at gunpoint, demanding I get you to Bozeman. Number three, you're scared to death of something or someone." He paused. "I'm guessing it's someone. Number four, I don't think you do these things every day."

Her lips were drawn tight and her eyes were still ablaze, but the fire wasn't as bright. "You can tell me, Red. I'll make sure you're safe."

Her lower lip quivered. Ah...now she was going to cry. He was a pushover when it came to teary-eyed women. Hell, he'd probably give her the gun back.

Red closed her eyes, her lips still trembling. He had the craziest urge to kiss that trembling away from those nice, full lips. Steve imagined sliding his tongue inside her mouth, doing a grand sweep while she moaned with pleasure. Staring at her lips, he imagined other things those lips could do to him.

Red opened her eyes and caught him staring. The tip of her pink tongue flicked out as she licked her bottom lip. His cock was now at full mast, throbbing and ready.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

She shifted underneath him, then her eyes widened in awareness. Steve battled with his escalating desire. "Tell me what you're afraid of." He paused and cleared his throat. "And don't say me."

"You're hard."

Steve groaned. "Ignore it. I'm trying to."

Red rolled her eyes.

"Come on, Red, fill me in." So, he could get down to the business of kissing her, and no little peck on the lips. It had to be a deep, wet, erotic kiss, followed by a second, a third...

"Someone is trying to kill me."

That put the brakes to his lust, and fast. "Who?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you."

"Yes, you can."

"I can't tell anybody. No one would believe me."

"Try me, Red," Steve coaxed.

Fear and a glimmer of hope warred on her face. "If I tell you, you have to believe me. Because everything is true."

"I'll believe you." As Steve held her gaze, he wanted to suggest she tell him later, after he stripped her bare and devoured every inch of her body with his tongue, including between her legs. His fantasies caused more heat to build inside his already hot body.

Red blew out a frustrated breath. "You're heavy."

"You want to be on top for a while?"

Her brows drew together. "What exactly are you suggesting?"

"This." Steve lowered his head before she could protest, wedging his tongue between her lips and sweeping inside her mouth, just as he'd imagined. When a tiny, breathy moan escaped

her lips, Steve released her hands and wrapped his arms around her. Their lips still locked, he rolled over, pulling her on top of him. Her breasts pressed against his chest, making his cock ache even more.

Red raised her head and stared at him with an appealing flush coloring her face. Her full lips were swollen from their kiss. "Oh."

"I want you." He took her hand and lowered it to his groin. "That's what you do to me."

Watching her breathing speed up, he caught her gaze. Those green eyes of hers only added to his frenzied state. Red started rubbing him, but Steve moved her hand so he could peel her tank top over her head. A strapless pale pink bra barely covered her breasts. He licked the edges, where her breasts swelled over.

"Oh, hell. Why not? I might be dead tomorrow." Reaching behind her, she unclasped her bra, letting her breasts spill out.

Steve looked into her eyes as his hands cupped her soft, plump breasts. "No one will hurt you. I'll see to that, Red." Her eyes, already simmering with heat, flooded with gratitude.

She lowered her head, nipped his upper lip while he gently pinched her nipples.

"You have beautiful breasts," he whispered before he kissed her again.

Her tongue invaded his mouth and Steve groaned as she rubbed her pubic mound against him. Lifting her forward so her breasts were at eye level, he suckled her nipple like a starving man. Her hips moved seductively up and down over his erection. He needed her bare flesh rubbing against his. Steve reached for the button on her jeans, but she stopped him by pushing his tee shirt up and over his head. Then she bent, her thick hair spreading across his chest as she licked his nipple. She licked her way over to his other nipple and his desire for her ripened with each rake of her tongue. While the exotic scent of her hair drifted around him, Steve palmed her crotch, hearing her breathy moan. Moments later they were both struggling with each other's jeans. When the clothes were off, Red kissed him again, her hot, naked body draped over his.

Slipping his finger into her wet pussy, he couldn't stop the groan that rumbled from his lips. She raised her butt slightly, moving her hips up and down. His other hand sought out her breast, where he rubbed his thumb over her hard nipple, the sound of her husky, womanly moans driving his lust higher and hotter.

When she came, Steve gritted his teeth as fiery lust exploded inside of him. He didn't give her a chance to recover before he plunged his cock deep into her pussy.

Red sat up, moving with him as he thrust hard and fast inside her. Through hooded eyes, he watched her breasts jiggle before he covered them with his hands. Red laid her hands on top of his and worked them against her. The feel of her soft palms had him clenching his back teeth together to hold onto his control.

She came again, her dark heat surrounding him as he followed with one final hard thrust, drowning in her womanly essence.

As his brain started to function again, a sense of wariness hounded him. This was more than a one night stand for him, which hadn't been part of his plan. The plan had been to seduce her, not fall for her.

* * * *

Melanie didn't even try to fight her way back to reality. She collapsed on top of Steve's broad chest and burrowed her head under his chin and let his solid body cradle hers. After a time, his hands skimmed up and down her back. She wasn't sure she could look him in the eye because she never jumped into bed with a man she hardly knew. Of course they weren't exactly in bed. They were on the floor of his camper.

"Tell me your name."

Raising her head, Melanie looked at him for a moment before she glanced away, hesitant to drag him deeper into her life-threatening predicament. In the end, she relented because her instincts trusted him. "Melanie Blake."

Steve tangled his hand in her hair, bringing her head down for a long, slow, moist kiss.

"Pretty name, just like the woman." A grin kicked up the corners of his lips.

"Thank you." She'd never considered herself pretty. Her hair was her crowning glory, but her nose was a little too big for her liking. On the other hand, her green eyes did complement her bright red hair.

"How about we get into bed," Steve suggested. "I've already laid in the dirt today. Although I will say this, lying on my camper floor with you was damn nicer than the rodeo arena."

The cowboy was not only good, but charming as well. "Okay."

* * * *

Coming out of a deep, sleepy haze, Steve heard water running. Opening his eyes, he saw her standing at the sink washing her face, her hair piled on top of her head. She wore jeans and

her pink strapless bra, and seemed unaware of him watching her. His morning hard-on swelled with need as Melanie cleansed herself. “Morning.”

She spun around to face him, drying her face with some paper towels.

“Morning.” She avoided his gaze.

The awkward morning after. Only this time Steve didn’t feel awkward. Melanie in his camper, doing her morning routine, seemed natural to him. He frowned, knowing they had both gotten swept away in the heat of the moment last night. So, why in the hell didn’t he feel awkward? What he wanted was Melanie back in bed with him.

“Come back to bed.”

She glanced at him and shook her head before she bent down on one knee and rummaged in her tote bag. She shook out a clean black tank top. Turning her back to him, she pulled it over her head.

Steve propped himself up on one elbow. “I’ve already seen and touched your breasts, Melanie. And by the way, they are spectacular.”

She slowly circled around, her cheeks pink. How could she be embarrassed when she’d been so abandoned last night?

“I’ll make some coffee.”

Sexual frustration ballooned inside his body. “Coffee can wait. Why don’t you come back to bed?”

“I’m not coming back to bed.” Melanie took the coffee out of the cupboard. “You might as well get up.”

“I already am up, honey.”

She leveled an annoyed look at him, then went back to preparing the coffee. “You’re real sexy making that coffee.”

“Will you please stop?”

“What the hell is going on?”

She dropped her hands to her hips. “You don’t have to play nice guy with me. I know the score.”

Scowling, Steve tossed the blankets back and swung his legs over the bed. He watched her staring at his hard-on. Leaping out of bed, he stomped over, stopping inches from her. “Now,

tell me what the hell is going on with your attitude. Then after you answer that, you can tell me who's out to get you."

Frowning at him, she started rinsing the mugs they had used last night. "Why don't you get dressed?"

Steve took her arm and turned her to face him. "Because I want rip your clothes off so we can make love again."

"It's not going to happen again. I got carried away last night."

"Red, we both did."

"Let's just leave it at a one-night stand, okay?" She wrenched her arm from his grip and finished rinsing the mugs.

"Shit." Steve wheeled around. Spotting his jeans shoved under the table, he tugged them on. It was clear his hard, aching cock didn't hold the same appeal as last night. After he dressed, he plopped down at the table, a scowl etched across his face.

Melanie carried the mugs over to the table with an unopened package of store-bought cookies tucked under her arm. "Looks like this is breakfast."

Still scowling, Steve tore open the package of cookies. "Where's your gun?"

Melanie picked up her mug. "In my tote bag."

"You can't take that on the plane with you."

"I planned on tossing it right before I boarded."

Steve wolfed down four cookies, then washed them down with some coffee. "Now, tell me what's going on."

She stared down at her mug for several moments. "I don't think I should. If you would please just take me to Bozeman, I can catch a later flight."

Steve shook his head. "If you're in danger, I need to know who the bastard is. Is it an abusive husband? Boyfriend?" He pushed the package of cookies toward her. "Eat some cookies—you need food."

Melanie plucked one out of the package. "I don't have a husband or boyfriend."

Steve's surly mood brightened on hearing that news. "Then who's after you?"

Chapter 3

Melanie didn't know where to begin. The entire story was so unreal, so unthinkable. And she was snagged like a bug in a spider web. She glanced over at Steve and caught him watching her while he devoured another cookie. Frustration glowed in his eyes, no doubt because of the impressive hard-on he woke up with. Last night floated back to her. The image of the two of them making love on the floor of his camper caused heat to tingle down low in her tummy.

To steady her nerves she took a couple of deep breaths. "I work for the governor." Steve's brow arched. "I started out as one of many secretaries, then moved up. I've been one of his assistants for the last two years. Six months ago I started writing a few speeches for him."

"I'm impressed, Red."

She shrugged. "Three days ago, he asked me to check a rough draft of a speech he'd thrown together. He does that sometimes, then the speech writers fine-tune it for him." Steve nodded, so she continued. "I was at his desk using his computer. For some reason I couldn't find the file for his speech. I must have misunderstood him. Anyway...I accidentally opened up the wrong file."

"What was in the file?"

"The file was about..." She hesitated. This was huge. "The file had information about how Governor Johnson was getting kickbacks. I mean big kickbacks, lots of money from an out-of-state mining company supporting cyanide leach mining. You know it's on the ballot this year

to reinstate it and the governor has been promoting it. He always said he believed it could be done without any harm to the environment and that it would create more jobs.”

Steve whistled. “No shit? He’s a shoo-in for reelection this year.”

“He came into his office and caught me reading the file.”

“The first thing you better tell me is that he didn’t hurt you.”

His jaw tightened, anger glinting in his eye. For some crazy reason, that made her go all mushy inside. “No. I was so shocked at what I was reading that I didn’t hear him.” Melanie paused, setting down her mug. “He came around the desk and saw the file.”

“What did he do?”

“He immediately closed the file. Then he said something like, ‘You never saw this file.’”

Steve nodded. “What happened next?”

“I didn’t say a word, just got up and left his office. But the look on his face and his tone of voice were very threatening. That night someone tried to break into my house. I woke up, started yelling that I was calling 911, and the intruder took off.”

Steve stood up. “We need to call the cops. My cell is in the cab of my truck.”

“Wait. Sit back down. My cell is my tote bag.” Melanie laid her hands palm-down on the table and looked up at him. “I have no proof. I didn’t get a chance to copy the file. No one is going to believe me. If I had proof, I would have gone to the cops.”

“Shit.” Steve plopped back down.

Her sentiments exactly. She picked up her mug, saw her hand trembling, and put it back on the table.

“Who do you think broke into your house?”

Melanie shrugged. “Someone close to the governor, maybe Larry Reynolds. That’s his right-hand man. Larry stays out of the spotlight, does all his work behind the scenes. He’s rarely seen on camera.”

Steve leaned over the table and grabbed her hand. “Did you call the cops about the break-in?”

“Yes. But by the time they arrived, whoever it was was long gone.” His hand wrapped around hers helped steady her frazzled nerves. “The next morning when I was driving to work, a black sport utility that I didn’t recognize tried to run me off the road. Not a coincidence. I went back to my house, packed a bag, and split. I drove to East Glacier and stayed in a motel that

night.” She felt like a tire with a slow leak. For three days, shock and fear had been bottled up inside her and now those powerful emotions were slowly easing out of her body.

“I’m sorry for everything. I never would have shot you. I wouldn’t blame you if you turned me in to the cops.”

“I know you wouldn’t have shot me,” Steve said. “Maybe I wasn’t so sure in the beginning. I’m taking you to my place.”

Melanie shook her head. “I planned on flying to Seattle to stay with a friend of mine until I could figure out what to do.”

“Is your friend a male or female?”

Was that jealousy in his eyes? She’d already told him too much. Steve could be in danger, too. “It’s a she. An old friend from college.”

“I’m going to take you to my place. It’s couple hours down the road. I have forty acres out in the middle of nowhere. No one can find you there.”

Steve got to his feet again. “We need to get moving. We’ll stop in the next town and get a real breakfast.”

Her heart experienced a burst of adrenaline at Steve’s willingness to protect her. “No. Then you’ll be danger, too.”

“Don’t worry about me. I can take care of myself.”

Steve reached for her hand, and pulled her to her feet. Nudging her lips apart, he kissed her long and deep. Her willpower wilted like a rose in the burning sun. Melanie sighed as their tongues collided and flames burst to life inside her. She dug her fingers into the hard flesh of his chest in a desperate attempt to keep her wits about her. If she wasn’t careful, she’d be right back down on the floor with him again, eager and wet with heat.

Steve ended the kiss. “This will have to wait until we get to my place.”

Melanie heard the disappointment in his voice, feeling the same disappointment in her body.

Fighting to get her balance back, she nodded

Steve leaned his forehead against hers. “I’ve got a nice, big bed at my place.”

Technicolor images of being naked with Steve in a big bed flashed through her mind. “Just drop me in Bozeman.”

"No." He stepped back. "We need to get moving. Do you think you were followed at the rodeo?"

"I don't know. I don't think so."

She wished like hell her body would cool down. The cowboy seemed to have some kind of lusty power over her. "I need to get out of the state. I'm afraid no one will believe me. The governor is a powerful man."

"Yeah, he's powerful. But he's not the first crooked politician to come down the pike."

"Once I got to Seattle, I planned on making some anonymous calls back here to try and expose him." No matter how terrified she was, she'd never let the governor get away with his dirty little scheme.

"You can make those calls from my place."

"I don't want to drag you any deeper into this."

"Too late, Red. I'm already knee-deep in it with you."

* * * *

Steve rolled to a stop in front of a café just off the interstate. He killed the ignition, glancing over at Melanie. Her fingers were laced together so tight her knuckles were white. "I'm not that bad a driver."

She turned her head in his direction, but he couldn't see her eyes because of her sunglasses. "Okay, it was a bad attempt at humor." He watched her lips curl up slightly at the corners. "Come on, Red. I'm starving."

The café was packed, since it was the only place to eat for thirty miles. "I see a booth in the corner." Steve took her hand and led her through the noisy café to the empty booth. After she slid onto the seat, he sat down next to her.

Melanie frowned at him as she scooted over.

Leaning close, he whispered in her ear, "Can't help myself. I have to be near you."

Before Melanie could answer, a middle-aged waitress appeared with water glasses and two menus.

"How are you two doing this morning?" she asked as she handed out menus. "Coffee?"

"Coffee would be good," Steve said. The waitress turned and left. "Best breakfast around these parts."

"It's the only place to eat around these parts."

Steve grinned as he draped his arm over her shoulders. "Point taken." He kissed the corner of her lips.

"We're in public. You need to behave yourself."

"It's just too damn hard." He nipped at her lip again.

"Okay, you two lovebirds ready to order?" The waitress filled their mugs with coffee.

Melanie moved away from Steve while he grinned at the waitress. "What would you like, Red?" Wanting to touch her so bad, he hadn't given her a chance to open her menu.

"I'll have a waffle and bacon and orange juice."

"Two eggs over easy, hash browns, toast, bacon, and orange juice."

The waitress winked at them while she gathered up the menus. "Coming right up."

"Now, where were we?" Steve leaned toward Melanie, but she stopped him with a hand on his chest.

"This is the last time I saying this. Behave yourself."

Judging by the set of her chin and the determined glint in her eyes, she meant what she said. "We'll take it back up when we get to my place," he promised.

Her cheeks turned an appealing shade of pink as she picked up her water glass. "You shouldn't have passed the Bozeman exit."

"We've been over this." The woman was determined. "We'll figure things out when we get to my place. It's the safest place for you."

She gave him a skeptical look.

"Since you disappeared, I'm sure the governor has done a check to find out who your friends are. You didn't know me until last night." Steve paused. "By the way, where is your family?"

"Oh no. All I thought about was getting away. They're all in the Billings area."

"I think you should call them."

"Yeah." Melanie took a sip of water. "I guess you're right. I don't want my parents worrying, though."

"If they call you at work or home and you're not there, they will worry." Her brows knitted together. "We'll think of something to tell them."

Melanie attempted to smile. "Thanks."

Steve muscled back the powerful urge to take her in his arms and shield her against the danger surrounding her. Last night it had been about sex. All about sex. This morning, if he'd had his way, it would have been about sex again. But now, other feelings were sprouting for this woman sitting next to him. Glancing at her, he saw her staring down at her coffee mug. He'd go to the mat for her. He hadn't even known her for twenty hours, but he would do whatever it took to protect her.

* * * *

Melanie savored the feel of the warm water sluicing down her body as she shampooed her hair. Steve was checking on his stock. For the first time in days, she felt safe. No one connected with the governor could possibly find her here.

Steve, on the other hand, was an entirely different threat to her emotions. She'd picked him because he looked honest, but if she were honest with herself, she'd have to admit that other things had influenced her decision to shadow him around the rodeo grounds and find out where he was parked. When she'd watched him ride the bucking bronc, he'd been sturdy and strong-looking, and when he'd stared straight at her from the arena, she'd seen that his rugged face carried an integrity to it.

As she finished rinsing her hair, she glimpsed Steve on the other side of the glass shower door. And he was stripping. All that remained were his white briefs. Instant heat rushed through her body. The cowboy wasn't shy. She watched him peel his briefs off, and as always, he was ready, his hard-on pointing straight at her.

He opened the door, sporting the sexiest grin she'd ever seen on a man.

"You going to let me join you, Red?"

She wanted to grab him and press that hard muscled body of his up against hers. "What if I say no?"

Steve raked his hands through his hair, grinning at her again. "Looks like I'll have to try and persuade you to change your mind."

Like it would take any persuading at all. When she didn't answer him, he stepped inside, closing the shower door behind him. "You're not going to punch me in the nose, are you?" A combination of devilish humor and sultry lust gleamed in his eyes.

Melanie laughed. "Would it do any good?"

“Nah, not really.” He grabbed her and pushed his penis between her legs. “How about I wash you first, then you wash me?” He plucked the bar of soap and washcloth off the small shelf in the corner of the shower.

Fascinated, Melanie watched him lather up the cloth with soap, knowing full well all the places that cloth would go. Steve began at her neck and gently washed the sensitive spot below her earlobe as she tipped her head to the side. Then he trailed the cloth down to her breasts. While he washed one breast, his other hand fondled the nipple of the other.

“You’re just supposed to be washing me,” Melanie murmured as her breath caught in her throat.

Steve slid the cloth to her other breast. “I can’t resist your beautiful breasts.”

After he had thoroughly cleansed her breasts, his hand traveled lower and massaged her pubic mound with the soapy cloth. Melanie’s breathing speeded up while the fire built between her legs. The cloth disappeared between her legs as Steve massaged her with it. If he didn’t stop, she was afraid she would come any second. His hands, the warm water cascading like a soft waterfall over her body, made her wet with desire and need. Each of her legs was gently scrubbed clean. Steve turned her around and washed her back with long, sweeping strokes. Then the cloth lowered to her bottom and he sensually washed that part of her body, too.

He took her arm, and spun her around to face him. After he lathered up the cloth again, he handed it to her, his eyes burning with greedy hunger. “Your turn.”

“Okay, then.” Her voice tumbled out in a breathless whisper. “But you have to turn around.”

A look of surprise crossed his face before he did as he was told. Melanie started with Steve’s neck, too, then slowly cleaned his broad, muscular back. The cowboy had a set of shoulders. She found herself licking her lips as she skimmed the cloth over his firm buttocks. She heard him groan and reveled in the power she seemed to have over him. As she lathered up the cloth again, she nipped his ear. “Turn around again.”

When Steve circled to face her, his eyes were dark and stormy. Melanie swallowed back the dryness inching up her throat. Placing the cloth to his chest, she ran it through the smattering of sooty hair, then lower, to the hair just above his groin.

Steve groaned low and deep in his throat when she wrapped the cloth around his penis. Sliding it over his balls, she washed and gently massaged them, too.

Melanie tossed the cloth, dropping to her knees in front of him. She licked the tip of his penis.

“Damn...Red. I planned on taking you in the shower.”

Melanie ignored him as she circled her tongue around the head. Then with long slow strokes of her tongue, she laved him. He leaned back against the shower wall, tangling his hands in her hair. His husky groans of pleasure spurred her on to please him as she drew him into her mouth and sucked.

“I’m gonna come, Red.” Steve’s breathing was heavy, labored. “I swear, I’m gonna come.”

She moved her mouth from top to bottom, the heat building to an unbearable level between her legs, her tongue stroking with each movement of her head. When she felt the semen spurt from him into her, she licked him clean, knowing that with one stroke of her clit, she would orgasm, too.

Filled with satisfaction and inflamed with arousal, she leaned back and looked up at him. His eyes were barely open, but he was staring down at her. Steve took her upper arms and hauled her to her feet.

“Two can play this game.” This time he leaned her back against the shower wall and got down on his knees in front of her.

One delicious lick of his tongue and she would be a goner. When Steve’s tongue pushed against her clit, she moaned so loud it echoed in the shower. His first strokes were soft and gentle, but he increased the pressure with each broad stroke of his tongue over her ultra-sensitive spot.

Pressing herself against his face and gyrating her hips, she came moaning his name.

Lost in the afterglow of her orgasm, she found Steve kissing her, his tongue slipping inside her mouth. His penis prodded open her legs. Grabbing his shoulders, Melanie dug her fingernails into his flesh. Suddenly he spun her around, spreading her legs, and then thrust his hard cock inside of her opening. She flattened her hands against the shower wall as Steve’s swift powerful thrusts made her breath catch in her throat.

He leaned his body over hers, cupping her breasts with his large hands. Each driving thrust of his penis brought her closer to the ultimate pleasure. The water had cooled, but

Melanie's body was ablaze with heat, and Steve's was slick with water and sweat as he slammed himself into her. His groans fed her passion.

Begging for more, she pushed her bottom into him. Steve nipped her shoulder while his hands roughly pinched her nipples. The heat, the ecstasy, was unbearable. The sensations shooting and skyrocketing through her body were like nothing she'd ever experienced before.

His orgasm was loud and lusty as she mounted the summit and tumbled to the other side.

Chapter 4

Steve spun Melanie around to face him. Her wet hair was tangled and caught around her face, so he brushed the loose tendrils back, kissing her softly on the lips. Her eyes were wide with wonder as he traced the outline of her swollen lips with his thumb. "You managed to burrow under my skin, Red. Something tells me you're there to stay."

Melanie smiled. "Such romantic words."

"Hey, I'm a cowboy. What can I say?"

She skimmed her fingers over his chest. "A very sexy cowboy."

He kissed her again. "Believe me, I'm glad you think so. If we don't get out of here soon, the hot water tank is going to go dry."

"I kind of like it in here."

"There's always later."

They quickly washed themselves and each other again as the water turned to ice.

Steve watched Melanie towel herself dry. The red curls between her legs made him want to be inside her hot pussy again. He shoved those fantasies aside as he hooked the towel around his waist.

"I made a call when you first got into the shower."

"Hmmm." She wrapped the towel sarong-style around her.

This was the most relaxed she'd been since he met her last night and Steve hated like hell to break the spell. He pushed his wet hair back from his face. "To a buddy I grew up with. Jack Watson. He's a reporter at the newspaper in Bozeman."

Melanie's brow furrowed. "And?"

"I didn't give him your name, Red. But I told him what was going on."

"You shouldn't have done that."

"Jack can be trusted. I've known him for years. He's going to do some digging and get back to me with what he finds. He said he has contacts at the Capitol."

Melanie shook her head, sending water droplets flying. "Why didn't you ask me first?"

"Because I knew damn well what you would say, that's why."

Melanie bent down and gathered up her dirty clothes, storming out of the bathroom. Steve followed her to his bedroom. She dug in her tote bag for fresh clothes and pulled out a pair of sky blue bikini panties and matching lace bra. Steve groaned inwardly when she dropped the towel to the floor, revealing her shapely curves and valleys.

A combination of both lust and disappointment meshed inside of him as she dressed in her panties and bra.

"No one is going to believe me. So, now some stranger is involved."

"He's not a stranger. I can vouch for him. Jack believed your story. That's why he's getting right on it."

Melanie paused, a folded pair of jeans in her hands. "He believed you?"

"Yeah. He's heard a rumor or two about our good governor and the cyanide leach mining controversy."

She pursed her lips. "I worked at the Capitol and never heard a damn thing."

Steve angled over to the chest of drawers in the corner of his room, glancing over his shoulder at Melanie as he took out a pair of jeans, tee shirt, socks, and underwear. "You might have been too close to the governor. Couldn't see the forest for the trees."

Melanie didn't answer until she finished dressing. She combed her fingers through her hair and sat on the edge of the bed.

"I suppose that's possible. I really did admire the governor. I looked up to him. That's why I was so shocked out of my skin when I read that file."

He shrugged into a navy tee shirt, then tucked it into his jeans. "There you go. Jack said he'd try to get back to me as soon as possible. I plan on carrying my cell with me wherever I go."

Pulling a brush out of her tote bag, she started brushing the tangles out of her hair. "I still don't see a way out of this for me. I wish I'd never seen that damn file. If only the governor hadn't caught me."

Steve walked over to the bed and sat down next to her. "I think you have too much integrity to let something that big slide. Even if the governor hadn't caught you red-handed, you still would have done something about it."

Lowering the brush, she stared across the room for a moment. "You're right, Steve. There was no way I could have ignored that file. But it would have been easier to dig around anonymously."

He took her hand and laced his fingers through hers. "Don't worry, Red, you're safe with me. Jack will dig up the truth." He watched her lower lip tremble. "Tell me you're not going to cry. I'm sucker when it comes to a woman crying."

"Promise, I won't cry."

Steve vowed that he'd hold her until every last tear was dry. "I've got a big shoulder if you need to."

Skimming her fingertips down his cheek, she studied him for a moment. "I can't believe you're taking care of me like this, after I held you at gunpoint."

"You were running scared. People do desperate things when they're scared. I hightailed it out of an arena one time because the bucking horse I had ridden took a definite dislike to me. Took after me like a fox after a rabbit."

She giggled. "You're kidding right?"

Steve held up two fingers. "Scout's honor. I think he was pissed because I stayed on him."

"Your mama did raise you right." She pressed a kiss against his jaw.

"Trust me on this, Red. My kid brother Dave and I were a handful."

Steve was all ready to kiss her again when his cell rang. Reaching across her, he plucked it off the night stand. "Jack. That was fast."

As he listened to what his friend had to say, Melanie wrapped her hand around his arm, her eyes filling with hope.

“Okay, Jack, thanks. I’ll have my phone with me at all times.”

Her fingers tightened around his arm. “Seems the bigwigs in the governor’s office are having a shit fit. Everybody is wondering where you disappeared to. Jack’s contact confirmed the rumors about the governor having dirty dealings with the mining company.”

“Ohmigod. That means people will believe me.”

“You still have to lay low. It might take a while to get to the bottom of this mess. And you’d better call your parents.”

“Oh, God, my parents. That’s right.”

“Use the phone in the kitchen. I want to keep my phone free.”

He loved the way her snug jeans covered her shapely ass as she jumped up and hurried out of his bedroom.

A hopeless feeling pooled inside his gut. He had a bad feeling that once the dust settled, Melanie would go back to her old life. Maybe not as a speech writer, but in something to do with politics. Where the hell would that leave him? A cowboy that operated a small ranch. A half-decent rodeo cowboy. He’d been fairly content with his life until Melanie stowed away in his camper. It wasn’t just lust with her. In less than twenty-four hours, his feelings for her had burst open like a thundercloud.

Struggling to deal with his gloomy mood, he stood up and headed out to the kitchen.

* * * *

Melanie replaced the phone in its cradle as Steve ambled into the kitchen. He was sparkling clean, his black hair still damp, and his tee shirt showed off his biceps, which she knew fairly well by now.

He planted a quick kiss on her lips. “Want some coffee?”

“Yeah, I do. Can I help?”

“Nah, I’m a pretty damn good coffee maker, if I do say so.”

There was something on his mind, judging by the distant look in his eye and the set of his jaw. She leaned back against the counter and crossed her arms over her chest. “I hated lying to my mom.”

Steve pulled the coffee maker closer to him so he could measure the coffee into the basket. “What did you tell her?”

“That I was taking some comp time and spending time with friends in Havre.”

“That was a smooth lie. Just in case they contact your parents, that will send the bastards on a wild goose chase.” He turned the coffee maker on. “Do you have a friend in Havre?”

“A married couple, Dave and Amanda. I went to college with them.

Steve nodded.

Melanie wouldn't blame him if he regretted getting involved with her. Besides bringing out the wild side of her when they made love, the man was slithering into her heart and emotions. It had been two years since she'd let a man get this close to her, since she'd called off the wedding with her cheating ex-fiancé. She'd kept to herself since then, distancing herself from serious relationships, accepting only a casual date now and then.

Steve handed her a mug of coffee. “Thanks.”

“You're welcome.”

Frowning, she watched him angle over to the refrigerator and take a carton of cream off the shelf. At the counter, he added cream and two heaping teaspoons of sugar. Part of her wanted to ask him what was on his mind. A big part of her was afraid to ask, simply because he could be regretting bringing her back to his ranch. Now, he was stuck with her until this frightening ordeal was over. She'd burrowed under his skin, according to him, but he could have been referring to their out-of-this-world sexual chemistry and not anything to do with emotions.

Steve leaned against the counter beside her. “What did you do before you worked for the governor?”

“Lots of things. I worked at the university in Great Falls as an English lit professor's assistant for a few years. Then I worked for large company in their PR department.”

“You're pretty versatile then?”

Melanie lifted a shoulder. “Or I can't make up my mind what I really want to do.”

“You want to stay in politics?”

A chill crept through her. “I'm not sure I can answer that now. Not after what's happened.” Being with Steve, in the safety of his home, had chased away the gut-wrenching fear that someone was out to hurt her.

Steve nodded, staring across the room while he drank his coffee.

Uneasiness stirred inside her and Melanie set her mug down on the counter. “If you're having second thoughts about hiding a fugitive, I'd understand.”

A moment passed before Steve shifted his attention to her. “No second thoughts. I told you I would keep you safe and I always keep my word.”

Was he helping her out of obligation or did he truly care about her? Was she just a convenient lover? *A convenient, willing lover.* “There must be a bus station in town. I can take a bus to Bozeman to catch a flight.”

Steve slammed his mug on the counter, sloshing coffee over the rim. “You’re staying right here until the dirty bastards that are after you are caught. After that, you’re free to do what you want.”

Taken aback by his strong reaction, Melanie was left speechless. Anger blazed in his eyes. What in the world was he ticked off at?

“I didn’t check my stock because I called Jack instead.” He pushed away from the counter. “You can stay here and relax.”

A feeling of disappointment gathered inside her. She would have liked to go with him because she was curious about his ranch. Once the ordeal regarding the governor was mopped up, she might not ever see Steve again, and desperation twined through her at the realization. *Silly fool in love* flashed through her mind. “Okay.”

Steve leveled a look at her before he turned and left the room.

A minute or so later, she heard the front door slam. Melanie walked to the window in the kitchen and saw him striding toward a metal shed that covered a tractor and an older Ford pickup. After Steve climbed inside the battered green truck, she heard the old engine roar to life. He gassed it and peeled out from under the pole building. The old truck took a sharp right toward a gently rolling pasture. Soon enough, he disappeared from her view.

Anxiety riddled her at knowing Steve was ticked off at something. Or very possibly at her. He certainly hadn’t acted ticked off in the shower. So far, their lovemaking had been mind-bending, body-melting, and totally out of this world. At least it had been for her. Steve aroused her senses, her hormones and long-dormant feelings beyond reason. She craved more of him, more of his masculine body, his passion, and his lust.

Sipping her coffee, Melanie wandered into Steve’s living room. Heat flushed her body just fantasizing about making love with Steve again. Shoving those fantasies aside, she studied the large, open living room. It was masculinity personified. A large chocolate-brown couch and matching recliner sat facing a TV. A six-point mule buck’s head was mounted on the wall above

the TV. Hanging on the opposite wall was a painting of three horses, racing through a bright, green spring field. A variety of books and magazines were stacked on the coffee table.

Melanie plopped down on the couch and realized the coffee wasn't helping. Yawning, she slid the half empty mug onto the coffee table and stretched her arms over her head. Maybe Steve was right. She should relax. For days, she'd been running on adrenaline, fear, and little food. She lay down on her side, discovering the couch smelled like Steve, masculine and warm. After a time, she drifted off to sleep, erotic images of the two of them together in his shower floating through her mind.

Chapter 5

Steve jostled around in his circa nineteen-seventies truck, taking inventory of his stock. He hit the brakes, which needed replacing, stopping ten feet past his intended destination. Turning off the engine, he blew out a frustrated breath and climbed out, slamming the creaking door behind him.

Melanie Blake wasn't the first woman he'd bedded on first meeting. The difference this time was that he didn't want a one-night stand, or two-nighter, for that matter. Steve wasn't even sure what emotions were riding him, making him restless and moody. After making love in the shower, he should be whistling and striding around with a spring in his step. Instead, his moodiness reminded him of a thunderstorm brewing on the horizon.

Hiking around his pasture, he counted the cows and calves. All twenty-three pairs were accounted for.

Melanie would no doubt hightail it back to Helena once this whole damn mess was cleared up. She'd given him the impression she was more than qualified to fill a variety of different jobs. There weren't a lot of jobs around these parts. The nearest town, with a population of two thousand, was twenty miles north of him.

Ready to turn back, Steve paused. *Hold on, pardner. Where the hell are you going with this?*

He barely knew Melanie and already he was considering a future with her. Usually he seduced women into bed whenever he got the opportunity, and then afterward, took things slow.

He'd jetted ahead of himself where Red was concerned. "Goddamn." Maybe he'd better take it for what it was—a chance to have a hot fling with a sexy, willing woman. No more, no less.

Steve wandered back to his truck, keeping an eye out for his Quarter horses, and finally spotted them lolling by the creek that meandered through his property. He got back inside his truck, listening to the old engine grind to life. Making a wide sweep around the pasture, he headed the truck in the direction of home, still battling his stormy emotions.

When he walked inside his house, he spotted Red asleep on the couch. She was on her back, her arm resting on her hip and her glossy hair fanning out like an angel's wings. While he watched her sleep, his cock swelled to life. Grinding his teeth together, he wheeled around and stomped into the kitchen. After he snagged a beer out of the fridge and twisted off the cap, Melanie padded into the kitchen.

"Steve." She brushed her hair back from her face. "When did you get back?"

He took a long swig before he answered. "A few minutes ago."

Melanie found a glass in the cupboard and filled it with water at the sink. "I fell asleep. I have no idea what time it is."

"Three o'clock."

"Hmmm..."

Her green eyes were drowsy, her face flushed with the warmth of sleep. His hard-on kept swelling.

She leaned her hip against the counter, drinking her water. "Are your cows okay?"

"They're fine."

Melanie set her glass on the counter. Her hips swayed in her snug jeans as she ambled over to him, plucked the beer bottle out of his hand, and took a slow sip. Eyes locked on his, she handed the bottle back to him.

"You have a problem with me."

He had to respect her directness. "Maybe," he said lifting a shoulder. "Maybe not."

She moved closer to him, forcing him back until he hit the fridge. "I think maybe you do."

Their eyes locked. The musky heat radiating off her had him guzzling more beer.

"Like I told you before, help me get to Bozeman and I'll get out of your hair."

Steve wasn't letting her off this ranch until the governor's henchmen were caught, which could take some time—days, maybe even weeks. He drank more beer. The more time he spent with Melanie, the worse it got for him. He was hard as a rock. His sexual agitation made for a sour mood, especially when the object of his agitation stood less than six inches away from him.

He shook his head. "We've already been over this, Red."

"I feel like you're holding me prisoner."

"What the hell?"

"Yeah. You brought me here. You won't let me leave."

"I'm protecting you."

She studied him, pouting. Steve was a nanosecond away from taking those kissable lips of hers.

"You're under no obligation to protect me. And don't give me that crap about how your mama taught you right."

With his free hand, he reached for her, wrapping his arm around her neck. His mouth had barely touched hers when his cell phone rang. "Shit."

Steve dropped his arm, unsnapping the phone from his belt. "Yeah."

"They're in a real snit at the Capitol since your lady friend disappeared," Jack Watson said.

Her expression turned serious. "What's going on?"

"Everybody wants to know where Ms. Melanie Blake disappeared to."

Steve didn't comment. He'd said *a friend* this morning when he talked to Jack, not mentioning his friend was a female. "If they're so damned worried about her, did they notify the police or the press?"

Jack laughed. "Yeah, right. Word around the Capitol today is the governor is sweating it that Melanie Blake vanished off the face of the earth"

Hooking her finger through his belt loop, Melanie leaned closer so she could hear the conversation. "They have no idea where she's at?"

"No sir. And the governor's closest people are basically having a shit fit. Rumor floating around is she has a backup copy of a particular file."

"She doesn't." Melanie was frowning. "What's next, Jack?"

“At this point, my advice is to keep your lady friend safe while I keep digging. I can’t go public until I get some evidence.”

It was Steve’s turn to frown. “How are you planning on doing that?”

Jack chuckled. “I never reveal my sources. Hang tight. I’ll keep you posted.”

Steve lowered the phone and turned it off.

Melanie jerked on his belt loop. “Dammit. Tell me what’s going on.”

The worry and fear growing in her eyes brought out his protective instincts. Steve reached for her, but she moved away from him. “He said they’re basically having a shit fit trying to figure out where you disappeared to and that they haven’t released anything to the press yet.”

“Of course not. That would put the spotlight on them.”

“They also think you have a backup copy of the file.”

Melanie fisted her hands together. “Damn. You don’t know how bad I wish I did.” She took a deep breath. “If I did, I could go public.”

“Jack’s on top of it. He’s planning on doing more digging. And trust me, Jack is damned ambitious.”

Melanie started pacing. Steve finished off his beer and dumped the bottle into the trashcan under the sink. He angled over to her, taking her arms. “Come on, Red. Take it easy. That’s why you need to stay here. You’re safe. No one knows you’re at my place.”

“Your friend does.”

“I give you my word that Jack can be trusted.” Steve could almost see the wheels turning inside her head. “You’re not thinking about doing something crazy, are you?”

“Like what?”

“Sneaking off in the middle of the night.”

“My being here isn’t fair to you.”

Massaging her shoulders, he felt the hard tension tightening her muscles. “As far as I’m concerned, it doesn’t matter what’s fair. What matters is keeping you safe.”

Her eyes fixed on him. “I don’t think I’ve ever thanked you for all you’ve done.”

Emotions shifted around inside his heart like a fault line. Steve cleared his throat. “You’re welcome.” He kissed her. No open-mouthed tongue thrashing, just a simple, gentle kiss on her lips.

Melanie laid her palms on his chest. “Um...there’s something you should know.”

His eyes narrowed as tension balled inside his gut. “What’s that?”

“I never jump into bed with a man so soon—I mean so quick, like I did with you last night.”

Some of the tension inside his gut eased up. He also felt his ego notch up a level. “I should probably take that as a compliment then.”

Melanie cuffed him on the shoulder. “Don’t let it go to your head, cowboy.”

Steve framed her face with his hands. “Seriously, Red, I already knew that.” There was still a hint of uncertainty in her gaze. Steve battled back his lusty need to carry her to his bedroom for another round of erotic loving. He figured Melanie needed comfort right now instead of hot, slick sex. “Come on, let’s go for a walk. I’ll show you around my place.”

He knew he’d made the right decision when he saw relief spread across her face. If only his nether regions agreed with him.

Chapter 6

At ten o'clock that night, Melanie leaned against the doorframe of Steve's bedroom. Awkwardness gushed through her body like lava flowing out of an angry volcano. Steve sat on the edge of the bed and tugged off his boots. Her fear of being discovered by the wrong people and the consequences of that discovery pushed her emotions to the edge, especially her emotions where Steve was concerned. They were spiraling out of control. She'd selected him for transportation, not as a bodyguard, and certainly not as passionate lover.

He glanced over at her. "Red?"

His nickname for her always kicked up her heart rate. Nicknames usually came later in a relationship, but their relationship was anything but usual.

Steve shrugged his tee shirt over his head, exposing his chest, and an entirely different type of volcano erupted inside of her body. Just looking at his bare skin, with the smattering of hair across it, shot fiery missiles of heat through her.

"What's on your mind, Red?"

Tearing her gaze away from his chest, she couldn't bring herself to look him in the eye. Melanie lifted a shoulder.

Steve stood and walked towards her. Her gaze focused on the sooty hair just above the waistband of his jeans. She knew all too well the trail that delicious masculine hair took. There was no disguising the bulge in his fitted jeans. Pumped on adrenaline, she'd abandoned herself to

him in his camper and his shower without considering the outcome. Since then, she'd had plenty of time to question her actions.

He placed his hand on the doorframe above her head. "You're eyes are damned expressive. I can see there's something heavy on your mind."

Melanie stared at his chest, which wasn't a good idea because the sight of it fueled the fire already building inside of her. "I'm having conflicting emotions."

His jaw tightened. "About us?"

She nodded.

As Steve outlined her lips with his forefinger, that soft gesture traveled straight to her heart.

"It's pretty damn obvious we have the hots for each other. Neither one of us can deny that blatant fact."

"No." Melanie struggled to find the right words, words that wouldn't come across as desperate and needy. The sad truth was, she was in a needy, vulnerable position at the moment. "But do we like each other?"

"Red." He laid his rough hand on her cheek. "Believe me, I like you."

Sincerity shone in his eyes. "I like you, too."

"If you want, I can sleep in my spare bedroom."

When Steve offered to let her sleep alone, eliminating the pressure, some untamed emotion broke inside of her. Melanie threw her arms around his neck and pulled his head down for a kiss.

Pushing her tongue inside his mouth, she sought out his, needing his. Steve's arms twined around her and they savored each other's tongue and lips. Wiggling her sex against his hard-on, she heard his rough, feral groan, which made her hunger for him grow.

He broke the kiss, burying his head against her neck, biting and nipping. Melanie's hand found his crotch.

Steve's hand covered hers. "You're going to make come right here and now, if you're not careful." His voice was raw with need. "I want you in my bed this time."

He backed up, bringing her with him, keeping her body crushed against his. He paused as his hands slipped under her top, stripping it off in one swift motion. Then his hands went for her

jeans, following down the path they took, and by the time they were off, his head was in the perfect position.

Dipping a finger inside her lacy panties, he kissed her curls through the lace. When his finger started caressing her clit, she drove her hands into his hair, knowing she was wet beyond reason.

Steve stopped, eliciting a moan of disapproval from her. He slithered up her body until his lips met hers. While his tongue thrashed wildly with hers, she felt his hands unclasp her bra, and she arched her back, pressing her breasts into his rough palms, moaning as they rubbed her nipples in a circular motion.

Melanie grappled with the snap on his jeans, her hands fumbling, lusting to get to his hard penis. Moaning in pleasure, she finally pushed her hand under his briefs and let her fingertips caress him.

Steve spun her around, toppling with her to the bed. He settled between her legs, the soft faded denim of his jeans rubbing against her crotch. "Oh...Steve...I want you inside of me now."

His large hand skimmed her panties off her. "Soon, baby, soon."

The thrill of his middle finger gliding into her had Melanie biting her lip. Her eyes closed tight as she worked her hips in unison with his finger. Melanie begged, "I want you inside of me."

He moved his body next to her, his finger still doing erotic things to her while her hips moved in rhythm. "Open your eyes, baby." A roughness edged his tone. "I want to look in your eyes when you come for me."

Melanie opened her eyes. His half-closed stormy blue eyes were her undoing. Her orgasm swept through her with a sudden jolt, leaving her weak-kneed and mindless.

When Steve's weight shifted off the bed, she raised her hand to pull him back. Pushing off the bed and standing up, he stripped of his jeans and briefs. His naked body was slick with sweat and his erection enticed her to sit up. Grabbing his hands, she pulled him on top of her, her need for him overwhelming.

Steve rammed himself inside her and her breath ceased for a moment. "I want to ride you hard," he whispered at her lips.

"Yes," Melanie moaned. Her hands fastened to his buttocks, urging him to thrust hard and deep into her.

With a feral greediness, Steve plunged harder, faster, and deeper. Melanie ground herself against him, drawing him deeper and deeper into her sex. When she came, she was stunned by the intensity of her reaction to this man who was pounding himself home.

Steve came with one final, hard plunge, followed by a loud groan.

* * * *

After a couple of minutes, Steve rolled off Melanie and flopped on his back. He felt her hand reaching for his and wrapped it in his own while his heart swelled with an emotion that felt suspiciously like love. His body was satiated, but his emotions twisted and turned inside him like a rodeo bull in the arena. He turned his head so he could look at her and found her eyes closed, her hand resting just above her damp curls between her legs. Her body still flushed from sex.

How in the hell could he fall for a woman so fast? Twenty-four hours hadn't even passed. "Red?"

"Hmmm..." She didn't open her eyes, didn't even move.

He knew he'd been hard on her. He weighed one hundred and ninety, while she couldn't weight more than one twenty-five. "Are you okay? I didn't hurt you, did I?"

Melanie's eyes flew open as she cocked her head in his direction. "No."

"I got pretty damn wild there for a few minutes."

A smile tilted up the corners of her lips. "Did you hear me complaining?"

He leaned toward her just as she leaned in for his kiss.

"I was just checking."

"I'm pretty tough. I grew up on a ranch, too, with an older brother that always was daring me to do things like wrestle a calf to the ground or ride bareback across the fields. Or lift a fifty-pound bale of hay." Melanie smiled again. "I could never pass up a good challenge."

"So, you like ranch life?"

"I've missed it since I've been on my own."

Steve tamped his hopes down before they rose too high.

Melanie turned on her side, snuggling against him. "I have a feeling I'll sleep like a baby tonight."

Steve slid his arms around her. "Sleep, Red. I'll be looking after you."

After a time, Steve drifted off into a restless sleep. He dreamed of Melanie, worrying that one day she would walk out of his life as quickly as she had walked into it.

* * * *

"Hey, sleepy head, time to rise and shine." Melanie sat down on the bed, scooting her bottom next to Steve's legs. She held a mug of hot coffee in her hand, loving the fact she was sore in the all the right places this morning.

Steve opened his eyes, focusing on her. "Hey, yourself."

The cowboy was sexy twenty-four hours a day. His black hair was literally a mess, but it didn't detract from his masculine appeal. "I brought you coffee with cream and sugar, the way you like it."

Pushing himself into a sitting position, he propped his back against the headboard. Melanie gave him the coffee and a lingering kiss on the lips.

Glancing at his bare chest was enough to get her all hot and needy again. "Did you know your refrigerator is almost bare?"

He took a drink of coffee before he answered. "Don't remind me. I need to go into town today to pick up some horse food and human food."

"I'd love a drive into town."

Over the rim of the mug, he frowned at her. "I don't think that's a good idea, Red."

"Why not? We're three hundred miles from Helena." She was determined not to act like a scared ninny anymore. Steve's friend was investigating the cover-up. If Steve trusted Jack, then she did, too. Melanie prayed it would all be over soon.

"I think we need to be careful. There's no point in taking any chances."

She supposed he was right.

"Red?"

"Yeah, yeah. I know you're right." Didn't mean she liked it.

He took her hand and brushed his lips over her knuckles. "I've got lots of books to read. If you like sci-fi, I'm your man."

I'm your man. She was beginning to believe she could like Steve being her man. She still didn't know exactly where she stood with him, so she kept her thoughts to herself. "As a matter of fact, I do like science fiction."

"I won't be gone long. I'll hightail it into town and take care of business. I should get everything done in a couple of hours or less."

"Okay."

Chapter 7

Melanie leaned against the porch pillar, watching the plume of dust following Steve's truck down his driveway. Loneliness lodged inside her chest as the dust and Steve disappeared. He was right about laying low. Now that he was gone, uneasiness snaked through her. Melanie bounded down the steps, deciding to go for a walk before the heat of the July day turned up the thermostat.

An hour later, she wandered into the kitchen and drank a tall glass of water to quench her thirst. When she turned from the sink, she dropped the empty glass to the floor, shattering it into a dozen pieces.

Forcing air back into her lungs, she struggled to speak. "How did you find me?"

Larry Reynolds's laugh was both sardonic and evil. "Did you really think you could hide from me?" He shifted the nine-millimeter handgun to his left hand, staring down at it for a moment before he passed it back to his right hand. "I'm the governor's right hand man for a reason."

Panic froze her in place as she stared at the gun. Shocked to see Larry standing across the kitchen, she hadn't noticed the gun in his hand. Her gun...It was tucked in her tote bag in the bedroom. Steve had to have a gun, like every other rancher did, but since she didn't know where he kept it, it was of no use to her, either.

Fighting to control her mounting fear, she said, "I want to know how you found me."

"I'm afraid you're not very good at cat and mouse, Melanie. That hair of yours stands out in a crowd. You were easy to pick out at the rodeo the other day. Why did you go to a damned rodeo in Great Falls?" Larry paused and considered his gun again. "We lost you in the crowd."

"So, you lost me in the crowd. I want to know how you found me here." At Steve's ranch, where she was supposedly safe.

Larry lifted a shoulder. "Your cowboy's reporter friend called the wrong person at the Capitol. Of course, Jack Watson believed his source was safe. Interesting what money does to a person's morals." He leaned a shoulder against the wall like he had all the time in the world. "Phone taps. Very handy in situations like this."

The taste of fear crawled up her throat. She knew Steve wouldn't be back for a while. Battling with her growing terror, she glanced down and saw her hands trembling. She clenched her fists together, nails biting into her palms.

"I want the disk."

Everybody and their friggin' dog believed she'd made a backup file. It might be her only hope to let Larry believe there was a backup disk. It would buy her time. "Sorry, I don't have it."

Larry held up a hand, studied his fingernails. Though he was in his mid-forties, he was lean and in good shape from running every day. She couldn't outrun him if she tried.

"Melanie. You expect me to believe that?"

Panic bowled through her. She needed to be fast on her feet. "Steve hid it."

His eyes narrowed. "Now, why don't I believe you? I think it's here, in the cowboy's house."

Not wanting to show her fear, she struggled to act as nonchalant as Larry. "You know, you're not always right."

Anger flared in his nondescript blue eyes. "Don't play games with me, Melanie. Game-playing pisses me off."

Melanie shrugged as if to say, *What can I do about that?*

He pushed away from the wall. "Where's the goddamn disk?" He pointed the gun at her with one hand and sighted down the barrel.

Her breath clawed inside her chest and she willed herself to breathe. "If you kill me, you'll never find it."

“You know too much.” Larry’s tone was laced with fury. “What you know could end the governor’s career, his chance at running for president in four years.”

Anger and fear boiling inside her, she glared at him. “Some president he would make. All he cares about is money and power. I can’t believe I was so blinded by his charm.”

“Give me the damn disk. Now.”

Melanie spread her arms out in front of her, desperate to stall him. *Steve*. She’d chosen him because he looked honest. Now, her heart burned with love for him, and he would never know her feelings if Larry killed her. “Do I look like I have it on me?”

He shook his head in disgust. “You can make this easy on yourself or cause yourself a slow, painful death.”

Melanie grabbed the counter edges for support, bone-chilling fear rushing through her like spring runoff from the mountains. Larry raised the gun higher, this time pointing it straight at her head.

Knives. There were sharp knives in Steve’s kitchen somewhere. She needed to find one and fast. “Steve put it in a drawer in here. I think.”

Spinning around, she hated the fact her back was to Larry while he held her at gunpoint. Her hands were shaking so bad, she barely managed to open the drawers. The first contained miscellaneous things—flashlight, batteries, pads, and pencils. The second drawer she opened was crammed with folded dishtowels.

“If you’re playing with me, Melanie, you’re in deep shit.”

Fighting to keep her fear at bay, she glanced over her shoulder at him. “I’m looking for the damn disk.” The third drawer held eating utensils. She didn’t know how much longer she could string Larry along. Wrapping her trembling fingers around a dinner fork, she glanced over her shoulder at him and nodded.

Larry angled around the kitchen table. “Give it to me.”

When Larry muscled her aside, she jabbed the fork into his side somewhere below his heart.

He dropped his gun. “Goddammit!”

The kitchen door burst open and Steve rushed into the room, a shovel held in front of him like a shield. “Run, Red!”

Relief at seeing Steve and heart-wrenching fear for him crashed together inside her. "He has a gun."

She crouched down to grab for the gun at the same time Larry did. Her hand found it first, but his hand wrapped around hers, tightening like a vise. Melanie winced in pain, but managed to hold onto the gun.

She heard a loud thud and then Larry yelled in pain before he crumpled to the floor in front of her.

Steve grabbed her arm, pulling her to her feet.

"Ohmigod. Did you kill him?"

"I doubt it. I whacked him just hard enough to put him out for awhile." He snatched the gun off the floor.

Steve put his arm around her shoulder and backed her away from Larry, who was already starting to come to. He spit out groans and curses.

"Who's the bastard?"

"Larry Reynolds." The relief barreling through her made her lightheaded. She sank against Steve, feeling his arm tighten around her. "We have to call the police."

"They're on their way, Red. I called the county sheriff when I spotted his SUV hidden behind the trees at the end of my driveway." Steve kissed her temple. "I want to know he didn't touch a hair on your head."

"He never got a chance."

* * * *

A streak of lightning slashed across the sky, followed by an ear-splitting boom of thunder. Melanie snuggled closer to Steve, feeling safe at last in his strong embrace. They sat on the old-fashioned porch swing, watching the spectacular storm tango across the Montana sky. Larry Reynolds was in custody, with a major concussion, compliments of Steve. Charges against the governor were now being investigated.

"What are you plans now, Red?"

She lifted her head and studied him. He stared straight ahead, his jaw rigid. Did Steve feel the same way about her that she did about him? "Looks like I'm unemployed at the moment."

Steve shifted so he could look at her. "You could stay here for a while."

His eyes were filled with questions. Melanie's pulse beat faster as her heart slammed inside her chest. "I was kind of thinking the same thing myself."

Steve nodded while his gaze slid away from her for several long seconds.

"I think you should stay here because..." He finally looked at her. "I think I'm in love with the woman that held me at gunpoint a couple of nights ago. You know, like the Stockholm Syndrome."

Melanie laughed. "I'm not holding you hostage."

"That's where you're wrong. You're holding my heart hostage."

Resting her hands on his shoulders, she kissed him, teasing his lips with her tongue, circling around and around.

"Watch yourself, Red. I don't know how sturdy this old porch swing is."

"My heart is doing really strange things, too."

A grin threatened at the corners of Steve's lips. "For instance..."

"Let's see now. It flutters and races, beats extra hard when I'm with you. When I'm not with you, it feels empty, like something is missing."

"Come here, Red. I'll make sure your heart is taken care of."

Melanie twined her arms around his neck, knowing her cowboy would live up to his word.

MELANIE'S PROTECTOR

Rodeo Cowboys: The Series, Book 1

THE END

AUTHOR'S BIO

Sage Burnett has been composing stories since childhood. Short stories, school plays, and poetry. She now writes contemporary romance set in Montana. Romantic suspense and comedy. And she loves a happy ending.

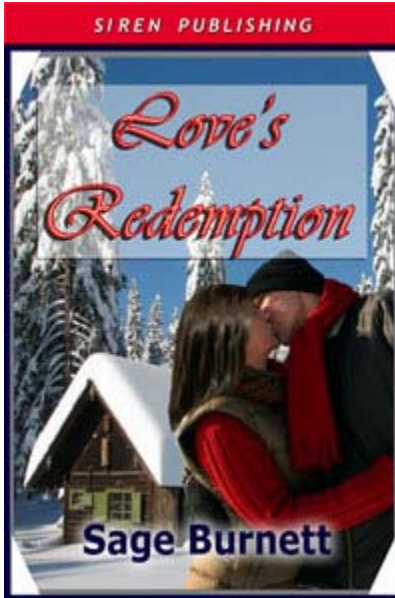
Sage once had a face-to-face encounter with a grizzly sow and her two cubs. It's clear she lived to tell about it. She survived a one-hundred-year storm on the eastern side of the state, another nail-biting incident she lived to tell about. She loves hiking in the Montana wilderness, wondering what wild animal might be around the next bend.

Sage eats a bowl of Cream of Wheat every morning and is a chocolate addict. She also drinks tons of green tea.

Her roomies are a rowdy girl black lab, Madison, and two spoiled, lazy, temperamental girl kitties, Runt and Cody.

Some of her favorite authors are Dana Stabenow, John Sanford, Tami Hoag and Dr. Seuss.

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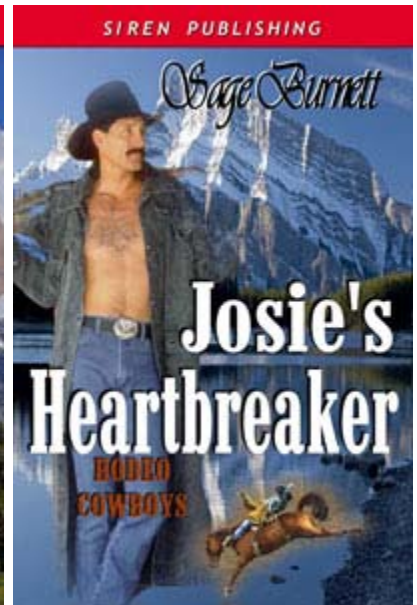
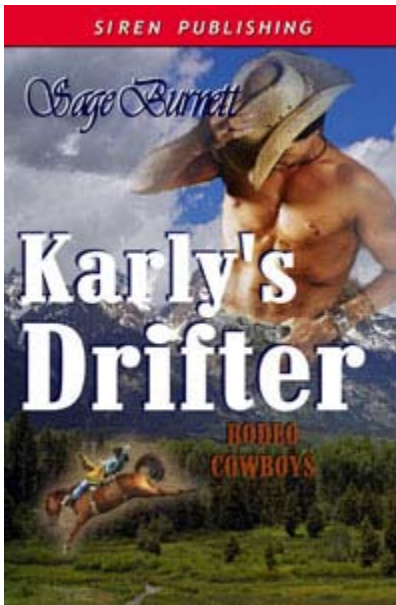
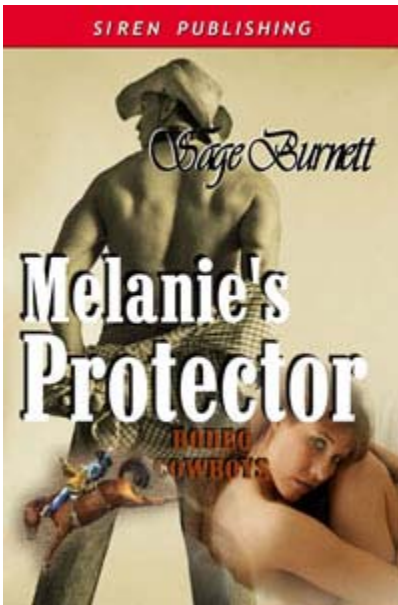
Melanie Blake needs protection so she picks Steve McCall to help her escape the people in hot pursuit of her. Steve has no idea the woman stowed away in his camper is smoldering with passion.

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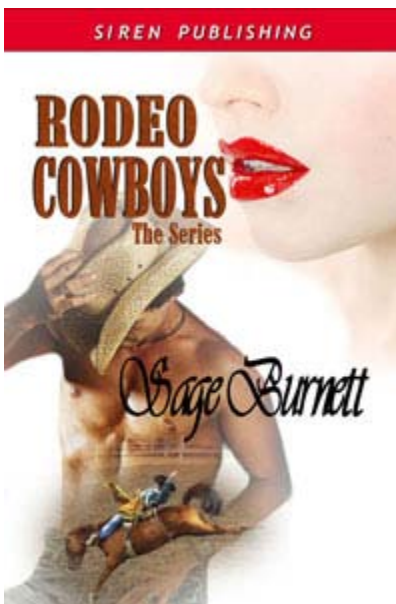
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