



His Farm, Her Circus  
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## Chapter One

*August 10, Ocala, Florida*

"My God, I may be ready for Social Security, but I sure as blazes don't want to draw it in jail," Abigail Hicks muttered.

Fifty-eight-year-old Rachel Whittaker turned a deaf ear to her best friend's relentless stream of complaints and fought a smile at the ridiculous image of them sharing a cell. "I promise you, neither of us will spend one day in jail."

Rachel shook her head as the documents Abigail held in place slipped and slid down the windowpanes, landing once again on the study's floor. "For crying out loud, hold 'em still. I almost messed up that time." She waited, pen poised in midair.

"Look here, Rachel, I'm trying to do just that, but it ain't easy. Breaking the law aggravates my bursitis." Abigail snatched the papers up and realigned them. She lifted her chin to a stubborn angle, her mouth tightened into a thin line. "Why'd I ever let you talk me into this fool thing?"

"You're helping because we're doing it for all the right reasons." Rachel squinted against the rays of Florida's midday sun and continued to carefully trace her sons' signatures. She'd tackled the easiest ones first, Luke's bold, sweeping strokes, and then Garret's beautiful handwriting. She'd saved Cal's hen scratching until last. He should have been a doctor.

Abigail frowned. "All the good intentions in the world can't change the fact we're doing something illegal. This is worse than the time we tricked them into appearing on that *Pick Your Bachelor* dating show. Remember how mad they got over that innocent little ploy to give them a gentle nudge toward matrimony? Especially Cal, Mister I-Know-the-Law Attorney. He threatened to sic the sheriff on us after that episode."

The papers slid down the windowpanes for the third time. Rachel shoved them back in place, releasing a frustrated breath. "Abigail Hicks, if you don't hold this contract still so I can finish, you won't have to worry about *them* killing you. I'll do it myself."

"You wouldn't dare. I'm the only beautician who knows your secret hair color formula." Abigail grunted and shifted her weight from one foot to the other. "Hurry up, the sun's bothering my eyes something awful." She batted her false lashes and then blew a lock of flaming red hair from her forehead.

"Hold on. This'll only take a few more minutes." Rachel traced the third name then tossed the pen onto a marble-topped side table. She turned and spread the papers across the oak desk with pride, smoothing them out with her hands.

Rachel leaned over their work and compared the forgeries to the real signatures, hunting any minor discrepancy. "Looks good. Did you bring your notary seal?"

Abigail hesitated then nodded, glancing at her oversized purse lying on the nearby chair. She retrieved the seal and plunked it onto the desk. "You're asking me to notarize a lie."

Rachel heaved a sigh. "Are these or are these not my sons' signatures?"

"They're not." Abigail crossed her arms and scowled. "My seal's supposed to testify

they were signed in my presence."

"For Pete's sake, are you having a senior moment?" She pointed to the names on the document. "They *were* signed in your presence."

"Not by them."

"That's a technicality."

Abigail pursed her lips. "What if Cal throws us in jail for this little *technicality*?" She shook her finger at Rachel. "He's gonna be furious about you bringing that author to stay here 'at his personal invitation.' Not to mention the other whoppers you've told."

She waved away her friend's accusations. "That'll never happen." Tears stung Rachel's eyes at the thought of failing her son. "We gotta try, Abigail. This woman's perfect for Cal."

Abigail nodded. "If he was looking, which he ain't."

"Well, I can't deny that. Poor Cal, the only set of briefs my boy's been into lately are legal."

"Rachel!"

Rachel burst out laughing at the sly smile hidden beneath Abigail's righteous indignation. "I tell it like it is. He's an excellent father, but darn it, he's divorced, not dead."

"The man's gun shy. Who could blame him?"

"Cal and Donna split more than five years ago. It's high time he started living again, if not for himself, then for Josh." Rachel's heart ached when she recalled how hard the breakup had been on her then two-year-old grandson. She patted Abigail's hand. "We gotta do this, Abigail. We're Cal's only hope of heading toward the altar."

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### *One Month Later*

"What the hell?"

Cal Whittaker jammed on his brakes, spewing dust and gravel as his truck screeched to a halt. In growing disbelief, he reread the Old English style letters on the new sign hanging above the farm's ornamental cast-iron gate. Overhead floodlights glared down on the words, 'Whittaker Oaks Thoroughbred Ranch'.

*Ranch?*

Maybe driving home dead tired, he'd made a wrong turn. He leaned back and studied his surroundings, hindered for a moment by the total lack of streetlights in the rural area. Ten yards ahead and over to the left, he spotted the old tractor. Yep, he was home, but he owned a farm, not a ranch. It had been a family farm for five generations now.

What lamebrain had dared rename the farm in his absence? His younger brothers had better sense. No, he groaned as an appalling thought materialized. This smacked of his mother's meddling and could only mean one thing. Trouble.

Cal gunned the truck down the winding road, churning up a cloud of dust in his headlights. He parked in the circular drive and anxiously headed toward the front porch.

During his week-long business trip in Dallas, he'd missed Josh something fierce. The daily phone calls helped; at least Cal got to hear his son's infectious laughter. He thought back over their conversations and one thing sounded somewhat out of the ordinary. Josh did

mention a new friend a couple of days ago. Cal couldn't recall the little girl's name, but Josh sounded secretive when Cal pressed for details. That was the least of his worries. Neither his son, nor anyone else for that matter, had breathed a word about the name change.

What was going on?

Cal glanced at the sprawling two-story colonial farmhouse where he'd been born. Lights shone brightly through every window as if a bonfire burned inside. The front door slammed. Boots sounded along the wooden porch; shadows raced down the steps and moved across the yard in his direction. When the flashlights switched on, he caught a glimpse of his brothers' beleaguered faces.

*What has Mother done now?*

Cal swallowed hard. He hooked his fingers behind the tie's knot, tugging it loose and stared at the bouncing beams of lights. An ominous silence hung in the air when Luke and Garret drew to a halt in front of him.

"What's going on? It's September, not April Fool's," Cal said with ill-disguised impatience. "Last time I looked, my name was on the deed, too, so whoever changed our entrance sign better change it back pronto."

Luke smiled and rubbed his chin. "Figured you'd spot that right away."

"Damn straight." He hated change.

"Cut it out, Luke." Garret pursed his lips. "Granddad probably turned over in his grave when the old sign came down."

Cal heard snorting and bellowing in the distance, he spun around and listened carefully. Another tide of disbelief washed over him. A moo drifted clearly across the darkness. "That racket better be Thoroughbreds with an identity crisis, not mangy cattle!"

"Don't shout. She'll hear you," Luke whispered.

Cal frowned. "Mom?"

Garret shoved his free hand in a pocket of his jeans. "Autumn Blessing."

"Not another stripper." Cal remembered one named Candy Apple that Luke had hauled out here for him to meet. She came complete with purple and orange streaked hair and breasts you could use as flotation devices. Disgusted with Luke again, he kicked up a clod of grass with the toe of his shoe and sent it flying.

"That happened five years ago, and you're still throwing it in my face." Luke shifted his weight from one booted foot to the other and glanced back at the house. "Listen, we can't talk here. It's not safe."

Luke and Garret strode away. Cal let out a long breath and followed. What kind of interfering female, besides their mother, had his brothers running scared?

They quickly scooted up a small hill around the back of the house. Little beads of sweat formed on his forehead from the apprehension growing with each step.

"One of you had better spit it out," Cal warned.

Flashlights illuminated their paths as they went through the gate, charged into the fenced fields dotted with shadowy oaks, and stopped. Cal glanced back at the house, a good hundred yards away, and then looked suspiciously from Luke to Garret.

Luke cleared his throat. "Okay, it's safe to talk here. Afterwards, we've got something to show you."

Impatient, Cal glanced at his watch. The luminescent dial shone bright in the fall night.

"Well, don't everyone talk at once. It's eight-thirty. I'm beat and starving to boot. Can someone give me the condensed version?"

Neither one of them said a word. Their continued silence said it all. *Mother*. His earlier hunch confirmed, Cal shook his head wearily. When they inherited the stud farm from their late father and promised to always look after their mother, it seemed like such a simple thing to do. After all, they'd always lived at Whittaker Oaks. No big deal. Until their mother turned matchmaker.

*Here we go again.*

The thought aged him two hundred years.

"Is this worse than the time she posted our photos and unlisted phone numbers on a freeway billboard?" Cal asked. He could still picture it, 'Hot, Sexy Bachelors Available on Call.'

Garret rubbed the back of his neck. "That was a walk in the park compared to the mess Mother's got us into now. And the fun has just begun, unless you can figure a way out, counselor."

Cal knew his frazzled younger brothers expected him to solve their problem, they always did.

"Mother logged on as you on the Internet," Garret said. "She chatted up a storm with this woman named Autumn Blessing, a bestselling author. Mother impersonated you, Cal."

A horrible idea popped into his head. His mother loose on the Internet, posing as him, and begging some innocent woman to marry him. Good Lord. It wasn't beyond her. His throat constricted as the hangman's noose tightened around his neck. He yanked off his tie and shoved it in his pocket.

"Do we know what I supposedly *said* to this author?"

Luke chuckled. "Are you kidding? Nothing's that easy with Mother."

"What does that have to do with turning the farm into a ranch?" Cal asked.

"We're getting to that," Luke said.

"Then don't take the scenic route," Cal spat out.

"Mother waited until we were out one day and changed the sign. Anyway, we do know one thing," Garret continued. "This Autumn held a 'Location Shoot Contest' searching for the perfect place to film her bestseller. Mother entered Whittaker Oaks into the contest, embellished the farm so it would match the descriptions of a cowboy-style ranch in the book, and we won. Or lost, the way we see it."

Cal kneaded his tense neck muscles. "Are you telling me they're planning to turn this farm into a full-blown movie set?"

"Unless we can stop them." Garret muttered a curse.

Cal ground his back teeth together so hard his jaw ached. "They can't do that. We have a business to run." His eyes narrowed. "You didn't sign anything authorizing this, did you?"

Luke grinned crookedly and regarded Cal with a shake of his head. "We wouldn't do anything *that* dumb, but the movie studio thinks we did, so does Autumn."

"What? Why on earth would they think that?"

Garret frowned and glanced over Cal's shoulder toward the house. "Mother forged our signatures to the contract, and Abigail notarized it."

"*She what?*" Cal jammed his fingers through his hair, and took a deep breath, drawing

in the familiar smells of fresh hay and grass. "She's gone too far this time." Fury pounded in his head. This matchmaking has got to stop. How was he going to deal with mother's latest disaster?

He pictured sending her to jail for just one day to teach her a much-needed lesson in meddling. As much as she might deserve the trip, he didn't have the heart to do that. And she knew it. Besides, it wouldn't do one lick of good. She'd probably try to hook them up with a pretty jailer or two.

"Get me a copy of the contract," he said to Garret, the only other member of the family who was a slave to logic. Luke found this mess way too funny for Cal's liking.

"It's in your room already," Garret said. "We insisted Mother cough it up after she told us about this crazy money-raising scheme. The initial payment from the studio is paper-clipped to the first page."

Cal pursed his lips. "I doubt money was at the heart of Mother's ambush. If she impersonated me, I'm the real target. She's trying to hitch me to this Autumn Blessing."

Did his mother really think all she had to do was set up a blind date and he'd magically fall for this stranger like some stud with a receptive mare? Well, this flashy phony could forget about hooking him. "What kind of woman meets a man on the Internet then comes to his house?"

"The kind a man would want to marry, toss into bed, and love on for a month?" Luke gave him a sly grin. "She's definitely worth skipping a lot of meals for."

Cal didn't have time for this. He had a son to raise, a law practice to manage, and a growing farm to run. Luke's description of this Autumn Blessing fit Cal's ex-wife, Donna. That marriage had turned into a nightmare. He shuddered at the thought of stepping into that kind of cesspool again. "You better remember whose side you're on, Luke. Have either of you read this book they're planning to film here?"

Luke shook his head. "Mother said it's a cowboy romance. I caught her drooling over the steamy cover. Some woman's lying in bed, her shirt gaping open. Nice view of her cleavage. A man, wearing nothing but jeans and a hard-on, is wrapped around her."

"I need a copy so I can find out what we're dealing with," Cal said.

Luke nodded. "Mother bragged about her autographed copy. I'll sneak it from her room."

"We'd all better read it." Cal's stomach growled, reminding him he'd worked through lunch. "Make it quick. What else did you want to show me?"

"Promise not to shoot 'em until we get rid of Autumn?" Luke glanced at him sideways.

"Yeah." Cal swore under his breath.

They ambled out another three hundred yards and stopped at a newly constructed corral. His brothers aimed their flashlights on fresh bales of hay.

Cal dropped into *The Twilight Zone*.

Startled cattle snapped their heads in the direction of the light. The frightened herd bellowed and huddled together, staring into the beams.

He estimated the number at a hundred. The light spanned into another area. In the next corral stood an angry-looking bull, as a flashlight beam rested fully on the two thousand pound beast, it charged.

"Watch out!" Luke yelled. "That fence may give!"



They jumped as the bull crashed against the fence, backed up, and hit it again.

"This is the new ambience Mother added at her own expense," Luke joked over the mooing and banging. Expression wry, he glanced at Cal, sensing his turmoil. "We felt the same way when the trailers pulled up with these longhorns and Brahma bull."

Cal's gut feeling told him their mother had done a lot more than buy and import a herd of prime beef onto their farm to win that contest. All the evidence wasn't in yet, that was certain. What else had she agreed to?

He kicked the railing. The bull snorted and gave a defiant toss of his head. *Don't tempt me. I take my steaks medium rare, fuzz head.*

Luke shut off his flashlight, and the animal settled down.

Cal turned to his brothers. "Soon as we get rid of this author, these cattle are history. How long has this woman been here?"

"She arrived from New York a few days ago," Luke said. "We didn't have the heart to spring this crap on you over the phone, so we waited until you came home."

"You should have told me. I don't like surprises."

"Could you have walked out of the trial?" Luke asked.

"No."

"You'd sit there in Dallas worrying about it and not able to do one damn thing until you came back. We made the right decision," Luke said. "Besides, you got one more piece of trouble. She thinks *you* invited her."

"What?"

"She's not just *visiting*, Cal. She accepted your invitation to *stay* with us."

"I'll be damned." He'd rather have a hurricane level the place. He clenched his hands into fists. "How long?"

Luke shrugged. "No clue. How would it look if we asked 'when are you leaving' the minute she arrived?"

Cal stopped and stared at the night sky. His mind scrambled for a course of action.

Luke and Garret turned their flashlights back on, and they all headed back.

"What's your plan?" Garret asked.

"I'll tell you what we're *not* going to do." Cal scratched the stubble on his chin. "Tell the truth."

*Had he uttered that statement?*

As an attorney, he'd always sought the truth, embraced it like an anchor in a storm, and here he was skirting it, for the moment anyway.

"Huh?" Luke asked.

"Think about it. One hint about who *really* wrote those e-mails, and she'll suspect deceit and forgery. We could end up in a multi-million dollar lawsuit. And Mother could land in jail." He hissed under his breath. "Damned if I want to tangle with the film company's lawyers. They play hardball and won't take fraud lightly."

"So, what are we going to do?" Garret asked.

Cal tried to think of logical steps to mitigate the damage. "First, I'll change my password so Mother can't log on and cook up any more schemes in my name."

"That's a given." Luke nodded. "What next?"

"After I study the contract, I'll talk to Mother. I hope to God it has loopholes, so I can



figure out how to break it. In the meantime, I'll gather all the facts I can about our unwanted guest. My private investigator might be able to shed some light on this author. No telling what kind of sordid past she has."

"Mother probably deleted the e-mails, but we can access the history copy the computer stores," Garret suggested.

Cal shook his head. "Nope. I taught her how to delete them. Not one of my smarter moves. Now, I'll need to recover the deleted files. Did Autumn bring a laptop?"

"Yes," Garret answered. "But she's on it all the time."

"Well, she has to sleep," Cal countered. "If I can't restore the files to our computer, I'll get them from this author's."

"In the meantime, we'll help find out what Mother wrote," Garret said. "Autumn won't suspect a thing if we ask questions. She'll just think we're being nosy."

Cal nodded. "Over the next few days, I'll try to convince her she's picked the wrong location. If I'm lucky, she'll select another site to plague."

"And if she won't? Or can't?" Luke asked.

Cal stopped. "We regroup and decide our next move. Our main objective will be to avoid any permanent damage to the stud farm. Once this blows over, this place goes back to normal."

"There's something else," Luke said quietly.

Cal walked faster toward the house. "What, we're being invaded by a herd of romance writers next week?"

Luke shook his head as they stomped up the steps. "Worse. Josh likes her a lot."

Wonderful! This must be the girlfriend Josh had yammered on and on about. So much for assuming she was a child. Cal groaned and shoved open the back door.

For all Cal knew this stranger could be a criminal. She had no business fooling with the feelings of his son. Damn his mother's hide. No more matchmaking. Period. How could she do this? She knew Josh was still dealing with the pain of his own mother's rejection.

"Take a peek at her," Luke whispered. He cracked open the door to the dining room.

Although Cal saw Autumn from the back, she didn't see him. He studied her with utter amazement. Whatever he'd expected, it wasn't this.

Her dazzling reflection lingered in the window she faced. Her skin was tanned, but what surprised him the most was her waist-length, jet-black hair. When she bent to put food on the table, the swell of her full breasts pressed against her shirt.

His body reacted instantly to her well-rounded bottom encased in tight-fitting jeans, becoming hard as a rock. He groaned inwardly at her movements and closed the door.

Heaven help him. Here stood more trouble than he'd ever imagined facing.

## Chapter Two

Autumn Blessing anxiously gnawed at her lip and placed a bowl of mashed potatoes on the mahogany table in the dining room. The floorboard creaked in the hall. She looked over her shoulder. Butterflies tangoed in her stomach at meeting Cal face-to-face.

No one was there.

It must be the old house settling.

She glanced at the rich, oak floor and wool rug in the foyer. The same hardwood graced the living and dining rooms of the impressive colonial home. She loved everything about Cal—his home, family, beautiful Thoroughbreds—but how would she feel about this man when they met in person?

A man who, like her, had been so lonely he'd offered his friendship on-line. As they'd grown closer over the months, she'd told him a secret about herself. One she'd never have the courage to admit in person. Instead of making her feel ashamed, he'd offered to help and had even opened his home to her while the production company filmed the movie.

Her breath caught in her throat at the sound of footsteps on the kitchen's oak floor.

However it was only Rachel who rounded the corner carrying a platter loaded with broiled chicken. "It shouldn't be too much longer, sweetie." She smiled warmly as she placed it on the tabletop.

Autumn's heart raced. Would Cal be disappointed when he saw her for the first time? She'd seen rejection in the eyes of so many others, but she felt certain this man would be different.

Preoccupied with thoughts of Cal, Autumn tripped over a step between the dining room and kitchen. The basket of rolls nearly tumbled from her grasp.

Rachel patted Autumn's arm. "Relax, dear. Cal won't bite."

Male voices echoed in the kitchen.

*Maybe coming here to stay wasn't a good idea.*

She dug her teeth into her lip in sudden panic. *Oh, God.* On wobbly knees, she spun to study the smiling photo of Cal and Josh that hung on the wall.

*Please let Cal like me.* She turned as they entered the dining room. The tall, gorgeous man in a charcoal-gray suit stopped within a few feet of her. Lord, his shoulders went on forever. The photo didn't do him justice.

His heated gaze took a slow, lazy path over her body, causing her nipples to tingle then settled on her eyes. "You must be Autumn. I'm Cal," he said in a deep, husky voice, extending his hand to her.

The hero of Autumn Blessing's romantic comedy paled beside the tanned, ruggedly handsome, thirty-four-year-old Calvin Whittaker. Her gaze stuck to the man who she'd shared her innermost hopes, dreams, and secrets with over the Internet for the past six months. But no amount of cyber-chat could have prepared her for the sheer impact of meeting him in the flesh. The man was sexy as sin.

She shook his hand and smiled, searching his gray eyes for a hint of warmth. "I've been looking forward to this for months."

Her statement seemed to shock him, but before he could answer her, Josh ran into the

dining room and hurled himself into his father's arms.

"Dad, I missed you so much."

Cal hugged Josh hard. "Not half as much as I missed you, sport."

After they grinned big at each other, Josh turned his head toward her. "This is my dad."

Autumn saw the deep affection this man and his son shared. That's the Cal she admired. "I know."

"Have you met Autumn? She's nice, Dad."

"Is she?" Cal asked. He lifted his head and shot a hot glance her way. Heat flooded her face; her skin tingled.

He released Josh, but not before planting a solid smooch on his cheek and ruffling his dark hair. Cal welcomed her to their home then excused himself to get his suitcase from the trunk and clean up before dinner.

Rachel squeezed Autumn's shoulder. "See, all that worrying for nothing. He likes you." Rachel smiled and left to remove another batch of homemade yeast rolls from the oven. The house smelled like a bakery when she returned and added them to the basket on the table.

"If he doesn't treat you right, there's always me." Luke wore a dangerous grin. "Or Garret, but those accountants are pretty boring."

Garret gave Luke a swift jab in the ribs. Luke grabbed his side and feigned a mortal wound.

"Oh, for heaven's sake." Rachel rolled her eyes and gave them both a warning look. Luke stole a hot dinner roll, tossing it back and forth in his hands before inhaling it.

Autumn smiled at their antics. She'd never felt so at home. Twice, she peeked at the banister that curved around a staircase leading to the second floor, hoping to catch a glimpse of Cal.

Fifteen minutes later, Cal returned freshly shaven, his dark hair still slightly damp, wearing form-fitting Levis and a blue chambray shirt. At the sight of him, she reconsidered reviewing the specifics of the studio's publicity plans for Whittaker Oaks tonight. She figured he needed to relax, and they could cover that another day.

Cal sat directly across the table from her. He raised one black brow and gave her a long, thorough look. She moistened her lips and found him staring at her tongue. All at once, her fertile imagination clicked into overdrive, primed by twelve years of reading and writing romance. She fantasized about the two of them silhouetted against the night, a gazillion stars flickering above them. Hero and heroine in love forever, her fingers caressing his unruly blue-black hair as it glistened in the silvery moonlight. She couldn't wait to get her laptop and capture her feelings on paper.

"Where'd you go? Earth to Autumn," Cal said.

She jumped at the sound of his deep baritone, causing her hand to hit the water pitcher, which clanged loudly against the centerpiece of delicate shell-pink roses. How long had she been gawking? She flushed.

Everyone chuckled, including her. She scanned the faces around the table. Living here made her feel like Joan Wilder in *Romancing the Stone*, dropped into the middle of an exciting adventure with dangerously handsome Cal.

Surprised by his frown, she stared across the table at his inquisitive, silver-gray eyes.

He waved his hand in front of her face. "Next time you go into orbit, warn me."

"Jetlag." She mentally kicked herself once she'd voiced it. Brilliant. That might have worked, if she'd just arrived, except, there was no time zone change from New York to Florida.

Autumn noted the weariness around Cal's eyes. He looked exhausted. No wonder he was frowning instead of telling jokes and making her laugh with the quirky sense of humor he'd displayed in his e-mails. He was so different from what she'd expected. Maybe he was nervous, too. Perhaps they should have met without the rest of the family around.

The corners of his mouth lifted in a charmingly sexy grin. "I can't remember offhand, but how many other ranches entered your 'Location Shoot Contest'?" He sipped his coffee, gripped the mug with long fingers, and gave her a steady perusal.

*Why does he want to know?* She swallowed hard, striving to respond in a professional manner. "Thirty. The studio let me review the entries before they narrowed it down to seven. Whittaker Oaks was the only entry from this area that made the finals. I kept hoping you'd win."

"Why?" Garret asked, cocking his dark head.

"Ocala is the setting for my book, *Hearts Entwined*. Even though this area is the horse capital of the world, I didn't think the studio would pick Florida to film a Western, but they surprised me."

She could have sworn all three brothers turned and glared at their mother, who suddenly squirmed in her chair. Was it something she'd said? She must have been mistaken, because when she looked again they were smiling.

"I hope my sons don't pester you to death with questions." Rachel smiled sweetly.

Did they realize how lucky they were? She'd always wished for a mother like Rachel.

And a home like this.

"We're happy you're here, aren't we, Josh?" Rachel leaned over and ruffled his dark hair.

Cal's son nodded and flashed Rachel a snaggle-toothed smile, which deepened the dimples in his cheeks. He had the same beautiful, silver-gray eyes as his father.

Autumn waited for Cal to agree with Rachel, but every time she glanced around, the undercurrent hinted at something out of sync. "I don't mind questions," she assured Rachel, patting her hand.

"Mother, I don't want you to think I'm ignoring you since I came home," Cal said, his tone somber. "You've really outdone yourself this time. Quick as I analyze this new contract you helped us snag, rest assured, your entire family will sit down with you and express our *true* gratitude."

Rachel lifted her chin. "Oh, it never crossed my mind that you'd ignore all my hard work, dear."

Cal's fork clattered against the china. "There are over a thousand horse farms in the surrounding areas, Autumn. None of them entered and qualified?"

"Two came close," Autumn explained, "but I understand from the studio they refused to agree to some of the stipulations in the contract."

"What could they possibly object to?" Cal asked casually. All three brothers stared at her.

The cold expression in Cal's eyes told her he was upset about something. "I'm not sure

exactly what their objections were," she answered nervously.

"Would you be willing to fill me in on which ranches refused to sign?"

She nodded, noting Cal's deep concentration. Tiny worry lines creased his forehead, and his abrupt change of attitude completely baffled her. Did he regret his decision to get involved with her? "I'll have the names for you tomorrow."

Before she could ask about his specific concerns, Garret called her name. "Autumn Blessing. Is that the name you were born with or a pseudonym?"

Heartache from long ago caused her stomach to burn and knot at his question. Her bite of mashed potatoes tasted like sawdust. She sensed Cal's curious stare, but reluctantly turned her gaze to the youngest brother, Garret.

Should she tell them she'd been christened Autumn Sinclair? She inhaled deeply, fighting to dispel memories of the past. The pain of her parents' tragic deaths and the years spent in a parade of foster homes before she and her younger sister had been adopted by the Blessings still scarred her heart. "That's my real name," she said softly.

Wanting to end that conversation, she turned her attention to thirty-two-year-old Luke. According to Cal's e-mails, Luke was the spitting image of his late grandfather and had a bit of a wild streak. Blond and blue-eyed like a Viking, Luke stood at least six-foot-three. From the way he watched her and the devilish grin he flashed her from time to time, she guessed he must be the charmer in the family. The ladies' man. He returned her smile and she said, "Cal wrote that you're a veterinarian. My younger sister, Kayla, will have her vet license soon."

Luke cocked an eyebrow. "Is she as pretty as you?"

Her smile deepened. *Oh, yeah, he knows what to say, even to ordinary, plain-faced Autumn.* "Kayla is beautiful."

Interest lit up Luke's eyes.

She ate several bites of broiled chicken. The clean wintergreen smell of Cal's soap, mingled with the woodsy scent of his cologne, wafted her way. Enticed by the heady combination, she inhaled covertly, making food the last thing on her mind.

A mutter at the end of the table sent her attention to Josh and his fight to balance slippery peas on his fork. They dropped into his lap; some rolled onto the table and floor. Frustrated, he grabbed his spoon and dove into mashed potatoes now blanketed with green dots. His gaze caught hers after he swallowed a big gulp of milk. "Miss Blessing's got purple eyes, Dad. You ever seen any that color before?"

"No, I haven't."

"You didn't even look at 'em, Dad."

Cal leaned closer and glared into her eyes briefly. "They're light blue with a tinge of violet."

His gaze settled on her hair but slid away, almost angrily. Obviously, he'd disliked what he'd seen. With one look, he'd judged her unworthy of his time and had dismissed her.

Why hadn't she worn her hair in a sophisticated French twist instead of the long ponytail dragging down her back? She must look like some twelve-year-old kid. If she was glamorous and sophisticated, then someone like Cal might find her attractive.

To divert attention from her lackluster hair, Autumn complimented Rachel on the meal. After the dishes had been cleared, Autumn poured coffee and dished up dessert, while Rachel skillfully steered the conversation to important things like shopping.

"Abigail does my hair. She can work you in," Rachel said.

Autumn sighed. Even Rachel found her hairstyle childish. Heat crept up her neck. She wondered if a cut would solve her problem as she politely accepted Rachel's invitation.

Luke ate a bite of his apple pie. "I'm afraid you'll find our small town boring after living in New York."

"I'm not from New York. My editor's there. I'm from Houston."

"Then you'll definitely think you've stepped backwards in time here," Cal said with a clipped tone.

She pasted on what she hoped passed for a pleasing smile. "Do people actually close their businesses to go fishing or take vacations? And does Hannah really put a sign in the window of her bakery shop that says, 'Out of My Mind, Back in Ten Minutes'?"

Cal's mouth gaped.

"Don't look so surprised. I remember every detail you told me about this charming town." She sipped her coffee. "What's the one thing that stood out in my e-mails?"

"Everything." He hesitated, glancing at the ceiling before returning his gaze to her. "They were all memorable."

"There were well over five hundred of them."

Cal almost choked on his coffee. He cleared his throat and glared at Rachel. "I didn't realize we'd exchanged so many."

"I need another scoop of ice cream, please," Josh said.

"I'll get it." Cal stood so abruptly his chair nearly toppled and hit the floor. He grabbed Josh's dish and stomped to the kitchen. When he returned, the apple pie was smothered with vanilla ice cream.

"You think you got enough?" Rachel asked, receiving another harsh look from Cal.

Autumn had always heard men didn't like to expose their sensitive side. Cal's embarrassment about the volume of e-mails they'd exchanged provided a prime example of this.

After Josh devoured his dessert, he yawned like a sleepy puppy. "Done, Dad." He tossed his linen napkin onto the table. "May I be excused, please?"

"Yes. You look tired, son. Take a quick shower, and I'll be up to read and tuck you in soon."

"Do I gotta?" Josh pleaded. His eyes gave Cal a woe-is-me look. "I stayed inside most times. I'm not very dirty."

Cal smiled. "Yes, you have to bathe, and don't forget to wash behind your ears."

Autumn's heart fluttered. That playful smile and twinkle in Cal's eyes changed his entire demeanor. She wished he'd look at her that way. So caring and loving, so much closer to the warmth he'd exuded on-line. Was he shy in person or disappointed...in her?

Josh pushed away from the table and ran to hug his arms around her neck. A sprinkle of freckles covered his upturned nose.

"I used to hate baths, too." Autumn rubbed his back and smiled. "Have you tried singing in the shower?"

He wrinkled his brows. "What should I sing?"

Autumn grinned. "Anything. The louder, the better."

"How long can you stay?" Josh asked with a laugh.

"Your father said I could come a few months before the filming starts and stay as long as it takes to finish the movie." She noted the startled look in Cal's eyes. Why was he acting like a man before a firing squad? Was he thinking about reneging on his invitation? He couldn't. She'd make sure of that. Too much rode on this. She sighed as he shifted in his chair, his smile evaporating.

Josh gave Autumn a wet, loud kiss on the cheek. The child bestowed the same enthusiastic goodnight kiss to his grandma, waved to everyone, and then turned and trotted up the stairs.

Cal pushed away from the table. "I'd like to talk to you tomorrow about some things, and show you the fa...uh, ranch."

Thank God. At least Cal wasn't trying to throw her out yet. "Great. I need to discuss some things with you, too, and answer your questions." And solidify my stay here, she thought, slanting a side-glance his way.

As they walked into the living room, a shrill, off-key rendition of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" drifted down the stairs. The volume grew louder, and Josh's voice cracked periodically.

"Good grief, I better stop that caterwauling. See everyone tomorrow." Cal turned toward the racket and took the carpeted stairs two at a time.

On her way to the kitchen, Autumn thought about how disappointing her first meeting with Cal had been. He didn't seem like the same man. Maybe *she* was the problem? Had she imagined all the feelings they'd shared? Their closeness? What if he'd changed his mind and didn't want to help her?

Whether or not he regretted having her here, she needed to stay. She had to complete her part of the publicity for the movie studio and finish writing her sequel, with or without his help. Her sister's future and her own were riding on it.

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Cal dried Josh's hair and helped him into his favorite pajamas.

"Did you hear me singing?" Josh said with a grin.

Cal ruffled his son's damp hair. "Even the tree trunks heard you." He bent, gathered the wet towels, and tossed them down the laundry chute.

"I'm glad Miss Autumn's here," Josh said as they ambled down the long hall to his bedroom.

Cal switched on the lamp. "Don't get attached to her. She might not be staying long."

Josh snagged a book off the shelf and jumped into bed. "You think she's pretty?"

Tension built between Cal's shoulder blades. He stared at the wheelbarrow-shaped toy chest in the corner, avoiding his son's perceptive gaze.

Every detail about Autumn enticed him. The way her inky-black hair reflected light from the chandelier, how her rose-colored lips pouted when she was deep in thought, those incredible blue eyes with their arresting purple hue that darkened when she entered her fantasy world.

What had she been thinking about when she'd drifted off with that dreamy romantic haze? Josh was right. He'd never met anyone with stunning lavender eyes. "She's okay, I guess."



Cal lay down beside Josh and opened the book.

"She's beautiful. A perfect mom." Josh beamed.

Uh oh, had his grandmother planted that thought? "I don't think you can tell if Autumn would make a good mom just by looking at her." Squash this idea immediately.

"Miss Autumn looks like a schoolteacher." Josh wrinkled his little brows. "She smells like some kinda flower."

Cal took a deep breath and let it out slowly, remembering her enticing fragrance. "Jasmine." He frowned.

"Don't you like her, Dad?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Cause your mouth's all puckered up like mine when I eat yucky spinach."

Cal sucked in another deep, calming breath. She was another innocent victim in this whole mess his mother had created. Somehow he had the feeling that no matter which way he moved on this one, Autumn would be hurt. That was the last thing he wanted. He had to find a pain-free solution for everyone.

"I like her; she's just not my type."

"That's what Grandma said."

Cal's mouth fell open. "She did?"

Josh grabbed the book. "Yeah. Grandma said Miss Autumn's Uncle Luke's type."

## Chapter Three

"Are you awake?"

Small fingers pried one of Autumn's eyelids open. She blinked several times and looked into Josh's face as he leaned over her queen-sized bed.

She turned the small table lamp on beside her bed. "Time to get up?" she asked through a yawn.

"No, ma'am," Josh whispered, bright-eyed and alert. "I couldn't sleep." He inched closer to her, biting his lip.

Smiling to reassure him, she leaned up on her elbow and pushed the covers back, patting the mattress. The dark-haired little boy flashed a bright smile and eagerly crawled into bed. She dropped the thick down comforter over them, and he cuddled next to her. His head settled trustingly on her pillow, and he gazed up at her with those beautiful, innocent eyes. It reminded her of the times her sister, Kayla, had nightmares and had crawled in bed with her.

"Did you have a bad dream?" Autumn touched his forehead and gently brushed the bangs from his eyes.

He shook his head and snuggled deeper under the covers. "Thinking woke me."

Thinking, huh? This was an unexpected twist. What could be troubling him? A seven-year-old child shouldn't be up at night. "You want to talk about it?"

Josh nodded, picking up a long wavy strand of her black hair and rubbing it between his fingers in curious delight. "I think my mom's hair was soft like this." His voice sounded dreamy, and unshed tears glistened in his eyes.

Autumn's stomach lurched. With her presence, was he feeling the loss of his mother? It sounded like she'd stopped seeing Josh after the divorce. Surely she hadn't rejected her own child. She hated to think it, but maybe Cal had kept her away.

His bottom lip quivered. "Dad told me not to get attached 'cause you might not be staying long. I've been trying to figure out real hard how to get unattached. I didn't want to ask Dad though. He might get mad 'cause I already got that way."

Autumn continued to comb his hair with her fingers, silently coaxing the child to speak his mind. Her heart ached from the pain written on his face. "I see."

She tilted her head to one side and studied the shadows of light at the window. So that's why Cal acted standoffish earlier. He must be regretting the intimate secrets they'd shared. Her heart sank. No doubt he'd been disappointed meeting her in the flesh since she bore little resemblance to the airbrushed, sexy pose on her book jacket. Or maybe he feared another woman would hurt him as his first wife had. She wished she knew exactly what had happened between them, but Cal hadn't disclosed the details.

"Your father's probably afraid if you like me too much, you'll be hurt when the movie's finished and I go back to Texas." She smiled at him. No matter what happened with Cal, nothing would change the love she had for his child. "What he doesn't know is that you don't need to worry, I'm not going away. My sister and I will be moving to Ocala soon as the realtor finds us land we like."

"You are? You'll be my neighbors?"

Autumn kissed the clean smelling top of his head that still held the sweet aroma of baby shampoo. "Maybe not next door neighbors, but we'll live nearby and see each other a lot."

"Whew!" He blew out a breath. "Then I can still like you, and I don't need to think so hard." After a kiss on the cheek, he yawned. She turned off the lamp so they could get some sleep.

"Miss Autumn, can I tell you something?" She nodded. "You snore funny, not like my Dad and Uncle Luke, you know real deep like when the horses snort. You're more quiet, kinda like my friend Eddie's goat, Norman. Well, goodnight." He rolled over and pulled the cover up around his ear.

Autumn smiled. *A goat eh?*

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"Buck, buck, buck..."

Cal woke with a start. What was that?

He lifted his head from the pillow and squinted at the clock on his bedside table. The bright red dial read five. So much for sleeping late on a Saturday morning. With a groan, he struggled to sit upright and strained to listen for the noise that had jerked him from a sound sleep.

"Cock-a doodle do..."

Alert and curious, Cal swung his legs over the side of the king-sized bed. He raked his hair from his eyes, then rose to his feet and glanced around the shadowy room at the oversized dresser and armoire angled against the wall.

He listened. There it was again, coming from the window. He padded across the carpet and peeked through the blinds. Damn. A rooster. Where the hell did it come from? Whom does it belong to? The ugly creature puffed its feathers out and strutted back and forth on the windowsill. The thing stopped crowing only to peck the glass and make irritating tap, tap, tap sounds, like a typist clacking away at a keyboard.

Cal scowled. What a racket! He needed to round up that scruffy looking bird fast before it woke the entire house. After he pulled on his jeans and boots, he grabbed a shirt from the closet. He slid his arms in, but left it unbuttoned as he ran for the garage. Dust flew everywhere as he rummaged through the shelves and retrieved the carrier used to transport Josh's rabbits from the pet store.

Once outside, he positioned the metal-framed cage near the rooster and opened the door. "Get in there," he snapped, pointing an angry finger at the inside of the cage. The dumb yellow, black and white chicken blinked one beady eye at him and stood its ground. "You cooperate and get into this cage now, or you'll go into a cooking pot."

The rooster strutted forward like the king of the hen house, but instead of going inside as anticipated, he flew right at Cal. Cal stepped back, and the bird perched on top of the cage. It squawked and flapped his wings in a dominate posture.

Cal lunged forward and caught the rooster by its yellow legs. He smiled his triumph until the bird twisted, wings flapping, and pecked Cal's hand, making holes in the soft underside of his fingers. Cal let go and muttered a curse. The rooster fluttered away with an outraged screech, landing on the cage again. Glaring at Cal, he preened his ruffled feathers.

"Damn stupid bird." Cal hissed, sucking on the injured finger, taking a moment to study the situation. No scrawny bird was getting the better of him.

The rooster thought otherwise. He jumped down, charged at Cal's ankles, slashing at them with his sharp beak and claws.

Cal quickly retreated.

Suddenly the bird stopped. Like gunfighters who faced each other at dawn, they stared and waited for the other one to make the next move.

"Well, it's easy to see who won that round," Autumn cried out and laughed from the wraparound porch. "Fred, behave yourself and leave the nice man alone. He didn't mean what he said. Honestly, he has no intention of cooking you."

Cal darted rapid glances between the woman and the chicken. Damn if Fred didn't look like he was listening to every word.

Autumn looked straight at Cal. "I wouldn't try to put Fred in that tiny cage. He's paranoid about being confined, reminds him of cockfights and pain. That's what set him off."

"How long have you been standing there?" Cal's face burned from embarrassment...and then desire as he caught sight of her attire. She wore a clingy, flaming-red blouse tucked into jeans that hugged her ample curves in all the right places. His breath caught in his chest as he gazed at her like a thirsty man eyeing a bubbling stream of life-giving water.

His gaze reluctantly moved up her body until reaching her face. He couldn't take his eyes off those red lips, spread wide in a mischievous grin. Finally, he met her eyes.

However, she was busy giving him the same once over, a long lingering gaze down his hairy bare chest to the zipper of his well-worn jeans.

Self-conscious, he slowly mated the buttons on his shirt, while he watched her. Had he passed muster? Her being a famous romance novelist, no doubt fancy Hollywood men fell at her feet. Well, if she'd dressed to tantalize him, she was wasting her time. This wasn't Hollywood, and he'd never fall at any woman's feet, ever again.

"I've been standing here long enough." She placed her hands on the leather belt cinched at her small waist.

Cal's fingers fumbled with the damn buttons and his throat went dry as her breasts jutted out even more, emphasizing her perfect figure.

"I'm sorry Fred woke you," she said, humor lacing her tone. "I didn't get a chance to thank you again for agreeing to board our animals for a couple of months."

Animals? He'd thought the cattle were the extent of it. Good God, what kind of menagerie had his mother agreed to? Apparently, Luke and Garret forgot to mention a few things to him last night. "Glad to oblige." His brows shot up. "I'd like to see the others, if you don't mind."

"Sure. I'll lead the way." Autumn cooed to Fred, bent, and picked him up like a football.

"Damn," he muttered. The rooster didn't even squawk. Now Cal really felt humiliated.

"We'll put him back with the rest of his little family." She headed up the hill.

Despite his fascination with her seductively swinging rear, her words penetrated his fevered brain. Rest of his family? He pictured an army of irritable, bad-tempered roosters.

They reached a newly fenced area and he stood dumbfounded, staring at the blight now residing on his pristine pasture of blue stem grass. "I don't believe it." He rubbed his eyes, wished the mirage away, and then gaped.

The mirage still remained.

Two potbellied pigs wallowed and grunted in mud-hole-heaven. They had dug up the sod. An unsightly chicken coop loomed in the background. No telling how many pesky, bad-tempered chickens were inside. Three adult goats, two with babies, darted in their direction. The cattle and bull were bad enough, but this?

"Barnyard animals," he said dumbly.

"Isn't it wonderful?" Autumn opened the door to the large fenced area and placed the rooster inside. "We only have a few."

"A few?" he croaked, pointing to the whole menagerie. "That's more than a few."

She stiffened. "Wasn't the boarding fee we agreed on enough? Of course, if Luke has to treat them for anything, I'll cover that, too." She hesitated, and cast a confused look at him with her big purple eyes. "Rachel mentioned you might get upset because you aren't boarding Thoroughbred racehorses in this space, but it's not as bad as it looks."

"Oh, yeah? You aren't the one losing bucks for stud fees."

"I'm sorry, but you never mentioned anything about that in your e-mails. You understood what I'd be boarding here, and you agreed to the terms. Certainly you computed any loss into the figures you quoted. As an attorney, I assumed you'd take all those factors into consideration." Her eyes pinned him with their intensity. "Are you saying you want to renege on our arrangement now that I'm here?"

"Of course not." Oops, he'd almost blown it. He'd have to be charming and accommodate whatever surprises she threw his way until he found a way to break the contract. He could just picture his mother cooling her heels in a jail cell; at any other time, the thought would have made him cringe. However, envisioning her in a little orange jumpsuit felt good at this moment. He gazed at Autumn with what he hoped was a winning smile. "Where'd you get all these?"

"You must have forgotten. The vet my sister worked for during summers treated animals the ASPCA rescued from awful conditions. We adopted the ones they couldn't find homes for."

The small kids at their mother's sides paraded up to the fence and chewed on the rails. A familiar clean odor drifted through the morning air, but he couldn't quite place the scent. "What's that smell?"

"Baby shampoo and conditioner. Josh and I bathed the babies day before yesterday. He helped me name the kids, Buttons and Bows."

Cal groaned. Women! He sniffed the air again, not bothering to hold back his disdain. "They're animals, not babies."

She crossed her arms and glared at him, telegraphing him a warning he was on the verge of blowing it again. "And Thoroughbreds are only horses."

*Now she'd done it.* "No way. There's a big difference here. Thoroughbreds are elite, not to mention the fastest racehorses in the world." He glowered at her. So much for being charming. This confounded writer woman rubbed him the wrong way, in more ways than one.

Her eyes glinted back with purple fire. "They're your babies. You love them." She pointed to the eyesore plaguing his farm, sweeping her hand out. "These are ours."

His head snapped up. Babies! Was she out of her drop-dead gorgeous mind? He'd

heard the joke about women being from some other planet but this was ridiculous. "They're not babies; they're an investment. Lady, I'm proud of Whittaker Oaks, but I run a business, and I do what's best. I don't get attached to the horses. Sometimes I have to make some mighty tough decisions, and I can't let my heart influence my head. That's the cost of doing business in the real world, not the fantasy make-believe you spin."

Judging by her raised eyebrows and the look in her eyes, she wasn't buying one word he'd said.

She shook her head. "You care more for your horses than you want to let on. Remember Little Jess, that sorrel colt who caught a cold? You stayed up with him for three nights running."

Cal's eyes widened. So his mother had written about things that went on at the farm. He remembered the nights he'd stayed up with the sick colt. Heck, he'd stayed up with lots of sick horses, but that didn't mean they were his babies. A painful image of Midnight Boy, the one they'd been unable to save last month, suddenly flashed in his mind.

"You're missing Midnight Boy, aren't you?" Autumn's voice softened.

He nodded. For the life of him, he couldn't get any words out to express himself right now. He took a deep breath.

"He was special to you."

Yeah, but it isn't the same thing he told himself. Cal knew when he was beat. Thanks to a woman he'd never laid eyes on until last night, his stud farm was taking on animals faster than Noah's Ark. And not one of them was a Thoroughbred anything. Cal kicked a clod of grass with his boot and sent it flying. It landed atop one startled goat's head, making a bonnet.

Autumn leaned over to remove the clump of grass. "Cleo, don't faint. The nice man didn't mean to scare you. He's obviously not a morning person like you and I are."

In spite of himself, Cal chuckled at her teasing.

Autumn glanced over her shoulder and smiled back at him, easing some of his frustration. "Here's something else that'll make you smile. I found that information you wanted. The Flying K and Triple Hill refused to sign the movie contract. I'm curious though. Why'd you want to know?" she asked as they turned and headed back toward the house.

He scratched at the stubble on his chin. *So I could convince them to change their minds. Maybe get us off the hook with the studio,* he thought, but said, "So I could rub their noses in our victory."

She stopped and playfully swatted his arm. He didn't miss her flash of surprise from their simple contact. She'd felt the same sizzle ripple through her body. "Then you *are* proud you won." Her warm gaze found his. "You haven't changed your mind about my staying here while they film, have you?"

The smell of the jasmine she wore enticed him and the muscles in his shoulders tightened. "Not one bit." He shook his head to emphasize his point, hating to lie almost as much as he hated having her live here. She brought danger with her; the pretty, scintillating danger of having her sleep under his roof. Somehow he had to convince her to leave. For his own sake.

"I was afraid after you met me, you'd decide against helping me with that personal problem we...ah...addressed—in our e-mails." Red flooded her face. "I thought maybe you were disappointed in me or something."

Cal's heart skipped a beat as he flashed her a reassuring smile. *What in blazes was she referring to now?* "Why would I be disappointed? Of course, I haven't changed my mind, unless you have."

"I'm glad," she said with a smile.

The noose around his neck got tighter, and the executioner had his hand on the lever of the trap door. *Great.* "If I said I'd help you, I will. Let me know when you're ready."

She blushed again. "Oh, don't worry. Since I can't do it without you, I'll definitely let you know when."

*Can't do it without you. Uh-oh!* His mind immediately turned to sex. His body warmed fast to the notion, but his mind doused it with ice water. He needed to get rid of her, not get involved with her.

As she walked, her inky-black braid swayed back and forth at her waistline. His gaze fell to her cute rounded bottom. He fought the urge to pull that braid, draw her to a halt so he could thoroughly kiss those ruby lips. She was simple and down to earth. She didn't put on airs. The more he got to know her, the less she seemed like a sophisticated best-selling author. "Did you ever think you'd write a bestseller and sign a movie deal?"

"No, and if I had listened to some of my ex-friends' advice, I'd have given up years ago." Autumn gazed off into the distance and avoided his eyes.

From her tone, Cal knew their remarks stung. He felt like a thoughtless jerk for even mentioning it. "They're not real friends if they discourage you."

"I found that out. 'You're a librarian. Stop reaching for an impossible dream.' They said I was crazy to even try." She shook her head and lifted her chin. "I'd always tell them that I can't give up. I've always wanted to write."

"Well, you showed 'em. Didn't you?" He smiled.

"Maybe. Unless I drift into obscurity like some novelists. I have to produce that next one."

He tilted his head to the side, admiring her drive. "You will." No doubt she struggled with writing much as he struggled to keep the farm afloat. At least they had that drive and desire in common. He wouldn't give up his plans of doubling the size of this farm. His father hadn't lived to see it happen, but Cal wanted to complete their dream and build a training facility by purchasing the hundred-and-twenty acres right next to his acreage that would soon be for sale. It was his legacy for Josh.

"Well, I'll see you later then. After breakfast, Josh and I are going to a private horse auction. It's a surprise. I'm letting him bid on a miniature horse named —"

"Oh, my goodness. I hadn't expected this." Her eyes lit up like a kid in a pet shop. "You remembered how badly I wanted to see an auction. Good research, you know." She grinned. "Yes, I'll be ready to go right after breakfast."

He hadn't meant it as an invitation, but he couldn't very well take it back after seeing the sparkle in her eyes. Cal rammed his hand through his hair. The last thing he wanted was for Autumn to add to her rescued bunch of critters.

"Afterwards, we can talk about the first phase of media publicity for the movie," she said.

Cal's blood pressure shot up. What publicity? First phase? As in there was more? He stopped. "I can't wait." He pasted on a smile before he blew it again.



Once inside the house, Cal headed for the privacy of his bedroom and locked the door. He turned the TV on to drown out any conversation anyone might overhear.

He took a deep breath and sat in the rocking chair by the window. When Autumn left, he'd solve his problems. Or at least one of them; this strange attraction he had for her that overcame all logic. Like his ex, Autumn Blessing was completely wrong for him. Apart from the disruption she'd already caused, she was bringing camera crews to create more havoc.

He snatched up the phone from the nightstand and hit the speed dial.

"Hello." A full-force yawn echoed in the receiver.

"That you, Neil?" Cal asked.

"Of course it's me. Who else would be answering at this God awful hour of the morning? What's up, Cal, you need some help?"

"Yes, but this is personal." Cal brought his friend up to date on everything his mother had done so far, at least, all that he knew. The other undisclosed things she *might* have done gnawed at him like piranhas.

"I sure would have liked to see the look on your face when you spotted those longhorns and that bull." Neil Sharp burst into laughter. Cal held the phone away from his ear, but could still hear it until Neil had a coughing fit. Wonderful. He hoped this didn't leak out to anyone else.

Neil gulped air. "Whooee, Rachel's something else. That's better than the time you found that real friendly hot-to-trot teacher in your shower."

Would Cal ever forget that fiasco? His mother had sent a love letter to Miss Bell, signed his name, and arranged their initial meeting. Unfortunately, his mother hadn't anticipated that type of response from a prim high school gym teacher. When he'd shouted for her to get dressed and leave, his mother had run into the bedroom. It was the first and only time he'd seen her at a loss for words.

He remembered Autumn's hesitation when Garret had asked about her name being a pseudonym—what was she hiding? "Ha! This is much worse. See what you can dig up on Autumn Blessing, and if that is even her real name."

"Will do."

Cal hung up and grabbed the thick movie contract off the nightstand. Quick as he finished reading it and looking for possible loopholes, the quicker he could follow through with his intentions of having it out with his mother. No more matchmaking schemes. Ever.

A fifty-thousand dollar check marked "partial" was clipped to the cover sheet, along with the payment schedule. It indicated another equal sum would be payable two months after the shooting started, and a tempting two hundred-thousand dollars would be due upon completion of the movie. He whistled and flipped through the pages of the contract before settling down to study them.

Something was off.

He carefully reviewed the sequence, hoping they were just out of order.

*Tell me it isn't so.*

Page sixteen was missing, along with two others.

What was in those three missing pages?

The way his mother had meddled, he doubted it was anything good.

## Chapter Four

Autumn nearly bounced with excitement as she sat with Cal and Josh on the third row of metal bleachers. She looked at Father and Son, wearing identical boots, and couldn't stop grinning. After a bumpy start, everything was working out perfectly. She had a chance to research her sequel, and Cal had arranged it all.

The Flying K, a beautiful stud farm, held the private horse auction outdoors. A gentle breeze stirred the oak trees shading the fenced area near the viewing stands. Cal acted disappointed when he learned Daniel Kaufman, the owner, was out of town for a week, leaving his grandson, Thomas, in charge. Cal must have meant what he'd said about wanting to brag about Whittaker Oaks winning to someone who'd refused to sign the contract.

She glanced out into the ring, and Thomas winked and flashed her a cocky grin. She blushed and turned her head away. The guy might be devastatingly handsome, but she was taken, having been escorted here by two handsome cowboys of her own. She inched closer to Cal hoping to give the flirt a wordless message.

Cal looked at her. "You've got yourself an admirer. If you can tear your eyes away from Thomas, the miniature's coming out next." His brows drew together. "Remember, don't even *think* of winking back at Thomas, or you've bid on a horse."

She gaped at him. Was he crazy? After the e-mails they'd shared about her problem, he ought to know her better than that. "I have no intention of winking at anyone."

Cal pointed to the horse being led into the ring and handed Josh the bidding paddle. "Here comes that miniature you wanted."

Josh squirmed on the hard bleachers. Clad in jeans and a golden yellow shirt, his legs moved together and apart nervously at the knees. His eyes widened.

A gray mare with a flowing, white mane, and luxurious tail, less than thirty-four inches in height, paraded around the clearing for everyone in the stands to admire. Over the loudspeaker, the auctioneer promised the miniature would make a fine pet for some lucky youngster. He started the bidding at a thousand dollars for Sweet Lightning.

After a quick glance at Cal, Josh raised his paddle. He looked proud, puffing out his little chest as he made his first ever bid. Within seconds, someone raised the bid by three hundred dollars.

As the bids hit two thousand, the auctioneer slowed the pace and glanced toward Josh. Additional bids bulleted through the air and stopped at two-thousand-eight-hundred. The auctioneer smiled at Josh and Cal. Other heads snapped in their direction.

"Go for it," Cal whispered to Josh.

Autumn felt like chewing her fingernails off as Josh nervously lifted his paddle again and bid three thousand. She scanned the arena to see if anyone else had raised the bid.

"Going once. Going twice." The gavel rang out with a decisive thump as the auctioneer brought it down on the podium. "Sold to the lucky young man holding paddle number forty-eight for three thousand dollars. Pay the man. You got yourself a fine mare."

Excitement danced in Josh's eyes. He grinned, and Cal hugged him. "Son, I expected her to go for at least four thousand. You did good. Real good." Cal smiled. "You're going to have a blast competing in halter and driving races."

Josh turned and launched himself into Autumn's arms, giving her an enthusiastic hug. "I can't wait to ride Sweet Lightning and have her pull me around in a cart."

Seeing him happy made her squeeze him a little tighter. A trace of alarm flashed in Cal's eyes at the obvious affection between them. He stomped off to pay for Josh's miniature. Darn. How could a man be so threatened by a little hug?

Maybe after she told him she'd be moving here, he'd relax. Unless more than the fear she'd leave lay behind his warning to Josh not to get too attached to her. That niggling little warning crept into her mind. Why did Cal seem so bottled up at times? Maybe he was one of those odd type of men who found it easier to write his feelings down rather than verbalize them. He certainly didn't act like the same easy going, fun-loving man who'd written those revealing e-mails.

One hour and seven bids later, the last horse on the program paraded into the dirt ring. Autumn had never seen such magnificent horseflesh. Cal was right. Thoroughbreds were the finest racehorses in the world. He had every reason to be proud.

"Last but not least, we have a beautiful Quarter Horse named Gone South." The auctioneer's voice boomed out across the outdoor field. "I'd like to start the bidding at—"

"Dream on, Hiram," a gray-haired man from the front row interrupted, "she's Gone South all right—*way* south."

"You'd have to pay me to take her off your hands," a young man yelled.

"Why are they saying those horrible things?" Autumn asked.

"In the beginning, she won some small purses, but I saw her race the quarter mile last month." Cal crossed his arms. "She panicked and almost crippled her jockey."

"See what she'll fetch from the meat market," a burly man suggested from the back, then turned to leave.

Autumn gasped at the cruel remark. She knew people roamed horse auctions buying animals to sell overseas. Horseflesh was considered a delicacy and brought in a lot of money.

Fear flashed in the young horse's eyes as jeers rose from the crowd. The horse reared up on her hind legs, her eyes rolling. Her handler brought her back down with a rough tug on the halter.

Autumn's heart dropped to her stomach. The horse couldn't be sold for meat. Only one thing would save her.

She grabbed Cal's arm, holding tight. "How much should I bid?"

Their gazes met and held. "You can't be serious. Look at her. She's skittish. She'll never have the spirit to race again. No one wants her. Let her go."

No way would she let that magnificent animal die like that. Autumn rose to her feet. Her paddle shook as she lifted it above her head. "I-I start the bidding off at fifty dollars," she said, hating the way her voice stuttered when she got nervous.

The auctioneer smiled at her. "Little Lady, I don't think we're going to get any other takers." He slapped his gavel on the podium. "Sold for fifty dollars to the kind lady in red."

She plopped back down, and Cal stared at her dumbfounded. "What in the world were you thinking? What could you possibly want with that broken-down nag?"

"You'd never understand." She knew firsthand how it felt to not be wanted, but she couldn't share her feelings with him even when she didn't believe his heartless remarks.

"Okay, now that you've rescued her, what are you going to do with her?" The tone of

his voice softened.

"Love her," Autumn whispered, "that's all she needs." When her voice faltered, she turned away from Cal's probing gaze.

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An hour later, Josh was brushing and spoiling his Sweet Lightning in the barn. Autumn and Cal silently watched the young mare frolic in her own paddock at Whittaker Oaks, located next to one of Cal's prize Thoroughbreds, Sir Galahad. Though Cal continued to scowl at her horse, Autumn couldn't help smiling as her new pet galloped around the length of the field, enjoying her newfound freedom.

"Gone South," Autumn called. No, that wasn't right. What should she call her? Trying to think of a good name, she stuck her hand over the fence and beckoned her new horse.

Instead of coming to her, the Quarter Horse trotted over to Cal's prized black racehorse; head high and tail raised in a show of spirit. The horses sniffed each other over the white rail fence. Then they neighed and nuzzled like lovers necking.

Autumn laughed and pointed to them. "Look, Cal. I think they like each other. A lot. Wouldn't it be wonderful if they got married like in *Hearts Entwined*?"

He shook his head, narrowing his eyes. "No, it would *not* be wonderful. Sir Galahad is a champion. He brings upwards of five thousand dollars for one stud service. I'm not wasting his seed on her. Besides, horses don't get married." Cal knitted his brows. "I'm through Chapter Five of your book. That must come later; I don't remember anything about a wedding between horses."

Autumn smiled, pleased that he was even reading her book. "It's a sweet, funny scene. In chapter sixteen, they have an official wedding between two horses. Afterwards there's a carrot cake at the reception for the newlyweds."

"Uh-huh." Cal shook his head, looking like she'd just suggested castrating his precious Sir Galahad. "You'd have to get some show biz 'stand-in' horses for that. Won't work with my high-strung Thoroughbreds. And even if it did, I'd be the laughingstock of the community." He chuckled and slapped his thigh before glancing at her. "Besides, that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. You beat everything. Don't get me wrong. I like you and think you're a beautiful, loving woman, but you need a dose of reality. I'm surprised you can even get away with publishing such far-fetched hogwash."

She crossed her arms. Her dream man had some seriously nightmarish qualities. "Why? So I can be like you, cynical and suspicious? No thanks. You didn't sound that way in your e-mails. If I'd known you were such a jerk—" instead of finishing her sentence, she spun toward the house and stalked along the stone path to the back porch.

Why listen to him anyway? He was a mean, disillusioned lawyer, nothing like the person she had conversed with long-distance. Boy, a man could sure fool you and even when you meet him in person he may not reveal his true nature right away. So what if he looked better than she'd thought he would? She didn't care if her toes curled each time he said her name. His Jekyll and Hyde personality spoiled it all. She'd rather he was nice and homely than handsome and mean.

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"Autumn has a headache. She prefers to stay in her room tonight until she feels better," Rachel said.

For the entire meal, everyone around the dinner table looked at Cal like he'd shot Bambi, especially Josh. Cal didn't want his son thinking he mistreated women, but he had to send Autumn running for the hills.

"Cause of you, Miss Autumn won't eat. She's starving like Cinderella, and it's all your fault." Josh got up from the table. His lower lip stuck out in a pout.

"I'll see that your friend eats, son. Run along with Grandma and get ready for bed." Cal watched Josh reluctantly leave. He dragged his hand along the wooden banister as he followed his grandma up the stairs.

"You want to tackle confronting Mother tonight?" Luke asked.

An instant picture of his stud farm now invaded with barnyard animals and inferior horseflesh seared his mind. And Lord only knew what those three pages of the contract said that were conveniently missing when his mother turned it over to them.

"No," Cal said. "I can't deal with it tonight. I might strangle Mother right now."

"You'd have to stand in line," Luke said. "If one more person gives me a gift package for what every new cowboy needs, hemorrhoid cream and a padded seat, I'm going to lay into them."

Cal nodded. "I've got a plan to corner Mother tomorrow before she conveniently disappears for half the day at the beauty parlor."

"Actually that's better. Garret failed to restore the files to our computer today. He wants you to confirm they're gone for good before we tackle Mother."

"I'll run the program later tonight, but I'm afraid Garret's probably right. If he is, I'll end up trying to retrieve them from Autumn's computer."

Cal had made a serious tactical mistake, making Autumn angry, one he needed to correct. If he wanted to convince her to agree to his plan, he had to apologize to her. And fast. When Autumn did leave, it would be her idea, and his plan would see it happened sooner, rather than later. He didn't intend to work her to death, just teach her a lesson, and dim her excitement about staying at his farm. But first, he had to get back in her good graces by laying on the charm.

"Whoa, that sure is a big slice," Luke said.

Cal added the cake to the dinner tray. "Autumn has a sweet tooth like me and she loves chocolate." That ought to win him some brownie points.

He also placed a single long stemmed red bud he'd snipped from the vase of roses in the foyer across the napkin. Maybe all this romantic junk would keep her from slamming the door in his face.

Luke scowled. "What did you do that was so bad Autumn wouldn't come down to eat?"

"Insulted her book."

"It must have been a doozie."

Uncomfortably, Cal recalled he'd said a lot more, but that was between him and Autumn. "I'll apologize. I acted like a class-A jackass."

"Sounds like it." Luke agreed too wholeheartedly to Cal's way of thinking. "After all, her book got published, and they're making it into a movie, so it can't be all that bad. Can it?"

"Well, glad you feel that way, 'cause I bought extra copies. When I come back down, I expect to see you and Garret in that study reading. We're staying up until we finish it." The pained expression on Luke's face caused him to grin.

"By the way, I read the contract two times today." Cal frowned and crossed his arms. "There are hefty penalty clauses if we back out."

"In other words, we're screwed, only the studio can back out?"

"Looks that way. Also, we can expect a minimum of sixty, but no more than a hundred-and-thirty trucks to invade us. That slew of vehicles will stay on our property until the movie's completed, hopefully three months tops. It sounds like a pretty hectic pace. The cast and crew better find hotel rooms because we sure as hell can't accommodate them."

Luke said, "Garret and I only briefly looked at the contract. We figured that's your area of expertise. I didn't realize it'd be such a huge project."

"Remember we want to keep Mother out of jail and protect the farm. Oh, and one other thing, let's plan for the worst case scenario. This crap can't be avoided. We'll need to build another entrance and figure out where to park the trucks until it's all over, preferably far away from our horses. I don't want the noise spooking them."

"I'll handle that. You've got enough on your hands what with trying to catch up on the paperwork that piled up around here while you were in Dallas and this fiasco with Mother." Luke's brows drew together. "What's in those trucks, anyway?"

"Sound equipment, cameras, film, lighting equipment, dressing rooms, costumes, you know the usual stuff you'd expect. The rest is anyone's guess. A couple of other things bother me about this whole mess." Cal frowned thoughtfully, "Three pages are missing from the movie contract."

Luke snapped his fingers. "Mother! I'll bet she removed them before she gave it to us. She probably has them."

"I don't think so."

Luke pursed his lips. "You think she's destroyed them?"

"Nah. She'd have destroyed the entire contract, not just a few pages." Cal placed a glass of iced tea on Autumn's tray. "And another thing, Mother doesn't know squat about buying Texas longhorns or a two thousand pound bull."

"Now that's definitely the understatement of the year, but what does that have to do with anything?"

"She needed someone who did."

Luke fell silent. A moment later, he snapped his fingers again. "Ethan Hill. He's been sweet on her for years. He'll do anything for her."

Cal nodded. "Including review a contract, or hide a few pages. Triple Hill is one of the two farms that refused to sign the movie contract."

"Who's the other?"

"Daniel Kaufman's place, Flying K. He's out of town for a week. I'll talk to both of them later. I still wonder why they refused to sign the contract." He studied Luke's concerned face. "I need to warn you about something Josh let slip to me, Luke. Mother admitted to Josh she didn't bring that woman here for me." Cal swallowed hard. "Autumn's

after you."

"Me?" Luke's jaw dropped. "Pull the other leg."

"I'm not joking."

"You must be. I'm not the one she drools over." He stared back at Cal. "Tell you what, bro. If she throws herself at me, I might catch her. You won't mind, will you?"

Cal frowned and picked up the dinner tray. Hell yes, he'd mind. If he was determined to resist temptation, he was damned if he'd let his younger brothers get a taste of what he was missing. Sweet, sultry Autumn wasn't for any of them. If one of them did fall for her and kept her here permanently, Whittaker Oak's troubles would never end.

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Autumn buttoned her blue silk pajama top and studied her reflection in the bathroom mirror. Staying up late every night to work on her sequel was getting to her. Even her parents had commented twice today how tired she sounded on the phone. She leaned over to rub lotion on her legs and then pulled on her pajama bottoms.

She straightened and glanced around the decadent bathroom she and Cal shared. The Jacuzzi would easily fit four people. And those wall-to-wall mirrors? Made the whole place seem unbearably erotic.

Spotting his aftershave, she carefully picked it up, opened the half-empty amber bottle and gave it a sniff before setting it back down on the black marble counter. Umm. A sudden wicked vision of Cal standing beside her, clad only in a towel, teased her. She'd never shared a bathroom with a man. The intimacy felt naughty but...strangely nice.

"Have you forgotten what he did today?" she said aloud, frowning at her face in the mirror, still flushed with anger. He was maddening but he was also sexy as hell. It was her own fault for becoming cyber-friends with Cal. She'd built him up into something he wasn't. In her mind, she'd pictured him as a mature, soft-spoken attorney of average height. Boy, had she been wrong. Her heart tripped every time she looked at the muscular, six-foot-three sex god. He was too distracting. It was hard to keep her mind on business with him around. He kept creating sensual chaos out of her common sense, which became non-existent within twenty-feet of him.

As she strolled barefoot across the bedroom carpet, she heard a soft knock on the door.

"Autumn, may I come in?" Cal asked. "I brought you dinner."

She bristled, grabbed her blue bathrobe, and shoved her arms into it, even as desire quivered in her belly. The frightening feeling reinforced her decision to keep this all business, and one didn't greet a business partner dressed in one's nightgown.

All of her resolve vanished when she opened the door to find Cal holding a tempting dinner tray, on it was one perfect long stemmed rose. She wanted to stay furious, but smiled back at him before she could stop it. Hard to stay mad when those pearly whites flashed her way and his eyes pleaded. She picked up the rose and rubbed the petals softly against her cheek while Cal put the tray on the Victorian style writing desk.

"Thank you," she said.

"Thank Josh. According to my son, you're a poor, starving Cinderella, and I'm the villain." Cal jiggled his eyebrows up and down and she laughed.



He removed the cover on the plate, revealing lasagna that smelled scrumptious and oozed with cheese. He'd thoughtfully added a chunk of her favorite cake to the tray for dessert.

"The whole family's angry at me. I had no right to criticize you or your book. I'm going to finish reading it tonight. When I take you on the tour of Whittaker Oaks, we can talk about it."

Autumn sat at the desk and smiled, but inside she worried that Cal would be even more critical tomorrow. Especially when he read chapter sixteen and found out exactly what his Thoroughbreds would wear. Would he be even angrier? Would he reinforce his idea that what she wrote was stupid? Suddenly, she realized how much his approval mattered to her.

He strolled across the bedroom to leave. She glanced at her calendar and remembered they hadn't talked about the first phase of media publicity for the movie.

She rose from the chair. "Wait, please, I forgot to tell you the good news."

Cal turned to face the grenade she'd thrown. Good to her had to mean bad for him. He took a battle stance, legs planted wide apart, and waited for the death blow.

"What good news?" He took several deep breaths.

"They're announcing Whittaker Oaks as the winner of my Location Shoot Contest tomorrow."

"Announcing?"

"I'm not sure where all it will air, but I know the national networks and Entertainment Tonight are scheduled to carry the story. It'll run in different media for a few days."

Cal couldn't have been more surprised if she'd said they were packing and moving to Venus in the morning. Like a twister, the lies were spinning out of control and leaving the boundaries of his home town into the world.

"You okay? Your eyes look dazed." Autumn walked toward him.

He plastered on a smile. "Couldn't be better. Wow, that's some good news."

She gave him a pleased look and spanned the distance between them. Without warning, she threw her arms around him and drew him into a hug. For a minute he forgot to breathe, and when he did the clean scent of jasmine seduced him. Her warm body nestled against him in all the right places, her tempting breasts pressed into his chest. He fingered the silk of her bathrobe as his hands investigated her softness, then settled on her spine.

"I knew you'd be pleased."

She stepped away as if the hug was a simple handshake between friends, nothing more. He took a few steps back before he did something stupid like kiss her senseless.

"Congratulations again. I thought you should have the pleasure of telling your family yourself."

Only one person came to mind. Mother. And their conversation would be anything but a pleasure.

## Chapter Five

In the morning, Cal wasted no time confronting his mother with the bombshell Autumn had casually tossed his way last night. The pre-publicity the studio had planned for Whittaker Oaks sounded like a nightmare.

He'd managed to dispatch Autumn with Josh to buy a few toys for bath time, hoping to reduce the nightly debate on how much dirt constituted a need for washing. His boy was a chip off the old block when it came to standing his ground in an argument. With Josh and Autumn out of the house, it would give him time to hijack his mother and corner her in the study. Mother Dearest had some explaining to do.

Rachel sat demurely on the leather sofa, hands folded in her lap, the picture of angelic innocence. He glanced at the nervousness written on his brothers' faces. They sat with Rachel sandwiched between them, effectively hemming her in.

"I don't want to take an oath," Rachel grumbled.

"Repeat after me," Cal directed sternly. "I, Rachel Whittaker, swear I will never meddle in my sons' lives again, nor will I procure women for them as though I were a common pimp."

Rachel glared daggers at Cal. She had her left hand raised and her right hand firmly planted on the Bible he held in front of her. "I, Rachel Whittaker, swear I will never meddle in my spoiled, self-centered, insensitive, bratty sons' lives again. Even though they are completely clueless and undeserving of my superior ideas, I will not bring women here for them to meet."

Cal shook his head and breathed a sigh of relief. One thing you could definitely say about her living in the house after Dad died, it was never boring. And, in spite of everything, he loved her with all his heart. They all did.

Although she'd said the words with her usual fire and gumption, he knew any further lecturing would aggravate her even more. "Okay." He noted the O her mouth formed in surprise at his silence, then walked to the massive oak desk.

"You won't break that oath, will you?" Cal jerked the drawer open and placed the Bible back inside.

Cal found it a hard to believe when she shook her head. It can't be that easy. But then, her hand had been on the Bible.

He plopped into the burgundy leather chair near her, his stomach churning. A stubborn, rock solid determination showed in the obstinate jut of his mother's chin. Rebellion glinted in her gray eyes. Beyond any doubt, she'd adhere to the essence of the oath. But would she find a way around it? "Would you excuse us?" Cal asked his brothers. "I'd like to speak to Mother alone."

Luke and Garret exchanged looks of confusion. But more than willing to escape Cal's lecture, they shrugged and left the study.

Lord help him. If she was anyone else's mother, he'd have her arrested and throw away the key. Why couldn't she find a normal hobby such as golfing, traveling, or maybe watercolor painting like other little old ladies?

"Your matchmaking scheme to throw Luke and Autumn together won't work," he said point-blank. "I'll keep them apart while she's here."

She cocked an eyebrow at him.

The chair creaked as he leaned back and smiled. Not that he was about to divulge the news to his mother, but he'd finally devised a way to make Autumn leave. Putting her to work on the farm should do it. He could picture her hightailing it back to the big city of Houston. Quick as she left, his emotions would stop this tug-of-war eating at his insides every time he saw her.

Cal took a deep breath, schooled his features, and pressed on. "Last night Autumn told me the good news as she called it. They're announcing our winning the Location Shoot Contest today. Over the next few days, network news broadcasters and Entertainment Tonight are going to air the story. Apparently, this awful thing's big news."

She grinned and her eyes widened. "Aren't you excited? All our friends will be congratulating us."

He stiffened at the prospect and at the twinkle in her eyes. His mother would stop meddling when pigs grew feathers. Just the thought of pigs made his stomach clench. With his luck, an entire truckload would arrive tomorrow.

"You expect me to be happy about this?" He'd decided to test her, hoping if he presented her with an ultimatum she would help him. If not, at least he'd know Ethan had the missing pages. "You will get the missing contract pages from Ethan and turn them over to me immediately." The shocked look on her face told him he'd been right about who had them.

"He'll give them to you," she hesitated, "at the proper time." Her jaw tilted at a stubborn angle.

*What did that mean?* He wrinkled his brows. "And who decides when that is?"

"Why, I'll decide the proper time, dear." She patted his hand. "It'll be soon, I promise."

"And you think I'm going to sit here and wait until it suits you to turn them over? I promise you, you're wrong." He didn't need her help, he'd get the pages from Ethan himself.

It didn't faze her in the least.

"Mother, do you really understand the gravity of what you've done? Misrepresentation, fraud, forgery. We're walking a tight rope trying to keep you out of jail. Do you know that?"

"Yes," she whispered. "And I have all the confidence in the world in you."

"It's way past time you realized once and for all your sons are not looking for wives."

She nodded. "Of course you aren't, dear. Men never are."

He rubbed his chin, trying to figure out how to approach the next subject. Mother had obviously learned more than he'd taught her about getting rid of e-mail files. He couldn't recover them either.

Here goes nothing, Cal thought, hoping she'd help him. "What was in those e-mails you sent Autumn? She said I'd promised to help her with a personal problem." From what he'd seen of Autumn, he suspected her personal problem might be pretty wild. He leaned forward, curiosity and dread tensing his muscles. "What have you gotten me into, Mother?"

An enigmatic smile crossed her lips. "Something wonderful."

He blew out a sigh, counted silently to ten and waited for a reply. "You aren't going to tell me, are you?"

She shook her head and gave him a mysterious grin.

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A thick carpet of grass muffled her footsteps as Autumn paced the manicured paddock waiting for Cal. She came to a halt and sank down onto the ground running her fingers through the thick soft grass. Peacefulness and beauty enveloped her like a big hug. This place was perfect. She closed her eyes, breathed deeply, and lifted her face to the touch of the morning sun filtering through the sprawling moss-filled oaks.

"Sorry I'm late." The gentle breeze carried Cal's words, and the soft woodsy scent of the cologne he wore caressed her like a long lost friend.

She opened her eyes and watched his biceps flex under the deep burgundy shirt he wore as he moved confidently toward her. She swallowed hard. His muscular thighs strained against his faded jeans, drawing her undivided attention. Embarrassed, she slid her gaze down to his worn leather boots, which came to a stop next to her.

When she looked up, his eyes sparkled with warmth. He offered her his hand.

She took hold of the rough callused hand. The tingle from his touch flowed up her arm like a warm live current. He pulled her toward him.

"Let's go," he said.

She brushed the grass from her jeans and followed him up the hill, taking leaping steps to match his stride.

"If you step in anything along the way, that's a bonus." He smiled. "We call that the smell of money."

Looking down, she found her left boot already rolling in dough. "Oh, crap."

"Yep!"

They both laughed. His rumbled deep in his chest and sent goose bumps up her arms as his gaze took a lazy path down her body and then back to her face again. She stopped, held onto his arm for support, and rubbed most of the stink off onto the grass.

"We'll wash it up with soap and water later. Now you've been officially initiated into the Thoroughbred business," Cal teased. Their gazes held each other for the longest time. Finally, he cleared his throat. "Let's take that tour." He adjusted his stride and they hiked side-by-side. "Currently we have a hundred and twenty acres of fenced paddocks just like the one I'm going to show you now."

Autumn didn't miss the pride in his voice. "I've noticed you have only one horse in some paddocks. Why?"

"To separate the stallions. They're very territorial." He pointed to the miles and miles of white fences in the distance. "Horses chew wood, and that leads to breathing problems. We use vinyl fences and railing. Besides the main house, we have barns, foaling pens, bunkhouses for hired hands. There are also storage sheds and concrete buildings for equipment."

He pointed to two horses within fifteen yards of them. "I want to show you something. Watch. The smaller black one is Fast Boy and the chestnut is Honey."

The black horse carefully approached the chestnut. He sniffed and attempted to nuzzle her. Honey wanted no part of him. She nipped at his ear and attempted to kick him in the head. Completely out of luck, Fast Boy galloped safely to a far corner of the paddock, causing a cloud of dust to rise in the air.

"Oh, poor thing, she doesn't love him," Autumn said.

"Somehow I knew you'd see it that way, but that's not how it really is on a stud farm. It's strictly business. Fast Boy is our teaser stallion. He's too young to breed, we use him to find out when a mare is ready."

"What if Honey had been...amorous?" Autumn asked shyly.

"Luke would have examined her completely. We don't want her hurt. If she was ready, she'd have been taken to the breeding shed and —"

"Where's that?" Autumn's gaze darted to several buildings on the horizon.

"Right over there." He pointed to the large gray one. "Once she's inside, both horses would be padded to protect her when the larger, more aggressive stallion mates with her. It's all over in twenty to thirty minutes."

"It-it seems cold. I mean, Honey would be expecting the 'teaser' horse and mated with another."

"It isn't. Really, they both enjoy it."

She didn't see how. Honey would be scared.

"This may surprise you, Autumn, but stallions aren't monogamous. One stallion breeds with as many as seventy mares."

"I do know a little about horses, Cal. But I'd never read about a teaser horse." She avoided his eyes. He really must think her a fool. "I see why you said a horse wedding is stupid." Heat rose in her cheeks, more from anger than embarrassment. "You arranged this little tour to give me that reality check you think I need. Do you really believe the marriage scene between two horses in my book had nothing to do with reality, Cal? It was about a man admitting he loved a woman and showing her in a way she would believe and accept."

"It was about the fairytale notion a grown man would buy into drivel, like your hero did. It wasn't based on reality. At least not any that I know about."

"You mean the premise there's one right person for everyone, their soul mate. The heart of my story is the belief in true love. One that lasts a lifetime."

He laughed. "A lifetime? Don't you know that sixty-one percent of all marriages end in divorce? Mine lasted three years. I had a friend, David, who set a world record. He was married less than two weeks when they filed. That's today's reality."

Cal hadn't said much about his own failed marriage in his e-mails, but he'd mentioned it had been a messy divorce. Is that what made him such a cynical man? "You're basing this on your own experience?"

"Yes." He frowned. "I fell head over heels for Donna on a business trip. She swore she'd always wanted to live in the country, couldn't wait. Well, once we moved here it didn't take long to figure out we should never have married. There were too many things we couldn't agree on, the biggest being the fact that Donna hated Whittaker Oaks. I'm not trying to make her sound terrible, but she knew how much I loved Whittaker Oaks from day one. She constantly nagged me to sell my share and move to New York. When I didn't cave in, she threatened to take Josh away from me."

"That's when she divorced you?"

His head snapped up, and she saw hurt and anger in his eyes. "She didn't get the chance. I divorced her after she cleaned the bank account out and left for New York with another man."

Autumn cleared her throat. "I'm sorry. This whole thing must still be hard on Josh. He looked sad when he mentioned his mom."

"Donna walked away from both of us. I'm not sure he doesn't blame me for her leaving."

Was Donna completely heartless, or was Cal denying her access to their son as punishment for her infidelity? "She doesn't try to see her own son?"

He shook his head. "That's the hardest part for me to understand. I offered her visitation, but she didn't want it. It hurt Josh really badly, still does. She hasn't seen him in five years. Why take our problems out on Josh?" The tone of his voice grew bitter. "She's remarried and has another life. I never forced the issue with her." He turned to Autumn. "Do you think I did wrong?"

"Of course not." This woman didn't have any of the natural instincts of a mother. She wasn't even interested in seeing her own son. "Cal, children sense if people love them. The result would only hurt Josh more."

"That's what I believe, too. Plus, I'd have to worry about the jerk she picked up, how he'd treat Josh." He cleared his throat. "I try the best I can to make it up to him. One good thing, Josh and I have each other. Nobody's going to hurt him like that again. No women, no changes, no problems. That's my motto from now on."

She glanced over at his sad, lonely face with a lump in her throat. Having wandered like a nomad from one foster home to another, she understood rejection all too well and the walls you build up to protect yourself and those you love. She wanted to reach out, hold him tight in her arms, let him know she wouldn't trample his love like Donna had, but she was unsure how he would react. She longed for the close connection they'd shared over the Internet. It was like he wasn't even the same person.

"And someone like me who still believes in marriage and intends to go on believing hers will be the exception to the general rule is a misguided fool?"

"My point exactly."

She planted her hands on her hips. "Then I feel sorry for you. I'll stay a fool, Calvin Whittaker."

His lips thinned. "Suit yourself. I'm only trying to help. I thought working here a couple of hours a day for a week would give you a reality check. Make your writing more down to earth."

She eyed him suspiciously. Had he read her book and found it lacking in some way? "Will I be working with Luke?"

His gaze narrowed, and he gave her a harsh look. "No. George Himes, one of the grooms. If you decide to try it, I'll talk to him. You'll get first hand experience."

They stepped into the concrete-floored barn and the strong smell of ammonia hit her. Off to the side, farm hands were unloading a beautiful, mahogany mare from a horse trailer into one of the twenty stalls, complete with fans, clean hay, feed, and water.

While Cal described the barn, she thought about his offer. She shouldn't let hurt feelings get in the way of a new experience. "It would help me write more vivid settings and accurate descriptions. And it's good research." She hesitated, chewing her bottom lip.

"Working here a week would give you that gritty edge you need in your writing," Cal suggested.

She'd still have time to finish editing her rough draft. Besides, she'd learn how to help Kayla with the animal shelter they planned to open. She studied the challenge in his gaze. "I'll do it. Three hours a day for one week. Is that okay?"

He grinned and his eyes lit up with pure mischief. "Oh, yeah. Perfect. Let's finish the tour, wash your boots, and get a bite to eat first. You can start right after you've changed into clothes you don't mind getting stained."

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Autumn must have been insane to agree to do this job from hell.

Her entire body was stiff. Had she only been working an hour? It felt like a lifetime. By three o'clock, she'd dewormed four horses by squeezing tubes of foul smelling paste into their mouths. After that, she'd fed three others. She'd also braided two horses' tails and placed them in tail bags to prevent them from getting dirty, while she, on the other hand, looked like something that had crawled out of a chimney. On top of that, she now stunk as bad as any polecat.

She wanted to die. At the age of eleven, pneumonia had put her in the hospital for a week. It was the most horrible time of her life. Compared to being snorted at, nipped, nudged, and stepped on, pneumonia was a piece of cake. Her hands were numb. She had blisters on her thumb and index finger and two bite wounds from a horse that objected to her sticking her hands in its mouth. And, to top it off, deep inside, her aching muscles burned like a hot poker had been inserted into them.

By four o'clock, she'd mucked out one stall and disinfected it. After the stench and flies, which she'd never forget, she hoped she'd fall down and die.

By five o'clock, a vile, black beast of a stallion that reminded her of Cal almost kicked her. She'd changed her mind. As exhausted as she was, she didn't want to die. She wanted to live long enough to kill Cal slowly and painfully.

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At dinner that evening, Cal glanced at Autumn, who sat directly across from him at the table. Her damp hair curled around the front of her plum turtleneck and the strands clung seductively to her breasts causing him to shift uncomfortably as his jeans threatened to strangle his private parts. She lifted her head and her eyelids lowered, but not before he glimpsed the angry fire within them.

"Autumn, dear, are you all right?" Rachel asked. She handed her the platter of grilled T-bones. "You look tired. Maybe you should skip working on that book tonight and get to bed early."

Cal watched Autumn fumble and almost drop the dish. She grimaced as she caught it.

"I'm fine." She took a steak and clumsily passed the platter to Garret with shaking hands. "I agreed to help the groom out for a while to get some practical experience."

Rachel choked and coughed loudly. "For how long?"

Autumn cleared her throat. "A week."

Cal got the full blast of his mother's angry eyes, but refused to look away. He'd set this



plan into motion, and he wasn't backing down.

"You put her up to this," Rachel said.

Autumn looked at Cal, and he got both barrels of her lavender eyes. "It was a mutual agreement." She tried to cut her steak, but the angry red blisters on her hands prevented her from holding the knife. She winced, and Cal fought the urge to help, instead clutching his iced tea glass hard. He was surprised it didn't shatter in his hand.

"Here, let me." His mother took Autumn's plate and cut the meat up for her as if she were a child. "After dinner, young lady, let's see to those hands of yours. I think a good soaking and some liniment are in order."

Cal spotted the clumsy bandages on three of Autumn's swollen fingers as she forked a cube of meat. He swallowed his guilt and second thoughts with a gulp of iced tea. He'd figured she'd get sore, disgusted, and leave immediately, but it never occurred to him she might actually get physically hurt.

"I gave her a tetanus shot to play it safe." Luke followed the direction of his stare. "Black Warning nibbled on her fingers."

Cal dropped his fork and gave her a level look. "Don't you have better sense than to put your hand in a stallion's mouth?"

"She helped George worm horses," Luke defended.

Suddenly, Cal couldn't escape the horrible picture of her long delicate fingers marred permanently by this mammoth of a beast. The thought simultaneously angered and scared him half to death. "Weren't you wearing work gloves? Stallions can take your fingers off."

She sagged back in her seat. "They were too big and got in my way."

"You took them off?" He watched her nod in agreement, his concern shifting to anger at her disregard for her safety. But then again, she didn't understand the danger of a horse mistaking her fingers for food. George should have been more attentive to Autumn, made sure she didn't get hurt. He'd have to talk to him. "Maybe my mother's right, it wasn't such a good idea for you to do hands on stuff. We'd better rethink this. The agreement's off."

Her chin lifted. "I said I'd do it, and I will."

Cal admired her determination. He saw tears well up in her eyes and mentally kicked himself for being such a heel. He'd sent her out there without even thinking about supplying her with the proper equipment. Like a low life, he'd even asked George to sock it to her during the week. "I'll have smaller work gloves ready for you tomorrow. See that you wear them."

"Thank you. Your deep concern is noted," she replied crisply.

Duly taken to task by everyone in the room, Cal turned his attention back to Luke. "Maybe she needs a vest and hardhat."

"I don't think she needs to dress like a Gladiator to muck out stalls," Luke said.

Cal noticed a pink flush trailing up Autumn's neck to her cheeks. "Okay, but I don't want her injured while she's working here." Suddenly he realized everyone at the table but Autumn wore a knowing grin. Jeez, he sounded like he cared about her. He added really fast, "I don't want her suing us."

Autumn's lips tightened into a thin line. "Rachel, you're right. I'm tired. I'm going upstairs to do some work before I turn in early." She pushed back from the table with a grimace then bent and hugged Josh.

The boy kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks for helping wash Charlie and Chase. My ferrets smell good now." Josh smiled.

"You're welcome, sweetie." Autumn stumbled toward the stairs.

They all observed the agony of her slow progress as she climbed to the second story. It made him hurt watching her obvious pain. No one said a word until she was out of sight. Then everyone turned and glared at him like he'd turned into the Devil incarnate.

"Well, what have you got to say for yourself?" his mother huffed.

Cal pushed back from the table and rose. He'd give her the same silent treatment she'd given him earlier. "I'm going to the pool hall."

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A quick snap of the pool cue sent the multi-colored balls clacking. Acrid smoke floated in the air. The sweet sound of Ronnie Milsap's "Lost in the Fifties Tonight" mingled with gruff voices calling out shots and the TV blaring over the bar.

Cal leaned against the wall, peering around the hazy room for the second time. This was more like it, sanctuary from the woman driving him crazy. "Anyone seen Ethan Hill tonight?"

Heads snapped up and turned in Cal's direction. "I heard he hightailed over to Kentucky to buy a horse," Robert Gathery, the local pharmacist, shouted from the back.

"Don't make sense to me when we got fine horses for sale right here," someone added.

"Any idea how long he'll be gone?" Cal asked.

"Nope," several voices answered in unison.

"My dad and Daniel Kaufman will be back in a week," another voice yelled.

How convenient, Cal thought, looking in the direction of the last voice. Both the people he was hunting had left town together. A figure straightened to his full height, moved away from the pool table and sauntered toward him. As he drew near, Cal recognized Jason, Ethan's eldest. Jason had the same unruly blond hair and green eyes as his father.

"Buy you a beer," Jason offered.

"That works for me." Cal turned and headed for the bar with Jason on his heels.

Nursing the draft beer the bartender brought him, Cal glanced at Jason, seated on the adjacent bar stool. "You wouldn't happen to know why Ethan turned down the movie contract, would you?" Cal took a sip of his beer.

Jason smiled. "Sure would. Couple of reasons." He tapped his finger. "First, I think Dad wanted to please Rachel. She wanted that contract real bad. Besides, Billy Bob is stove up, busted a leg in the last rodeo, so we couldn't agree to the publicity shots."

Cal wrinkled his brows. Publicity shots? What in the hell did Jason's brother having a broken leg have to do with anything? "What publicity shots?"

"Hey, Cal, ain't that you and your brothers on the TV?" Homer, the bartender, asked. He turned the volume to a roar. "Listen up folks," he shouted, nearly busting Cal's right eardrum. TV? Cal twisted to glance at the screen.

"It was announced today that Whittaker Oaks Thoroughbred Ranch of Ocala, Florida, is the winner of the nationwide Location Shoot Contest." A picture of Cal, Luke, and Garret flashed on the TV screen, followed by a full shot of the Brahma bull and Texas longhorns.

"Ranch?" several voices yelled, and then everyone laughed.

"Rachel's struck again," the pharmacist yelled, brandishing an invisible sword and cutting an 'R' into the air. "This is the best one yet. She's the reason I stay single."

Guffaws, whistling, moos, and snorts sounding a lot like an angry bull broke out in the room.

"You thinking about turning your place into a Wild West Show?" another man shouted, which sent everyone rolling.

Cal thought once more about killing his mother.

"Quiet, guys!" the bartender ordered. "There's more."

The reporter shoved a microphone in front of a movie mogul's face. "Is it true that the number one box office draw Julia Kelly has been signed to play Catherine Ramsey in Autumn Blessing's bestseller, *Hearts Entwined*?"

The movie mogul beamed and nodded. "Yes."

"Whooee! You need any help out at your place, Cal?" a young man yelled, glancing up from the pool table. Soon two others chimed in with the same question.

"Can you tell us who will play Sheriff Sam Latham?" the reporter asked the movie mogul.

He beamed again. "Yes. We're proud to announce Hugh Shelton has agreed to take the role. We've been negotiating for quite some time now. Filming is scheduled to begin at Whittaker Oaks in two months."

"Hugh Shelton. I got two sisters that love him to pieces. They'd be willing to pay you to just sit and stare at him each day he's out at your place," someone yelled.

"Whew!" Jason said. "You really stepped in it this time, Cal. I'm sure glad Rachel's not my mother."

Cal would gladly put her up for adoption, but he knew he wouldn't get any takers. And he was damned sure he couldn't afford what he'd have to pay someone to take her off his hands.

The phrase, mitigate any permanent damage, kept running through his head like a mantra. "What publicity shots?" he asked Jason again, almost afraid of the answer.

"Guzzle down that beer and take a deep breath first."

Cal downed his beer and signaled the bartender for another, closed his eyes, and braced himself. After all, how bad could it be? They wanted a few more pictures of the ranch. But that didn't make sense. Billy Bob busting his leg wouldn't have kept them from signing that contract if that's all the studio wanted. A dull headache started at the base of Cal's skull. One he knew was going to spread before the night was through.

"How much do you already know about this?" Jason asked.

Cal opened his eyes and swiveled his stool to face Jason. "Zero. Spill it. Just give it to me straight."

"The three of you have agreed to have your pictures taken while bronc and bull riding," Jason said.

Cal half choked on his gulp of beer and then laughed. "This is a joke, right?"

"'Fraid not."

Cal gripped the mug of beer. "Then it's some kinda mistake. Jason, you know Luke and I ride horses quite a bit, but that's the extent of it." Cal shook his head. "And Garret, he

wouldn't be caught dead on one."

Jason raised his hands in protest. "I swear, don't shoot the messenger. I didn't learn anything about this bronc and bull riding business 'til after the deed was done."

Cal blew out a deep breath. "You're not the person I'd like to shoot right now."

Jason nodded. "Rachel told some whoppers to the studio. Said the three of you are cowboys. Born and bred riding bulls."

Cowboys? The idea was ludicrous. They were businessmen who owned and operated a rural stud farm. An attorney, a vet, and an accountant, plain and simple. They mostly acted as supervisors at the farm. Cal's heart did a rapid tattoo. For the first time in his life, he was boxed in. "How long you figure it'll take to teach us?"

"Two weeks, tops."

"You sure?" He kept thinking of Garret, who was going to have a donkey fit if they had to go through with this. "Is that really enough time?"

Jason nodded. "More than enough. I've trained green college kids to ride as well as Billy Bob and me. You don't have to get to competition level. You just need to learn how to hang on until the picture's snapped." He hesitated a moment, then grinned at Cal. "After that, you fall off."

Cal shook his head and rubbed his temples. *Without getting killed*, Jason had neglected to add.

"Guess you'll wanna come out to Triple Hill and learn. That way, we can keep it from the press."

Cal downed the last of his beer. He had to find a way out of this. "Hell no. Do I look like someone with a death wish? I'm not admitting defeat yet."

"I don't blame you. I love the rodeo circuit, but I'd hate to have this shoved down my throat." Jason waved to the bartender for another round. "By the way, I had strict orders from my Dad to give you this if you asked for it." He reached in his pocket and laid a crumpled piece of paper on the bar. "You haven't." Jason shrugged. "Take it anyway," he urged sheepishly.

"What is it?" Cal reached for the white paper with the small print.

"Page sixteen of the movie contract."

"Oh, shit!" Cal snatched it up and began to read. It was worse than he thought. What were they going to do?

## Chapter Six

The mechanical bull they'd trained on for four mornings in a row had pounded Cal into a mass of bruised flesh. Damned thing had pretty near rattled every bone in his body. Purplish blue bruises splattered his arms and legs where he'd tried to grab hold of the machine instead of simply letting himself fall. He shifted uncomfortably on the hard bench at Triple Hill Ranch, not knowing what hurt the most: his arms, his butt, or his pride.

"You reckon Rachel's trying to kill you?" Jason asked.

Cal glanced sideways at Jason. He sat squeezed between him and Luke on the bench in the barn. "That's what I asked her."

"And?" Jason prompted.

"I think I hurt her feelings, because she got really defensive. She nearly took my head off, swears she's rescuing us from a life of loneliness."

A grin split Jason's face and he poked Luke in the ribs. "You must be slipping, stud muffin."

"Okay, you're asking for it. There's nothing wrong with my love life, but I don't think my mother wants to hear I'm having more fun without a wife."

Cal could imagine the jewels of wisdom his mother would say about that fact. "And she doesn't care that Garret broke up with his girlfriend a month ago. According to her, that's more proof we need help finding wives."

"Help finding what you don't want to begin with?" Jason asked and gaped in astonishment.

"You got that right." Cal sighed and shook his head. "It doesn't make any sense to me, either. But she's convinced there's no hope for me unless I jump outside this box Donna's put me in."

"What box?" Jason narrowed his brows.

"Haven't a clue," Cal replied with a shrug. "Must be from that Psych class she took at the community college."

"Lord help you then. There's nothing worse than an amateur shrink. Well, you've got one good thing going. You and Luke are natural cowboys like your grandfather, so bull ridin' should be a snap for you. The bad thing is—Garret isn't. He's lankier, not as muscular. I'm not sure who he takes after, but I do know he's not ready to ride anything but a horse yet."

Jason pointed to the corner of the barn where the mechanical bull had hurled Garret off for the third time. He flipped in the air and landed face down with a thud in the four inches of fresh hay that they'd strategically strewn around the barn to cushion their falls. After muttering several curses, he pushed himself up, hay sticking out of his hair. He made an angry swipe at his hat lying on the ground. Picking it up, he dusted the beige brim against his leg, and then limped toward the machine again.

"Hell, Cal, that's a fake bull and its got Garret walkin' like a bow legged hooker on Sunday morning," Jason said.

Cal laughed, causing a ripple of pain to grip his bruised body. Every ache and pain made him ashamed of the misery he'd put Autumn through during her week of working as a stable hand.

He'd talked to George and asked the groom to take it easier on her. Every day Cal stopped by to visit, he'd found her smiling as she took care of the horses, bathing and feeding them, even wrapping their legs. Strangely, he looked forward to time alone with her. When he walked into that stable and she gazed into his eyes, his breath always caught in his throat. He wanted to forget their differences, pull her into his arms and kiss her senseless, but he knew better. He only needed to recall the many times he'd ignored the differences between him and Donna to realize how such a relationship would turn out. Very badly. He and Autumn were worlds apart. Their arguments about love and the pig sty she'd made of his stud farm had convinced him she'd never change.

"But he's stubborn, like all you Whittaker's," Jason said with a grin. "He may catch on eventually, if it don't kill him first. You got roping and the mechanical bull riding down pat so tomorrow you and Luke are graduating to the real thing. Until Garret can stay on that machine the full time, I'm not letting him near a real bull. I'll go see if I can help him." Jason stood and stretched his arms and shoulders stiffly, groaning as he did so.

Cal fingered the crumpled page in his vest pocket. Unfortunately, whoever had written this movie contract knew their business. He'd read page sixteen until he could recite it in his sleep. Trouble was, the answer always came out the same—this was an iron-clad contract. They'd agreed to do publicity shots to promote the movie, and that included bronc and bull riding.

"I found out about Autumn's personal problem, you know, the one you promised to help her with," Luke whispered. "I overheard a phone call between her and Kayla. They're worried about someone named Sarah. Seems Autumn's friend is pregnant and having a hard time, some kinda high-risk pregnancy. She can't travel for another month, but Autumn's afraid you've changed your mind about helping her."

By the time Luke had finished, Cal was somewhat relieved but still puzzled. Could it be that simple? Somehow her friend's high-risk pregnancy didn't sound very personal to him. But if Autumn had been led to believe he'd made a promise to help her friend, which didn't seem too bad, he'd make sure she knew it was still okay.

Luke turned to watch Garrett. "Look at him. He doesn't have a prayer. He's not cut out for this. I could try and tranquilize the bull and bronc before we ride."

Cal could almost see them riding around the arena on staggering steers that finally dropped in a drug-induced heap. Talk about publicity. Wouldn't that make a hilarious photo? And a lovely, fat lawsuit. He cocked an eyebrow at him. "You serious?"

"You got a better idea? We gotta do something." Luke sounded as frustrated as Cal.

"Not at the moment," Cal admitted, "but I'm working on one."

Luke glanced sheepishly at him. "Well, I hate to admit it, but you were right about me being the target and not you. Mother made up some lame excuse and asked me to take Autumn to town this afternoon around two o'clock."

Cal stared at him. "What'd you tell her?"

"I would."

"Wrong," Cal snapped. "I'll take Autumn."

"Somehow I knew you'd say that," Luke said with a grin. "You wouldn't happen to be sweet on her yourself, would you?"

"Hell no. I'm protecting your hide like a good brother is supposed to."

"Uh-huh. Is that what you were doing when you chewed out Trent and Miles for staring at Autumn during the horse auction? They told me you cornered them quick as she went to pay for her Quarter Horse."

"They did a lot more than stare." Cal stiffened. "They made some lewd remarks about what they'd like to do to her."

"Hell, bro. Most men that see her have those notions. You can't clobber them all for wanting to try."

"There he goes again." Luke pointed to Garret.

They winced as Garret's body flailed briefly before arcing through the dust filled air. He landed on his backside with a loud thud.

"I'm dying..." Garret moaned as he tentatively moved his legs. "Can you break your tail bone?" He grimaced when he struggled to his feet and brushed hay from his clothes and hair. "I'm an accountant, not some damned trick rider." He staggered in their direction, rubbing the left side of his butt, a grimace darkened his face.

Cal considered their slim-to-none options and finally decided on a plan of action. He smiled as the thought unfolded. "Is it okay if we get you out of this, Garret?"

"Are you kidding? Be my guest. I don't have anything to prove by staying on the back of some bucking fleabag."

"How are your wrists?" Cal joked.

Garret knitted his brows and looked at Cal suspiciously.

"Luke, what if one of Garret's wrists was fractured," Cal suggested.

Garret folded his arms over his chest. "Oh, no. I'll take my chances on the bull."

"What's the matter, little brother, don't you trust us?" Luke glanced at Cal. "I can put a plaster cast on him, but what good would that do?"

"I thought I'd try it as an excuse and talk to Autumn, you know, play up the sympathy angle. Maybe they can take photos of Garret sitting on the bull preparing to leave the chute and we'll handle the rest of the shots."

Garrett quickly stuck his left wrist in front of Luke. "I'm all for it. Just make sure I can still work on our books with the cast on."

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Autumn moved Gone South back into a stall after she'd bathed him. She patted the horse's neck. "I'm going to tell you a secret." Autumn swallowed past the lump in her throat. "I know it hurts when people say they don't want you. It happened a lot before I was adopted." She picked up a brush and rubbed the horse's velvet coat, pleased at the change in the mare's condition. "But, that's over. I love you, and you don't have to worry about anyone not wanting you again."

The door to the stall squeaked open, and she glanced over her shoulder to see Cal grinning in the doorway. She buried her burning cheeks in the horse's neck as a frantic question raced through her mind. Had he heard her speak to her horse?

She peeked at him. Even though his expression remained open and charming, suspicion squeezed her heart. Now what did he have planned for her?

When he still hadn't spoken, she gave him another sidelong glance. Lately, he'd

developed an irritating habit of showing up when she least expected. Autumn took a deep breath and turned to face him, trying hard not to notice how he always filled the stall with his sheer masculinity. Instead, she focused on the warmth sparkling in his eyes.

"How are your fingers healing?" he asked. "Let me see." He stood toe-to-toe with her and gently took the brush clutched in her hand.

The moment he grasped her hand in his, an electric heat spread throughout her body. Her mouth went bone-dry. Fascinated, she watched as he slid his fingers gently over her wounds. The tingling fire of his touch worked its way up her arm and across her chest, beading her nipples.

She snatched her hand away. "They're healing nicely."

"That's good. I don't think they'll scar." Their gazes locked. "A little toad told me you wanted to go to town."

"Yes, I do. Luke's taking me this afternoon." Her heart beat faster as she gazed at his handsome face, her defenses ebbing.

"Something came up, so I'm taking you. I have business in town anyway," Cal said.

*Well, I'll be.* She hadn't thought it possible, but Rachel was right. Cal *was* jealous. Rachel had said Cal would stop Luke from taking her. Like a kid given a special Christmas present, she continued to stare at him in utter amazement.

"I have to stop by the architect's and pick up the preliminary plans for a training facility. We need to review them, make any changes and get them back to him as soon as possible."

"Sounds wonderful." Autumn smiled and walked out of the stall, recalling the way Rachel's face had lit up when she talked about her boys' plans for the horse ranch. She faced him, putting a hand on his arm. "Rachel mentioned it was your father's dream."

Cal lifted his chin. With pride in his eyes, he placed his warm hand on top of hers. "Yeah, and I'm going to see it comes true."

"While we're in town, would you mind pointing me in the direction of Sean Heaton Realty?" Almost immediately, he removed his hand and she let her own hand drop free.

"Of course not," he said. "More research?"

"No. I spoke to him on the phone. He's supposed to locate some land for me and Kayla."

"You and your sister aren't going back to Houston after the movie is finished?"

"No, we're going to build a house with a vet clinic and an animal rescue shelter right here in Ocala. If Mr. Perry is your architect, then he has our plans on his drawing board, too."

"How much land you figuring on buying?" he asked.

"Sixty acres."

"I'll do better than that. I'll introduce you to Sean personally and make sure he locates the best acreage available. It might take a while to find the right property, but Sean won't steer you wrong."

Gone South neighed and nudged Autumn's shoulder. She laughed at the tickling sensation of the horse nuzzling her neck and reached over to pat her head before she turned her attention back to Cal. "Bet you'll be glad to see the last of our animals."

He looked at her intently. "You've got that right."

Her heart plummeted to her stomach with an old, familiar sting of rejection. For a



moment, she had seen surprise, respect, and genuine liking in his eyes. But then his eyes had turned dark and she felt like a giant sinkhole had opened up and swallowed the hope she'd held inside, separating them forever. No doubt, he'd be glad to see the last of her, too.

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"It's five o'clock. Where *is* Autumn?" Cal muttered. He'd been standing on the sidewalk under the striped awning of the ice cream shop for thirty minutes. The exact spot they'd agreed to meet after their errands. He glanced up and down the busy street, greeting people who looked his way. No sign of her. Maybe something had happened. With a disgruntled groan, he set off in search of her.

His first stop was the bookstore she'd mentioned after he'd taken her to meet Sean Heaton. When he noticed Autumn's Hearts *Entwined* prominently displayed in their window, a sense of pride filled his heart. A huge sign read, "Book Signing by Prominent Author, Autumn Blessing, at Whittaker Oaks, October 7, 1:00 P.M."

A sense of dread replaced the pride. "Book signing," he shouted to no one in particular. "At my place?" That wasn't in the contract.

He ignored the curious glances of several women as they exited the bookstore. His lips tightened. He stalked toward Sean Heaton Realty, determined to have it out with Autumn.

Cal opened the door and poked his head inside. Sean, dressed in his three-piece navy suit was hunkered over his desk. He looked up and Cal and grinned.

"I thought Autumn might still be here."

"Nope. You missed her by fifteen minutes. Damndest thing. She stood by the mirror muttering something about dropping off her poster at the bookstore then charging into the twenty-first century and getting a make-over from head-to-toe."

*Had she gone crazy? She looked fine the way she was. Why in the world would she need a thing like that?* "Any ideas where she might have gone?"

Sean scrunched up in face. "Well, according to my wife they claim to perform those miracles and more at Abigail's."

Cal had barely walked through the door of the beauty parlor, when the poisonous fumes hit him. He stopped dead in his tracks. Good grief, he needed a gas mask to survive the stink floating in the air and ear plugs for the constant high-pitched hum of dryers. His eyes burned as he glanced around the room at the women whispering, their hair in various stages of transformation—some black and purple goop spread on their scalp, others had tin foil sticking out all over the heads.

Finally, his gaze zeroed in on Autumn and he froze.

Like a vulture hovering over its prey, Abigail eagerly held Autumn's sopping wet waist-length hair with one hand, while the other, poised with deadly scissors seemed ready to sever the luxurious curls.

"Drop those scissors, Abigail Hicks." His voice boomed across the crowded salon, bouncing off the pink walls and cutting through the murmur of conversations. When she hesitated, he narrowed his eyes and added, "Now!"

The scissors clattered to the floor, and Abigail whirled around, her hands rising slowly in the air. "Honest, Sheriff Cal, I didn't rustle them steers." Her thin chest heaved with

laughter.

Amid objections to his behavior, Cal hurried across the room. He stopped directly in front of Autumn's chair. When she looked up at him, he swallowed hard. Tears pooled in the corner of her eyes.

"What do you want?" Autumn demanded, obviously upset by his behavior.

Cal's jaw dropped. She had a right to be mad. What in the world had gotten into him? Had he lost his ever-loving mind? It was *her* hair. He didn't own one single strand. She most certainly didn't need permission to chop it off. She could do anything she damned well pleased with it, even if the very thought of anyone cutting her beautiful curls made him want to snatch her away.

He back-pedaled to cover his outburst. "Abigail sometimes gets scissor happy." He bent and picked up the scissors.

Abigail gasped at the insult.

Well, that went over like a lightning strike. She glared at him like she wanted to hog-tie him to the chair, take a razor, and shave his head.

He unconsciously spread his legs in a battle stance and crossed his arms over his chest.

"Are you planning on making a drastic change?" Did that come out of his mouth? He looked around, appalled at his sudden overzealous interest in Autumn's hair. *She's going to think I'm some kinda control freak if I keep this up. Shut your trap, you idiot!*

"Miss Blessing was under the impression you liked short hair," Abigail suggested. "If memory serves me, Donna wore hers that way."

Autumn gave a gasp of distress.

Cal spotted the tissues, yanked one out, and shoved it at Autumn. To his way of thinking, her sadness told him one of two things: his roughness might have upset her, or maybe she wasn't thrilled about butchering her long hair.

"You thought *I* wanted you to cut it off? Where'd you get an idiotic idea like that?"

All of a sudden Autumn puffed up like some angry toad. "The-the way you looked at it when-when we first met."

Thankfully, some semblance of control returned and he clicked back to that day. The thought floored him. She wanted to change it to please him. He wanted to kick himself. Hard. "I was afraid to stare, Autumn. Your hair looks fine the way it is." He couldn't believe he'd admitted that. The blood drained from his face. "Of course, if you want it short, I can't stop you."

Abigail pulled another pair of scissors from the drawer and held them up to Autumn's hair. She fought a grin as she glanced from him to Autumn. "I'll leave the length and snip off any split ends. Any objections?"

Heat raced up his neck to his face as he and Autumn came to some kind of personal agreement about taking a half-inch off. The mirrors covering each wall reflected his face as some shade between a beet and an overripe tomato.

To his chagrin, everyone turned and stared at him with wide, knowing grins. Murmurings about romantic young love almost choked him. He eyed the exit sign, wanting to escape their speculations. Jeez. He wished he had a microphone so he could shout for the world to kindly mind their own damn business, because nothing was happening today, tomorrow, or any other day between him and Miss Autumn Blessing.

"You want to wait for her?"

Still obviously ruffled from his unintended insult, Abigail stared at him with pursed lips.

A hush fell over the beauty parlor.

Wait? For Autumn? His mind screamed. Are you crazy? What would everyone think? Several husbands milled around awkwardly in the beauty parlor waiting for their wives. Did he want to do that? Hell, he didn't even like this woman. Or her babies. If she'd gathered animals for Noah, God would have had to build a dozen arks.

He couldn't explain what had happened this afternoon. All of a sudden, he seemed to have developed some sort of insane hair fetish. One he'd better recover from fast before everyone got the wrong notion about Autumn and him.

An idea jumped in his head. He coughed. "Yeah." Not wanting to fuel suspicions, he turned to Autumn and whispered a little louder than he intended, "We're going on a picnic afterwards to get some things ironed out." His words echoed across the room like bullets.

The "ahh's" could be heard all around the shop.

Sweat beaded on his temples as he stared at Abigail's wink. Good grief, now they really had leaped to the wrong conclusion.

Autumn's lips formed a surprised O. "We are?"

"Seems you forgot to mention a little matter about a book signing at my place the seventh of October," he whispered between clenched teeth. When he realized he still clutched the pair of scissors in his fist, he slapped them down on Abigail's sink top and stalked to the waiting area without another word.

Autumn's jaw sagged.

"Uh-oh," Abigail said.

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Autumn fought the anger surging inside. How dare he take this high-handed manner with her? They'd discussed the book signing in their e-mails lots of times. She'd apologized twice now for not letting him know the exact date when the studio notified her, but that wasn't good enough for Cal. Oh no, he had to go on and on about the intolerable situation she'd put him in.

She slung the plastic bowl of pasta with chicken back in the picnic hamper, hoping he'd get the message loud and clear.

"Let me get all this straight." She fisted her hands. "First, you want me to change the photo session for Garret, because he fractured his wrist. Correct?"

Cal tightened his lips and glanced at the sky. "Yeah."

The sudden picture of Garret writhing in pain from broken bones made her feel guilty; he'd be in a cast for weeks. "I can understand that. I don't want Garret hurt any more than you do. By the way, the studio moved the photo session up by one week," she blurted out, afraid she'd forget to tell him that date, too, and never hear the end of it.

Autumn placed the bowl of leftover spinach salad in the picnic hamper, and ignored the shocked expression on his face. "Second, you object to your Thoroughbreds wearing bridal clothes in the final scene. It's 'too prissy,' you said."

Cal glared at her. "That's putting it mildly."

"Tough stuff, and that's putting it mildly, Calvin Whittaker. You agreed to do it when you signed the contract, and I'm not rewriting it for anyone. Like I explained to you before, that one scene proves the hero has changed, he really loves and respects the heroine. He's willing to compromise."

"Compromise," he spat, pacing in front of her. "That only happens when a woman browbeats a man to death and, like a coward he gives in so she'll shut up and he can have peace and quiet."

"Or a man admits to the world he loves a woman enough to sacrifice for her. That scene bloody-well stays as I wrote it!" Autumn threw the container of sweet pickles into the picnic hamper. "Third, all of a sudden you want *me* to rent another place for my book signing."

Cal lifted his chin. "Damn right!" He crossed his arms and stood rigid above her.

She folded the blanket and slung it over the picnic hamper. Jumping to her feet to face him, her anger finally boiled over. "Wrong. Why would I do that? Here's how it's gonna be, Mr. Whittaker. The book signing includes a tour at Whittaker Oaks. Nowhere else. As far as I'm concerned, it's part of the pre-publicity. And you've already agreed to it in the contract."

"Fine. Then I want to supervise how it's done," Cal snapped. "I have a business to run."

She studied him, surprised by her sudden realization that this was all part of his need to control things. "Do you think I want to harm Whittaker Oaks?" She shook her head and huffed a bit of air. "I'll make you a deal. You give me your word you won't sabotage my book signing, and then we'll work together. If we have any problems during the event, I'll find somewhere else for me and my babies to live while the movie is filming." She extended her hand. "Deal?"

He shook her hand and smiled a little. His expression changed from relief to warmth as his gaze slowly scanned her body. Heat washed through her, and her senses whirled.

"I can't figure you out, Autumn. I don't think I've ever seen you stand up for yourself this way."

"Is there something wrong with my standing up for myself?"

He wore a mischievous grin on his face. "No, I kinda like it."

"You do?" He was the most exasperating man.

"A lot," he added.

She took a deep breath and let it out. "I've never been this mad." She looked away from him briefly. "Except once."

"When was that?" he prompted.

"When I protected Kayla."

As their gazes locked, a glimmer of understanding shone on his face. "Why did you have to protect your sister?"

Feeling like ice water had been thrown on her emotions, Autumn bit her lower lip. She didn't want to talk about the past. Besides, no one had ever believed her side of the story. She'd been labeled incorrigible after that incident.

Would Cal believe her? Especially when he didn't seem to believe her about anything else?

"After our parents died, Social Services placed us in a foster home. Right away, I didn't like the creepy way Reverend Jenkins kept staring at Kayla when he thought no one was watching. He was up to no good so I always made sure he wasn't alone with her. One night his wife left to play bridge. He tried to catch me and lock me in the closet, but he slipped, fell down the stairs, and broke his arm." She looked up at Cal. "They kicked us out. After that, Reverend Jenkins and his wife made sure every foster home knew I'd attacked him." She studied his face, anticipating the worst. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"Of course I believe you."

His sincerity made her want to press against him, feel his strong arms around her, comforting her, trying to make up for all the years she'd been strong for Kayla.

"I'm sorry," he said, his voice husky with concern. "We'll try the book signing your way." Cal reached out and touched her hair. "Looks nice. What do you call this fancy style?"

"A French braid." Goose bumps paraded up her spine as his lean fingers followed the length of it down to her waist, lingering to slip his arm around her.

He stepped closer. "We're so different, Autumn. Too different. What am I going to do with you?"

She shuddered when his warm breath drifted against her cheek. Hadn't he already made their differences crystal clear? He'd set his mind to getting rid of her.

Autumn lifted her chin in defiance. If he thought she'd cry, he was mistaken. She should be used to rejection by now, but it always hurt, especially from Cal, but she never cried, at least not in front of anybody. "I think we both know the answer."

"Do we?" His eyes darkened, searching her face, lingering on her mouth. She felt his indecision. When she nervously licked her lips, he groaned softly and stared into her eyes. The intense hunger took her breath away.

Dropping his arm and releasing her, Cal turned and slowly walked away.

## Chapter Seven

"I'll never get this scene right," Autumn sighed. "Not without Cal's help."

She clicked file then save for what seemed like the hundredth time that night. Bitterness churned in the pit of her stomach. The chair squeaked as she shifted uncomfortably and focused her blurry eyes on the computer screen. Despondency weighed heavily on her heart. Frustrated with Cal, she tried to keep thoughts of him out of her head, but failed miserably.

Was it her imagination, or hadn't Cal almost kissed her four long days, or ninety-six solid hours ago? Heck, he hadn't even tried to peck her on the lips since then. In fact, he wouldn't hold her hand or look her in the eye. Her mind must have been playing tricks on her. He'd obviously changed his mind about helping her and wanted her to leave.

Immediately.

Or did he?

Cal blew hotter than Texas one moment, colder than Jack Frost the next. Images burned in her mind. The raw hunger grew stronger with every accidental touch, each shared look, each brush of his hand. With every heartbeat the excitement grew. But it seemed that Cal always tried to deny what he felt. His eyes misted with desire, but his heart remained sealed off from her love. How long would he remain distant?

Her plans kept unraveling like yarn in a playful kitten's claws. She thought she knew what she wanted. At the top of her list was anything to improve her writing; namely, learning to write passionate love scenes. At first, she'd been ashamed to admit she'd never felt passion. Sexual hunger, the kind of craving she only wrote about in romantic comedies. She'd been grateful last year when co-writer and friend, William Jackson, had assisted with editing the two love scenes the studio had added to the screenplay of *Hearts Entwined*. What William, happily married for thirty years, advised made sense.

"Find yourself a special friend, one you can trust completely with a part of your life, someone who'll teach you to give and receive love," William had counseled in a fatherly tone, "then those love scenes will flow freely from all the warm memories stored in your heart."

She'd believed Cal was Mr. Right. But he was rapidly turning into Mr. Wrong. The six months she'd corresponded long-distance with him, she'd built Cal up as the perfect man: sweet, sensitive, and loving. At last she'd found a soul mate, but Cal seemed so different in person.

Oh, he wanted her. That much was obvious to even a greenhorn like her. Could she give herself to someone who didn't love her? Love? Was she asking for too much? He often teased her about her "romantic" idea of love. Maybe he was right. It was probably foolish to reach for the stars when the man she wanted was right at her feet. Besides, what about Kayla and all their dreams for a house, vet clinic, and animal rescue shelter? Her sister needed her—Autumn had always looked after her.

An hour later, she still sat at the desk in the book-lined study, staring, but not really seeing, like a zombie hypnotized by the computer screen. She would never finish at this pace.

A loud rap sounded on the French door. She jumped.

Rachel poked her head through. "Am I interrupting?" She stepped into the room

carrying a silver tray loaded with a generous helping of goodies and two mugs. The delicious smell of oatmeal raisin cookies and hot chocolate filled the air.

"I need a break." Autumn rubbed the knots in her shoulders as Rachel shuffled across the plush, eggshell carpet in her bedroom slippers. She put the tray on the desk and then settled in a squeaky wooden rocking chair beside Autumn, fussing with the seams of her faded plaid nightgown.

"What you really need is to get some sleep. You've been cooped up in this study every night plugging away at your book. It's one o'clock, sweetie." Rachel handed Autumn a mug and lifted the other one, clinking them together lightly. "To love. Cheers. Here's to you for having survived the God-awful week Cal skunked you into working like a farm hand."

"To love." Autumn thought about Cal's version of tough love and chuckled silently. Well, she showed him she could hang in there with the best of them. She blew on her hot chocolate and then took a tentative sip, tasting a hint of Amaretto. She smiled her appreciation at Rachel. "It's delicious."

"Thank-you, my dear." Rachel grinned. Her gray eyes looked tired, but here she was, doting over Autumn like the mother she'd never had. "In celebration, I've arranged a little surprise at noon, something to work out all your soreness, particularly in your derriere." Rachel smiled. "No, I'm not shooting Cal."

"Shucks, then I give up, what is it?" Autumn teased.

"I'm not telling." Rachel shook her head and scooted her chair closer to Autumn. "I'm not one to butt in, but I'd have to be blind not to see how badly you and Cal are hurting. You're a lot alike. You both work yourselves into a lather trying so hard to run away from whatever's gnawing at you." She took another sip of hot chocolate. "You've become like a daughter to me, sweetie, and I'll help you any way I can. I'm a real good listener," Rachel said.

Autumn shrugged, and her cheeks heated from embarrassment. "I wish I knew more about men and how they think."

"Is that all? Well that's pretty simple. According to survey's, sex is on their minds about eighty-percent of the time. The other twenty-percent, they wonder why sex isn't on their minds." She grabbed a fat oatmeal cookie and handed one to Autumn. "I've loved two men in my life." Her voice turned somber. "One I was married to for thirty-seven years and lost to a heart attack. For the longest time, I felt dead inside. I was afraid to even try to love again, to face the pain of losing someone else, until Ethan Hill. He helped me understand my heart, my need to love and be loved. The heart and mind are truly amazing; it's a choice of the mind not to love again, not the heart."

Tears stung Autumn's eyes as Rachel's face softened with an almost angelic warmth. What would it be like to be loved like that even once? To look over at the pillow next to yours each night and see arms reach out to cherish and hold you? To have him love you with every fiber of his being?

"You aren't going to cry on me, are you?" Rachel teased.

Autumn sniffled. "It's just so beautiful."

"Yes, it is. I've been blessed twice," she said softly. "What I've learned in life is that we often fear what we want and need the most. If you really want my son, then find out why he's afraid to love you back and talk to him about it."

"It's no use. We're too different." She shrugged. "I can't change my dreams or who I am."

Rachel smiled sweetly. "No need to. Cal's changing, and he doesn't even realize it yet. Did you ever think he'd install a heat lamp for old Fred and his harem of chickens?"

Autumn shook her head. "Cal did it to keep Fred from chasing him like mad and pecking him when he gathers eggs."

"See what I mean? Give him time. He'll come around even more. Haven't you noticed?"

"Yes. I caught him putting a blanket around Gone South, just like he did for Sir Galahad."

"My son's a good man. My James, God rest his soul, always wanted to double the size of Whittaker Oaks. Believe me, Cal doesn't need another hundred-and-twenty acres to build a training facility. Thirty acres tops would do it. Some day he'll realize he has to get his own dreams and stop feeling he has to carry out his father's wishes to the letter." Rachel patted Autumn's hand. "Don't stay up much longer and you keep getting in that hot tub every day like you promised."

Autumn nodded and chewed the inside of her cheek, uneasy at the prospect of being bold enough to snag Cal's attention. Her face flamed at the thought of his lips pressed against hers. "But how's Cal going to feel if I make the first move?"

"Scared as hell." Rachel rose from the chair and hugged Autumn before leaving the study.

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Cal woke up in a cold sweat and glanced at the clock on the nightstand. Only two o'clock. He flung off the heavy covers and furiously paced his bedroom. Finally stopping at the window, he peeked between the blinds and watched stars flicker against the dark umbrella of the night.

He sighed. Had he only known Autumn nine days? Damn, it felt like an eternity, every day frustrating as hell, the way it tore him apart inside with wanting her. Slowly but surely she was killing him. If not during the waking hours, definitely at night.

Night after godforsaken night the same erotic dream tortured him, triggered by his desire to wrap Autumn in his arms and never let her go. Like an insatiable hunger, he longed to taste her so badly he hurt clear down to his toes. In his dream, he'd succumbed to the temptation to kiss her and experienced a passion that grew like a sapling into something he'd never thought to find on God's green earth. Something tender and sweet...and something totally Autumn.

Then the dream changed. Morning dawned, finding him alone, cursed by a never-ending caravan of trucks waiting to enter Whittaker Oaks. The overpowering odor of diesel fuel penetrated his nostrils, as did the stench of animals of every species—except his cherished Thoroughbreds. The dream cruelly turned into a nightmare as he and Whittaker Oaks become the butt of jokes, Noah's Ark of the Ocala Thoroughbred Owners' and Breeders' Association. Cancellations for their services flooded in, ruining the family. Finally, the ultimate deathblow came when they were sold at auction lock, stock, and barrel. A part of him died along with all



his family's hopes and dreams.

He felt trapped, caged like an animal.

Thank the Lord, Autumn was looking for those sixty acres. Good riddance. The instant he thought it, he wondered how much he meant it.

He picked up the phone and frantically dialed Sean, relieved when the realtor answered and didn't scream at him.

"Cal, that you again?" Sean yawned into the receiver. "This is the second time you've called at two in the morning. Dammit. Friend or no friend, this better stop. I'm doing all I can."

"Find out if the rumor's true," Sean's wife yelled. "But do it in the other room." Cal heard the sound of the bed creaking as Sean moved around. "Since you're up, feed Janet her bottle, would ya? I'm goin' back to sleep."

After apologizing profusely, Cal added, "If there's anything I can do to speed the process up, let me know. Whatever it takes to get her and her animals out of my hair, I'll do it. Faster than lightning."

"Hair!" Sean cackled. "Yeah, it's all over town how you kept Abigail from cutting Autumn's hair."

Cal didn't want to go there again. "I better let you get some rest. I'll let you go now."

"Hold on," Sean snapped. "Don't hang up. You woke me. The least you can do is keep me company while I feed little Janet. Okay, out with it, why'd you stop Abigail?"

"She would have butchered Autumn's hair."

"Uh-huh. Abigail's been doing Rachel's for years, always looks nice, but then it's short. Although come to think of it, Sally Fletcher wears hers the same length as Autumn's, and Abigail does it just fine. Peculiar ain't it?"

Cal frowned and ignored his question. *For a man woken up too early, Sean sure was running his mouth a lot.*

"Heard you went on a romantic picnic afterwards," Sean added. "About five people told me that juicy tidbit."

Damn, gossip was spreading like the pox. "We argued the whole blasted time."

"Uh-huh. That's exactly how Alice and me were when we first met. Of course, it sure was nice making up. Still is. I think you've got feelings for this woman you're trying to get rid of. Yessiree, you got it real bad. All the symptoms are there." Cal heard a loud wail and Sean's voice cooing, urging Janet to stop fussing and suck her bottle.

"Don't be ridiculous. I-I we're not even friends." Cal's heart did triple time because he knew it was a lie. He had all the symptoms of a lovesick fool all right, a constant erection and sleeplessness. Next, he would forget to eat, and then he would die. That woman had to go before he did something absolutely stupid — like take her to bed.

"Uh-huh. That's a sure sign, yessiree. She's trapped you like some lusty stallion sniffing a mare in heat, plum out of his mind with pent up desire."

Cal forced his voice to remain calm while he tried his best to deny what appeared obvious even to him. "No way in hell."

"Uh-huh. Then why'd you order George to go easy on her when she helped him in the stables? You checked on her every day to see she was okay. Yep, that's another sign."

"Sign, my ass. Autumn got hurt. I felt responsible for her, that's all." He swallowed

hard. "Plus, I didn't want her to sue."

"Uh-huh." Cal heard Sean patting the baby's back, followed by a volcanic burp.

"Shut up with the uh-huhs, Sean. I assure you, I do *not* intend to get involved with Autumn romantically or otherwise, and you can report it to this whole small-minded, busybody town. Tell them to stick it in their—"

"Whoa! For an attorney, you sure are cooking your own goose." Sean roared with laughter. "Yep, denial's another sure sign. Bye." he said then promptly hung up.

His heart in his throat, Cal hit the speed dial of his next line of defense. Maybe the PI had found dirt on Autumn. She couldn't be as innocent as she seems. There had to be some dirt he could use to get rid of her. For Pete's sake, she was a romance writer, bound to need inspiration for all those scenes. He let out the deep breath he'd been holding, remembering there wasn't one hot erotic scene or climax in *Hearts Entwined*. Hell, her hero and heroine never rounded second base.

Relax. It didn't mean a thing. Sweet romantic comedies were written by married authors and they had plenty of sex. Autumn could be innocent on the surface and wild underneath. Even kinky. Lord, he felt his libido act up again at the images that brought to mind. For his own good he had to keep telling himself Autumn was a phony. Maybe. Okay, he'd calmed down some. A tiny bit. Several deep breaths and ten minutes of frantic pacing helped a lot more.

This is what happens when you live a monk-like existence for way too long. Only one sure cure. Two people spending all day in bed enjoying each other's bodies. Good old fashioned, mind-blowing, knock-your-socks-off sex, with no strings attached.

Trouble was, Autumn automatically came to mind every time he thought about hot, wild, uninhibited sex.

He felt a ray of sunshine in his otherwise chaotic life when Neil answered the phone without giving Cal a time of day lecture. He'd gotten back from a stakeout about fifteen minutes ago and was still writing up his notes.

"Cal, I wanted to wait until I had all of the report, but I'll give you what I have so far." Neil rustled papers.

"Hit me with it." Cal took several deep breaths.

"Autumn is smart, has a Master's in Library Science. She was a librarian before writing her one and only bestseller. Her friends told me she wrote eleven books at least before selling *Hearts Entwined*. Autumn's thirty, and Kayla's twenty-six, they were born to Vivian and London Sinclair."

"*The London Sinclair who wrote the blockbuster If Looks Could Kill?*" Cal could almost see the dark, angry eyes and the bloody knife on Sinclair's book jacket, and its position on the shelf in the oak paneled study. "I remember the movie years back."

"One and the same," Neil confirmed. "Guess he should have named it *The Book That Kills*."

"Why?" Cal asked, totally confused.

"It was his only bestseller. Some say not producing another one drove him to drink. Anyway, he became an alcoholic. When his wife died of cancer, he sank deeper into the bottle, and finally ended his life with a shotgun."

Cal winced. "How old was Autumn when she lost her parents?"

"Five when Vivian died; six when Sinclair died."

"What happened to Autumn and Kayla?"

"I'm still chasing it around. There wasn't any money left. Sinclair was dead broke. Relatives didn't want the girls, some thought they'd turn out like their father, you know like a bad seed, so they went into an orphanage and later foster care."

Cal closed his eyes, wanting to shut out the bleak picture Neil painted. Autumn had so little love and family support growing up, while Cal had it all.

"Anything about a Reverend?" What was the name of the creep Autumn said had tripped and broke his arm? "Jenkins?"

Neil blew out a loud breath. "Is there ever. Brother, I wanted to hit his two-ton, loudmouthed wife. She kept calling Autumn trash. Supposedly, she pushed him down a flight of stairs when she didn't want to mind, and he broke his arm. Personally, after meeting the jerk and checking him out, he's a pervert if I ever saw one. Anyway, they kicked Autumn and Kayla out. Afterwards, the nice Reverend's wife made a point of telling her version of the truth. Because of suspicions hanging over Autumn, they got shuffled around a lot."

"How old were they when the Reverend broke his arm?" *Too bad it wasn't his neck.*

"Autumn was eight, Kayla was four."

Cal winced again. He could only imagine the hell Autumn and Kayla had gone through. The night Autumn had given him a glimpse of her past, he'd wanted to know more, but he'd sensed she didn't want to reveal even a small part. "Anything else?"

"Sinclair's bestseller wasn't made into a movie until years after he died. His relatives were vultures. You know the drill, they set up a fake guardianship and spent the cash. Doubt the girls even knew what kind of money exchanged palms. Enough to make you puke," he spat.

Cal sighed, feeling lower than dirt. The more he learned, the more he admired Autumn. Here was a woman struggling against life kicking her in the teeth. Like an insensitive jerk, he'd added to her hurt, but she'd stood fast. She'd overcome even the backbreaking job he'd goaded her into. He thought of all the lies he'd told her from day one to keep his mother from going to jail, instead of leveling with her about this whole mess. If there was a phony, it was him.

"Don't wait until you have it all wrapped up. Call me when you find out more, your formal report can come later," Cal said.

"You sound down. Let me guess. You're starting to care about this author, and you don't want to, right?"

"In spades," Cal reluctantly admitted. His shoulders slumped from what felt like the weight of the world. Hadn't he already learned his lesson about marrying a woman who didn't have the same dreams as he had for the future? Donna had abandoned him and Josh to live out her own desires. And here he was falling hard for someone who could destroy his whole way of life.

After he hung up, he grabbed a change of clothes and headed for the shower. He felt like shit. Ah, to hell with trying to sleep. He wanted to see if Sinclair's bestseller was still on the shelf.

Twenty minutes later, he opened the French doors to the study and stopped dead in his tracks. Autumn, barefooted, red toenails peeking out from silk pajamas and bathrobe, lay

slumped over the desk fast asleep. Her dark, luxurious hair was braided and lay across her shoulder. He caught his breath at her beauty. The computer screensaver floated like a ghostly apparition in the background.

Cal padded softly across the carpeted floor, bent, and gently lifted her into his arms, being careful not to wake her. She moaned. Cradling her against his body, he tried to remember how long it had been since he had held a woman. Too long, he decided as the scent of jasmine flooded his senses, and sent him reeling.

He proceeded from the study and up the stairs. She stirred, her arms moving and settling on his shoulders. He pulled her tighter against him. Desire surged within him when her full breasts flattened against his chest. She moaned softly as he reached her bed. He settled himself down on top of the bedspread at the foot of the mattress, still holding her tenderly in his arms.

Taking a deep breath, he reluctantly shoved back the comforter far enough so he could put her into bed. He fought the urge to join her under the covers.

Straightening slightly, he found her arms still clasped around his neck, dragging him back down toward her. Her eyes fluttered then closed tightly.

"I like this dream," she whispered, putting her nose to his neck and breathing deeply. "Nice." She arched upward, pulling him closer. "Especially when your arms hold me tight."

A low groan escaped his lips as he stroked her hair. "You fell asleep in the study so I brought you to bed," he whispered. "Goodnight." He attempted to straighten again.

"No!" She grabbed at him.

"What are you doing?"

"Scaring the hell out of you." She kissed him softly, but he clamped down on the heat that made him want to respond.

"Honey, you better wake up and see what you're about to unleash," he whispered into her mouth.

Her eyes opened wide, staring into his with wonder.

He smiled down at her warmly. "I'm real and so is this bed you're in."

She stretched, her movement whispering her body against his. "I've wanted to know what kissing you felt like for so long, Cal." She pulled back to look at him.

His gaze dropped to her lips. Her tongue flicked across them. "I've had a few fantasies of my own." He watched as emotions flickered across her face and her eyes fired with desire. "Why don't we both find out?" He slowly lowered his head.

Impatient, she pulled his mouth down to hers and he was more than willing to oblige her curiosity this time, effectively stopping any protest as their kiss deepened. Their lips and tongues sought each other in the darkness. They kissed like love-starved teenagers, no longer denying the nectar of each other's mouths. The kiss went on and on, so sweet and passionate, until it built to a craving for a deeper union.

They broke away from each other, gulping in air. "You taste wonderful," she whispered. "I never knew kissing could make you so warm inside, all tingly." Her fingers touched his lips and brushed softly back and forth across them. "I know this doesn't settle anything between us, but right now I don't care."

Cal nodded, finding speech difficult. All he could do was stare at her kiss-swollen lips and the moonlight reflecting in her lavender eyes, and feel his longing for her growing.

"Please be careful this afternoon when you ride those broncs and bulls for the photographers." She lightly brushed her lips across the knuckles of his right hand.

"I plan on staying in one piece." Sucking in a deep breath, he fought the urge to wrap his fingers into the soft strands of her gleaming hair and pull her mouth to his again. The desire seemed so strong he could almost feel her body leaning into his in response.

He thought about what she had said earlier. She was right, and he knew it. Sex wouldn't settle anything between them. God help him, it would only make matters worse, because afterwards he might never want to let her go.

"Goodnight," he whispered again with a raspy voice. He reluctantly left the bedroom. His lust-filled daze slowly dissipated with each step he took away from her.

Back in the study, he located Sinclair's mystery and laid it on the desk. Autumn's screensaver still floated like a ghost in front of him.

Suddenly he realized this was the chance he'd been waiting for. Autumn was asleep upstairs and her computer was practically begging him to take a look.

He moved the mouse, and found her account logged on. Moving quickly, he ran the program to recover the deleted e-mails between his mother and Autumn. As he did, he thought back to Autumn's troubled childhood, he wanted to know everything about her, especially the personal thing she needed his help to resolve. Cal still doubted it was a simple matter of helping her pregnant friend. That seemed too easy.

Within twenty minutes, he'd recovered the e-mails. He stared at the screen. Damn, his mother and Autumn sure had a lot to say to each other.

"What ya doing?" Luke's deep voice said from the doorway.

Startled, Cal hit the computer keys, sending the messages zinging to Autumn's account as new mail.

He glanced up. "Damn it, Luke."

Luke's eyebrows rose. "I came to check on Autumn. She's usually working in here."

"I took her to bed," Cal blurted. He concentrated on the mess he'd made of Autumn's account.

Luke chuckled. "I doubt that. You may have *put* her to bed, watch that Freudian slip before it gives you away."

Cal glared at him. "I just sent five-hundred-and-fifty messages I recovered to Autumn's account instead of mine. I'll resend them to my account and delete them from hers right now, but you gotta help. I'll keep her busy this morning while you and Garret print them for me."

"You don't have to keep her busy. She's borrowing the truck to pick up her plans from the architect and taking Josh for a treat at the ice cream parlor. On the way back, she's doing me a favor and stopping by the feed store for some supplies we need."

Cal shot to his feet and shook his head. "Are you out of your mind? The county Animal Center's right next to Al's Feed Store. She'll cart every condemned critter in the place back here to live."

"I don't think they'll all fit in the truck." Luke laughed. "But I sure would like to see her try." He jabbed Cal in the ribs with his elbow. "Lighten up. She isn't gonna do that. Besides, it's only temporary. When she goes, they go. Right? By the way, I wanted to give you a heads up. Sam Walters plans on asking Autumn out on a date, if you don't object."

Cal frowned, picturing a slightly balding, potbellied widower at least ten years older

than Autumn. "Tell him I said he's too old for her."

Luke grinned and nodded. "There'll be other men, some more her age. They won't ask for permission like Sam."

"If this is your subtle way of telling me you'll be one of them, go to hell."

"You're lucky I don't deck you." Luke folded his arms and looked straight ahead.

"You'd be right." Cal rammed his hand through his hair. "I don't know what got into me."

"Forget it. You're in enough hell for both of us."

Cal nodded. "Ethan Hill came back from Kentucky today. I got nowhere with getting him to turn over the two missing pages."

"You didn't expect to."

"No, but I asked him to drop by kind of casually tomorrow afternoon, meet the reporters, and insist Josh and Mother stay at his place while we ride the broncs and bulls."

"You aren't worried, are you?"

Cal hesitated, dismissing the premonition something bad was going to happen. "Of course not."

## Chapter Eight

Autumn lay in bed and struggled with the memories of that incredible, sensual kiss. Cal's kiss was nothing short of sweet torture. How could she not think about it?

The delicious tingling his moist tongue inflicted, teasing, coaxing her lips until they parted. The pressure of his mouth full upon hers, demanding her surrender. Their tongues seeking. Dueling. Caressing. She'd been lost in the heated kiss until they separated, gasping in awe that they'd both wanted more.

Her nipples beaded; the memory of their desire still fresh. Lord, she would dream about that kiss for the rest of her life. What an example of how to spice up her writing. Unable to sleep, she blew out a deep breath and tossed the covers aside. The clock read six-thirty as she made the bed.

After a quick shower, she slid a white V-neck tee over her head, shoved a red leather belt through the loops of her jeans, and stepped into her boots. Part of her longed to taste his lips again, another part of her feared losing herself to the sexual pleasure Cal stirred.

The idea of making love to Cal ignited her blood, but most days his feelings were painfully obvious. *Could she settle for mind-blowing wanton sex with no words of love?*

Her heart stopped when she entered the warm kitchen and saw the man starring in her fantasies. A freshly showered Cal stood at the marble counter in tight jeans. Once the coffeemaker stopped dripping, he snagged a cup of coffee and set it on the counter, along with a bran muffin from a basket piled with baked goodies. Opening the oven, he forked slices of ham and Belgian waffles from platters and placed them on the two china plates beside the pitcher of juice. Her mouth watered at the aroma wafting across the room.

His handsome face flushed as he looked up at her. She stood there for a moment, hoping for a sexy wink, a wicked grin, some kind of acknowledgment that their relationship had changed after last night. Instead, he seemed to prefer to ignore the entire situation. Had it meant nothing to him? Feeling uncomfortable at his continued silence, she poured herself a glass of orange juice, and grabbed a blueberry muffin.

Finally he smiled at her. "Everyone else has had breakfast, sleepyhead. Garret's in the study and Luke's in the barn practicing his roping for this afternoon. I waited until I heard you stir to start a fresh pot of coffee. Mother's worn out from staying up late last night. She went back to bed for another hour."

Autumn smiled, not fooled by Rachel for one second. She'd seen another opportunity to get them alone. "Where's Josh?"

"Where else?" Cal chuckled. "Enjoying his day off from school by saying hi to Sweet Lightning. He rides that miniature almost every day."

She was shocked as Cal fixed her a cup of coffee—adding two creams—the way she liked it. He moved everything for their meal to the octagonal game table that doubled as a breakfast nook.

Maybe she should take the initiative. "About last night—"

"We'll talk about it tonight," he said in a low tone, grabbing the maple syrup and linen napkins. "Somewhere private." He motioned for her to take the cushy aqua-colored chair beside him. "Never know who might walk in."

Or what might happen between the two of them, she thought, not daring to voice what they both knew.

The tension mounted as she ate, and they avoided any discussion of what was uppermost on both their minds. She'd thrown herself at Cal last night and he knew it. She poured syrup over the waffles then pushed the plate away.

They were wrong for each other. But when he'd held her in his arms her body replied, who cared? Would she rather have one night with Cal, or live with the regret that she'd passed up the one thing she craved?

Cal's voice brought her back to reality when he volunteered to take her and Josh to pick up her plans from the architect, before they headed for supplies.

"Dad." At the sound of the familiar voice, Autumn glanced at Josh bounding through the back door and into the kitchen. "I'm ready to go."

Autumn fought a smile as she surveyed Josh, a typical, mischievous boy, covered in mud from his hair to his sneakers.

"What in the world have you been into?" Cal hunkered down to his son's level, a look of amusement on his face. Her heart tugged at the picture they made.

"I had to say goodbye and help wash Miss Piggy. She's getting adopted this afternoon. This is the last time she'll have fun in the mud. Isn't it, Miss Autumn?"

She nodded.

"Where's she going?" Cal stood and moved to her side.

"To a nice home. The article I wrote featured Miss Piggy as the Pet of the Day in the local newspaper, and a man answered the ad. Their family recently lost their potbellied pig. They'll pick Miss Piggy up early this afternoon."

Josh held up his filthy hands and crossed several of his fingers. "We washed Miss Piggy *and* Miss Puddles, Dad. Then they'll just have straw to play on so they'll stay real clean. We're hoping the nice man will take 'em both in his car."

"His car?" Cal's brows furrowed.

Autumn lifted her chin. Was he going to believe this? Nah! But it was the truth. "Miss Piggy will be riding in style—a limousine. White to be exact."

"The same color as the straight-jacket the nice man will be wearing?"

"Noooo. Dr. Jacobs is perfectly sane, in fact, he's a renowned heart surgeon. His kids love potbellied pigs. They're coming with him."

Cal turned toward Autumn. A grin split his face. "You really think we can palm both pigs off on Dr. Jacobs and his family?"

Josh giggled. "They look really cute. We dressed them in red-checkered vests."

Autumn took his slippery hand. "I'll get him cleaned up, while you clear the table."

After a long shower, Josh finally looked like the little boy she knew so well. She sopped up water from the black and beige tile while he stepped into his jeans and pulled a navy striped shirt over his head. He sat on the edge of the tub waiting for her to help him with his socks and boots.

After she finished dressing him, he put his arms around her neck and hugged her tight. "Do you like my dad more than Uncle Luke?"

The question floored her. As they headed toward the hall, she replied, "I like them both, but it's a different kind of like."



Once they reached the stairs, he turned and looked up at her. "Would you do me a favor?"

"If I can," she answered, not sure where this conversation was heading.

"Go on a date with my dad. My grandma goes on 'em all the time with Mr. Hill. She says that's how you know if you love someone or not."

Somehow Josh had tapped into a secret hope of hers. She studied his earnest face as she tried to formulate the right answer. "Sweetie, whether your father and I love each other or not, I won't ever stop loving you, but dating has to be your dad's idea, not yours or mine."

His brows furrowed. "Oh." He trotted down the stairs with Autumn close on his heels.

He reached the bottom of the stairs then raced toward the kitchen. "Dad, I want you to ask Miss Autumn for a date."

Autumn blushed. "Sorry, I didn't put him up to this."

"Relax. I know you better than that. Besides, I already asked you out, remember? Somewhere private."

"O-Okay." His gaze moved to her mouth. She nervously licked her lips and her breath caught at the heat emanating from beneath his half-lidded eyes.

Josh grinned from ear-to-ear as they left the house. He wore the same happy expression at the architect's.

Dust and dirt flew as the tires ground onto the gravel parking lot of Al's Feed Store. She pulled Luke's supply list from her purse.

"I think Luke's already telephoned Al. He should have these ready by now. While you take care of this, I have some business to discuss with the Director of the Animal Center." She handed the list to Cal, hopped out of the truck, and made a beeline toward the Animal Center.

"Hang on, we'll go with you." Cal's strangled croak drew her attention. "I mean, in case you need us for anything."

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Like what?"

"To help bring home strays," Josh chirped up. "I heard Uncle Luke and Uncle Garret laughing about it."

"Is that so," Autumn huffed.

Cal scrambled out on the driver's side, pulling Josh with him. "You plan on rescuing all of them, don't you?"

"Yes." She practically flew up the sidewalk and entered the center, hoping Mrs. Gage, the Director, had decided to take her up on the proposal she'd written to the Animal Center. It was a win-win proposition for the animals. Surely allowing photographers to feature a "Pet of the Day" as a promotional tool would encourage adoptions and help owners find lost pets.

"It isn't part of the movie contract. I won't allow them on my property." Cal followed close on her heels.

Autumn ignored the anger building inside her at his callous attitude. At the counter a bubbly red-headed young lady wearing a stained white lab coat grinned at Autumn.

"Can I get you to autograph this? I can hardly wait for the tour of Whittaker Oaks." She extended a copy of *Hearts Entwined* and a pen to Autumn. "I'm Melanie Dillon. I think what you're doing to help us save our animals is wonderful. Mrs. Gage gave the green light to start anytime."

Autumn smiled at her young fan. She turned and winked at Josh, lifted her chin

slightly and gave Cal a see-there look.

After Autumn scrawled a cheerful message and her signature, Melanie said, "I want to show you the ones we're hoping to find adoptions for right away through your program."

Josh laced the little fingers of his left hand in Autumn's and his right hand in Cal's. Autumn and Melanie discussed the program while Cal interjected questions periodically as they clopped down the vinyl hallway. He seemed especially pleased to learn Autumn's rescued animals would be among those featured for adoption. She gave Melanie the exact time the photographers would arrive the next day.

The smell of disinfectant burned Autumn's nostrils and she released Josh's hand. They stepped into the cement area housing cages with barking and meowing hopefuls inside. Autumn smiled at the freshly groomed Heinz-57 variety ready for their photo-session tomorrow: gray-stripped kittens with stunning blue eyes, and long-haired dogs with chocolate and reddish-blond fur.

"Are you sure you don't want to hold off for awhile on that ugly thing?" Cal pointed to a cage on the far left side. "I can't see anyone wanting that dog the way it is now."

His rejection of the poor critter stung Autumn. But it wasn't the first time Cal had voiced his gruff opinion, nor would it be the last. She stared at the sad looking mongrel. Extremely thin, the puppy's long, yellowish fur stuck out at a variety of angles. Ugly bald spots followed the contour of its body where it looked like clumps of hair had been shaved away in hopes of a new healthy coat once the pup received adequate nourishment and care. The memory of her own pet, Blondie, brought tears to her eyes. She quickly blinked them back remembering with agony the day her childhood pet had been snatched from her arms. She opened the cage, picked up the tail-wagging, tongue-licking puppy, and cuddled it against her. Bending her head, she kissed its neck.

"Don't pay him any mind, Blondie," Autumn whispered, her voice almost cracking. "His bark's worse than his bite. You're beautiful and some nice family will adopt you. One with a houseful of kids." The kind of family Autumn wanted, but doubted she'd ever have. Blondie deserved the best and she'd see she got it.

"Her eyes are kinda lonely and sad." Josh moved closer to stroke the puppy.

Cal pulled Josh away from the dog. "Son, you know better. It may have mange. You don't want to contaminate the farm, do you?"

"I'll make sure your good side shows in the pictures. Come here." Melanie lifted her, placing her lovingly back in the cage, giving Cal a dirty look. "Don't you worry, precious. Maybe when your coat gets all shiny and smooth again, you'll be lucky and get adopted."

Cal moved closer and stared at Autumn with concern. "Sorry I jumped to the wrong conclusion. One minute I think I have you figured out, but then you surprise me."

"Yeah, that's how it works with people sometimes." Her disappointment in Cal clearly registered in the tone of her voice.

"I'm gonna get me a dog," Josh's boasted. They strolled along the sidewalk from the Animal Clinic to Al's Feed Store. "Maybe two or three."

Cal smiled. "On the way home, we'll stop by the pet store for ferret and rabbit food. I'll show you and Autumn some real dogs. Purebreds."

"What kind are you getting for Josh?" Autumn asked.

"An Australian Shepherd. But it'll take a while. It's a medium-sized dog, blue-Merle

color. He'll be strong at herding and good at guarding our Thoroughbreds from foxes."

"How much do they cost?"

"Five hundred and up."

She shook her head. "You could buy a lot of dogs for that kind of money."

"But they aren't purebred and AKC registered."

Pain gnawed at her stomach. In his book, an animal had to have papers in order to deserve love.

Fifteen minutes later, they had paid for the supplies, loaded them in the back of the truck, and began the quiet twenty-minute drive to the pet store.

Josh flew through the door of the pet store, heading straight for the bunnies. Walking past the glass tanks containing enormous lizards and snakes, Cal quickly gathered up the ferret and rabbit food Josh's pets needed and placed them on the counter, almost bumping into Autumn. You'd think they were attached at the hip. In spite of their arguments and her disappointment in Cal, for one naughty moment, she wished they were. At least then she'd have material for her love scene.

Five minutes later, Josh paraded to the front of the store carrying a carpeted climbing tree for his ferrets to the pile on the counter and ran to see the gerbils.

Cal motioned to the middle-aged, heavy-set shop owner. "When do you think you'll get that Australian Shepherd in, Henry?"

"Another month at the most."

"I'll go ahead and pay for these now. We're going to take a look at the purebred puppies for sale in the back."

"Help yourself. We got some new ones that just came in yesterday. The inventory moves pretty fast."

After Cal settled his bill and loaded the packages into the truck, they strolled around each small house, Josh determined to pet each yapping, slobbering pup. Autumn wiped away a stray tear for the perfect man and his perfect world, hating to face the realization Cal could never be anything more to her than research.

Cal couldn't forget the tone in Autumn's voice or the look in her eyes at the Animal Clinic. He'd disappointed her, even hurt her, but he couldn't help it. Hell, he abhorred the idea of bringing other animals onto the farm. After all, he certainly wasn't some modern day Old MacDonald. Why couldn't she be more down-to-earth? Why couldn't he accept that she was different and stop trying to make excuses for why he was attracted to her?

The conflict between them was eating him alive inside. Every time he hurt or disappointed her, he knew he should stay a thousand miles away. For both their sakes. But he couldn't. Dammit, he wanted her too badly.

Cal watched her stride up and down the aisle. Someone should outlaw those tight jeans of hers. He fought the urge to grab her and kiss her. Thoroughly. Much as Cal hated to admit it, some kind of strong, urgency flared whenever he saw her.

Autumn had gushed over those hapless, ugly flea-bitten strays yet there she stood, fairly ignoring the fine looking collies and terriers.

Out of the corner of his eye, Cal saw a white bunny jump trying to leap from its cage. The poor animal's eyes rounded. It cowered in the corner as a large python dropped over the side of the adjacent glass tank and slithered toward its prey.

Autumn screamed. The hairs on Cal's arms jumped to attention. Cal watched the bloodthirsty reptile answering the call of his nature.

"Save her!" Josh frantically pulled on Cal's shirt.

Ah, hell, the snake had to live too, but Cal didn't want to see any rabbit swallowed whole, let alone have Josh and Autumn witness such cruelty. He ran to the tank, reached inside and lifted the frightened fur ball to safety.

Autumn and Josh ran up beside Cal, looking up at him as if he could leap tall buildings in one bound. He wouldn't trade this feeling, the looks of hero worship in their eyes for anything.

"James, get out here," Henry yelled to a worker in the back. "Move that python somewhere else. He crawled into one of the rabbit's tanks."

Cal held the rabbit up in front of him, studying its deformed face. It had one ugly kisser. "What's wrong with this thing, Henry?"

"She was born with her teeth pointing out. The vet has to file them down every other week. Oh, and you have to chop her lettuce up or she can't eat it."

My God, he'd done it now. He'd rescued a vampire rabbit. All this thing needed was a widow's peak and a cape.

He hated to ask, but this fleabag couldn't cost much. "How much for this rabbit with the birth defect?"

"Well." Henry hesitated, glancing from Autumn to Josh several times and back to Cal. "Let you have her for twenty-five."

No way could Cal explain buying a vampire to Luke, who'd have to file her teeth down every other week. How was Cal ever going to live this down? Jeez. He'd be the butt of everyone's jokes for months, especially Luke and 'Un-huh' Sean.

He glanced at Josh and then at Autumn, still seeing hero worship in their bright eyes, and reluctantly said the magic word that brought wide grins to their faces, "Sold."

"Thanks Dad, Drac will love you forever, I swear."

Cal loosened his hold on the rabbit, handing him to Josh's loving arms, who ran to add the fur-ball to his items on the counter.

Autumn moved closer. Lord, she smelled good. Her shapely mouth smiled warmly at him, and she winked. The need to touch her overwhelmed his last vestige of self-control. He caught her in his arms and swiftly claimed her lips in a hungry kiss.

His mind drifted back to that night in her queen-sized bed, she'd lit the match and ignited a slow burn inside him that scorched them both. It was a wonder the pink-striped sheets hadn't ignited into a two-alarm fire the minute their lips met.

The languid heat filled his groin again, reminding him of how much he wanted to carry her to bed. So far he'd survived two kisses and the world hadn't caved in on him.

He witnessed burning desire and hurt in her eyes when he jerked her away from him. What he saw made him want a whole lot more from her.

*Trouble.* He remembered what happened after he'd kissed her in his nightmare. Trucks and animals invaded Whittaker Oaks.

"Wow, don't I get a thank you like that?" Henry chuckled, puckering up.

"Shut up, Henry," Cal growled.

Silence. On the way back home, Josh was nestled between them in sweet slumber, with

the ugly rabbit snuggled comfortably in his arms. Autumn stared out the window, memorizing the road. He should say something to ease the tension, but what? He'd much rather she'd yell like his ex-wife, anything but this infernal quiet. She leapt from the truck the moment they pulled up to the house without a word.

Ten minutes later, Cal left Josh at the rabbits' cage and walked toward the barn. Behind him, he heard Josh yelling for Uncle Luke to come see the new rabbit. Cal shook his head. How in the world was he going to live this down?

After checking on yesterday's arrival of three Thoroughbreds and greeting their trainers, Cal headed to the house. A red station wagon was parked in the circular drive. He figured it must be someone else Luke was interviewing for the three positions they needed to fill.

Once he entered the kitchen, he spotted his mother baking an apple pie. He wandered upstairs feeling like a stranger in his own home. Luke and Garret leaned against Autumn's bedroom, ears glued to the closed door.

"What's going on?" Cal asked.

"Quiet," Luke whispered. "Listen."

"You shouldn't be eavesdropping," Cal snapped.

"Ooooh, that hurts," Autumn cried out.

Concerned, Cal stepped into the carpeted hallway so he could hear more clearly. His temper flared at the thought of someone hurting her. "She all right?"

"You got to do it hard for it to do any good," the male voice said from the other side of the closed door.

Immediately Cal crowded Garret out. Worry quickly turned to jealousy. "What's a man doing in the bedroom with her?"

"Ohhh, right there," Autumn purred. "That felt good. Harder, please."

Cal had heard enough. He reached for the doorknob.

"Noooo." Luke stopped Cal's hand. "It's not what you think."

Cal glowered at him.

"Mother hired a massage guy from Abigail's. He brought his table and everything."

"I'm going to slip this blanket down a little lower so I can do your lower back," the male voice cooed.

"You think she's naked?" Cal asked.

"Probably," Garret agreed.

Luke suddenly sounded like an expert. "I think the part he's working on is exposed."

"He's working on her backside," Cal remarked, alarmed as he realized just what part Autumn had fully exposed to some strange guy. "You mean she's butt naked on that table?"

"How the hell would I know?" Luke whispered and winked. "It's only a massage for heaven's sake. Chill."

"Chill? That's Autumn in there, not some stripper," Cal snapped.

"Kinda like having a license to a free peep show." Garret snickered. "Nice way to make a living."

Cal glared over his shoulder at Garret. "Not if I get a hold of the guy."

"Let me know if I get too rough," Autumn's masseuse said. "Take a deep breath and let it out real slow. You have a knot from a muscle strain in your lower back."

"He's copping a feel of her butt," Luke whispered with a teasing glance at Cal.

Cal's hands went for the doorknob again. "That does it."

Luke and Garrett both tackled him, holding him back. They turned him and headed him away from the massage action. "Whoa, Cal, drop it," Luke said. "Cross my heart, the guy's gay so there's nothing to worry about."

"Then why were you listening outside her door?"

"Guarding your beautiful interest in case he decided to suddenly become bisexual. Besides, you got one little problem and one big problem we need to talk to you about immediately." Luke guided them toward the study.

Cal glanced suspiciously from Luke to Garret.

"Nice job you did making sure Autumn didn't bring home any animals this morning," Luke teased.

Garret poked Cal in the ribs. "Tell him what he did with that vampire rabbit."

"You put a male rabbit in with Josh's two females." Luke locked the door to the study as they stepped inside.

Cal shook his head and shrugged. "Henry kept calling it a her. Just take him out."

Luke and Garret chuckled. "Too late. The damage's already done. You should see the grin on his pitiful face." Luke winked.

"Was that the little problem?"

"Hell, no." Garret laughed. "And it sure wasn't the big problem. I'll let Luke stay for the screaming. I just wanted to tease you a bit." Garret chuckled. "Oh, Josh's been watching them, and he has a few interesting questions for you," he said over his shoulder as he left.

"Oh, crap," Cal murmured.

"Here's the little problem." Luke reached inside the oak desk drawer and pulled out an open envelope. "This Special Delivery came today. I signed for it." He handed it to Cal.

His temper spiked when he recognized Ethan Hill's handwriting on the front.

Luke stilled Cal's hand. "Before you read it, I've read it and we have it covered. The other road is built and we have space already blocked off."

"What is it?"

"The second missing page of the contract, page twenty-three, along with an attachment. A Permit for Exotic Animals."

Cal carefully removed the papers, read half of it, and dropped into the leather chair. "Damn it to hell and back."

The columns listed the type of animal, the quantity, and the date they were to arrive in semi-trucks. Two baby giraffes. One elephant. Four llamas. Three ostriches. Ten zebras.

"I don't suppose they belong to the studio?" His voice rose on a note of hope.

Luke shook his head. "According to the footnote, the studio has agreed to ship these here for Autumn and Kayla."

"It just gets better and better."

Whittaker Oaks was becoming a damn zoo. His nightmare come true. First he kissed Autumn, and then all hell broke loose. Caravans of animals as far as the eye could see.

"This is the small problem?" Dread almost caused Cal's mind to shut down. Icy fear wrapped his heart.

"To my way of thinking it is." Luke's voice became somber. "We had to send some of

the e-mails to your account. You can print them later. I read the ones that pertained to this 'personal problem' you agreed to help Autumn with."

"And," Cal prompted. How in the world could Autumn's personal problem be worse than this caravan of horrors?

Luke patted him on the shoulder. "Autumn explained to you in her e-mails that she's written love scenes, but she's never experienced them. Cal, someone else has always had to edit them for her. They don't have enough passion in them."

"What does that have to do with me?"

Luke chuckled. "Everything, bro. In the six months you supposedly wrote to each other, the two of you grew close. Real close. She thinks you're her best friend, trusts you completely. So much so, that she wants you to be the first."

Cal rejected the thought that popped into his head. Couldn't be that.

*No woman writes a man she doesn't know and asks him to do that. On the Internet? Did she?*

"First what?"

"I'll paint you a picture." Luke reached into the drawer again. He pulled out a little black box and handed it to Cal. "Christmas came early, bro."

Cal stared at the condoms. His initial shock quickly turned to anger then hurt. "You mean I'm some kinda sex research for her writing?"

"Bingo."

## Chapter Nine

Cal cracked open the study doors and peered out. The stairs across were empty. So was the hall leading in one direction to the kitchen and in the other to the formal living room.

A murmur of conversation floated from the kitchen in the rear of the house. He strained his ears to make out the voices. Mother and someone else. If he hurried, he could slip past them.

He grabbed the box of condoms, shoved them into his shirt pocket and sprinted for the stairs, straight for his bathroom. Once there, he opened the cabinet and hid the box behind his cans of shaving cream and bars of soap, then he returned to the study. When he stepped inside, Luke smiled at him from a nearby chair.

"I haven't seen you move that fast since you ran track in college," Luke drawled, his blue-jean clad legs sprawled in front of him.

Cal cleared his throat and ignored his brother's teasing as he took a seat behind the desk. He blew out a long slow breath, relieved Autumn hadn't witnessed that particular object's vanishing act. If she had, he'd be sorely tempted to forget restraint, take her to bed, and keep her there until he'd used the whole damned box.

Luke leaned forward and pointed to the in-basket. "I need you to review the two contracts, initial the changes we agreed on, and sign them before I meet with Goldman Friday afternoon. If the TV publicity continues to increase our business, we'll have to hire extra help." He lifted a brow. "I guess you still don't want to admit something good's coming from this contract, do you?"

At the "I told you so look" on Luke's face, Cal's temper spiked. *Any* publicity would have increased their business, but they didn't need this kind. He leveled a calm, serious look at his brother. "I take a somewhat broader view of this situation than you. Face it—we're a joke. People in town are betting whether our entrance sign will change to Whittaker Oaks Zoo or Whittaker Oaks Wild West Show."

Luke's face split into another grin. "Come on, bro. Where's your sense of humor? You gotta admit it's funny. Half the town plans on coming out to watch us unload the elephant next week. If you'd *laugh* with them once in a while, let 'em know the changes don't bother you, they'd stop goading you."

"Well, when they come out next week to rib us some more, maybe you can give me lessons." Cal massaged the faint throb at his temples, the start of another bad headache. Without a doubt, it would last until this whole mess blew over.

Luke dragged his hand through his hair. "When I went to the barber, they told me hotels are filling up fast with early registrations. It'll be hard to find a vacancy within a fifty mile radius during the filming. Look at it this way, they won't tease you about the new business and tourists heading their way. This movie will put the town on the map as a sightseeing attraction. Stop thinking of yourself, bro. Think about our town and the people who live here."

Cal gave up massaging his aching temples and rounded on his brother. "It's a helluva mess. Don't you care we'll be hounded by spectators? We'll have no privacy." He tightened his lips, trying to rein in his anger as he considered the chaos Autumn had brought to his



father's cherished horse farm. "Whittaker Oaks is a *stud farm*, not a tourist attraction."

"Of course I care, but Garret and I don't see why it can't be both. Several large horse farms have scheduled bus tours of their place. We thought—"

"I don't want to hear it."

"Will you at least *think* about it?"

Cal focused on Luke as his pitiless voice cut through the pounding in his head. "No." He groaned at the anguish that single word caused as it left his throat.

"But, you'll be working with Autumn anyway, ironing out the details of her book signing and tour. Just see how it goes." Luke's tone turned cajoling.

No one needed to remind him he'd be working with Autumn on a daily basis. He'd thought about little else. How could he keep his hands off her? What if he didn't? One touch, one kiss... What if he lost control? What if they both did? He took a deep breath, fighting the panic eating at his insides.

"No," he said between clenched teeth.

"But, it could lay the groundwork for us to jump on the bandwagon after the movie's made." Luke blew out a frustrated breath. "Dammit, Cal, there's more than one way to make Dad's dream come true."

"Don't talk to me about Dad," he said stiffly. "Autumn put you up to this, didn't she?"

"No, and you better not tear into her about it either." Luke's blue eyes sparkled. "She simply asked Garret why we're passing up an excellent business opportunity, which made his accountant ears shoot up, and you know what? She's right."

Cal lifted his chin. "Really? Well I'm certainly glad to know where you stand. I'll think about it, but I'm not promising anything. Dad never wanted our farm turned into a tourist stop. I owe it to him—"

Luke's face turned red. He stood, and slammed his fist into the wall with such force Cal expected it to shoot out the other side. "Owe him for what?" he spat.

Cal's jaw dropped.

"Get real. Dad wanted a lot of things and to hell with everyone else's feelings. He let you know exactly how much you'd disappointed him when you, the first-born, didn't follow his footsteps and become a vet. Dad was dead wrong. All I ask is keep an open mind and do what's best for our farm and the town."

Cal nodded reluctantly. Memories of his father's hurtful remarks still stung.

*Son, I didn't give you life so you could waste it. I'm counting on you to carry your load.* Up until the day he died, Cal saw disappointment in his father's eyes.

The past was best forgotten. Once he accomplished his father's dreams for Whittaker Oaks, he could stop believing the seed of doubt his father had planted in his mind.

They glanced at each other awkwardly. Cal grabbed a shipment notification and handed it to Luke. "Seems Kayla rescued two monkeys and a zebra. They'll be here tomorrow."

"I know. She called and we talked about them three days ago. We coordinated their dietary needs. I've got it covered."

"That's news to me. How about letting me in on this stuff up front, not after the fact? I hate surprises."

Luke paced to the fax machine as he shook his head. "You hate not having control."

Well, I'm here to tell you, I don't need a sitter. Garret and I own part of the farm, too."

Cal stiffened as he met Luke's steely look that dared him to disagree. "I wouldn't have to keep such a tight control if you two had a lick of sense. Can't you see what you're doing to the place?"

"Making money?" Luke asked. "Is that so bad? I wish you'd lighten up and have a little fun. If you want my advice, and I sure as hell know you don't, I'd say get a life with Autumn." A secretive smile tugged at his lips, and he gave Cal a level look. "You're in love with her, bro. Worry more about mending those fences."

In love with her? He thought about all the times he'd ached for her sweet body, yet denied himself. Why? If it had been any other woman, he'd have given in. Savored the mutual sexual gratification with no complications when they parted. Because he knew the truth. One taste of her, and he could never let her go. That's why he stayed in a constant tug-of-war with himself.

"How do you think Autumn will feel after she discovers the truth about this whole fiasco? For six months she talked to Mother, not me, but I've perpetuated a truck load of lies ever since she set foot in this house."

Judging from the worried look on Luke's face, he'd vote to keep it from her forever. Cal was tempted, but he couldn't do that. She might never forgive him, but she deserved to know the truth. He needed to tell her before things got out of control. Their relationship was sliding into the red-hot, danger zone fast. He shifted in the creaking wooden chair and crossed his leg at the images flashing through his mind. He could hurt them both, if he did something stupid, like take her to bed without telling her the truth.

"I need you to do two things, Luke. Keep Autumn and Josh busy while I get something off my chest with Mother." Cal hated the way his mother had led sweet, vulnerable Autumn into a position like this. And him. What if he'd surrendered to his burning impulses? Would she ever have forgiven him? Could he ever have forgiven himself for hurting her?

Luke rolled his eyes. "You don't have to worry about Autumn and Josh. They're fussing over those potbellied pigs, waiting for Dr. Jacobs to arrive in his white limo. He'll be here in less than an hour, so keep your conversation with Mother short."

"I will." Cal absently rustled some papers on his desk. How much lip would Luke give him about this next request? "Don't make a big deal about this, but stop by the Animal Center tomorrow. Get Melanie Dillon to show you a mangy-looking puppy they plan to feature as Pet of the Day. Check the stray out."

"If she's healthy, should I bring the mutt home?"

Leaning forward with his elbows on the desk, Cal shook his head. "Jeeze, you should know better than to ask a dumb question like that. Autumn plans to take it with her when she leaves. I don't want anything bad happening to the dog. It breaks her heart when anything's hurt."

"And we wouldn't want to break Autumn's heart, would we?" Luke asked in a singsong voice and flashed a wry smile. "You send more mixed signals than a broken traffic light. No wonder you and Autumn are so miserable. Take the woman to bed—for all our sakes." He hurried to the door, and then turned, his hand on the knob. "I'm leaving before the fireworks start."

Cal stomped into the kitchen. "Mother, I need to speak with you."

"Really?" She tsked, shook her head, then shuffled to the coffeepot, slowly took down her mug and poured a fresh cup. Turning toward him, she leveled an equally steady gaze his way. "I've already sworn your danged oath on the Bible. What more do you want?"

"To get some things off my chest," he replied calmly. "I recovered the e-mails you exchanged with Autumn. It seems I, or rather *you* volunteered me to solve a special problem for Autumn. You do remember what that little problem is, don't you?"

Recollection dawned in Rachel's eyes, and Cal heaved a sigh when her lips formed a small O. He pulled out a chair and sat down, crooked his finger and signaled, pointing to the one beside him. Rachel screwed up her mouth in a grimace and slid into it.

"Ah, hell," Rachel whined. "I figured you'd solve the problem before ever knowing about it in the first place." She leaned back, covered her face with her hands and moaned.

Cal stared at her in disbelief. "Luke never was your target, was he?"

His mother shook her head, not even looking up.

"I had an inkling of that from day one," Cal admitted, concern for her stirring in his heart. Though determined to speak his peace, he tried to soften his words. "You planted that suspicion to throw Autumn and me together. But, I can't believe you thought I'd callously take her for a quick toss between the sheets."

She looked up, her eyes flashing dangerously. "Young man, if you think for one minute sex is all that sweet woman needs or deserves, I'm totally ashamed of you." She reached over to pat his hand. Her voice softened. "Don't worry. It'll work out fine for both of you. Once she buys her land, she'll move away. All her animals will go with her, and that'll solve your problems. Of course, she'll continue to see Josh because she loves him, and once she finds someone who'll really appreciate her, she'll get married —"

"Married?" He flinched. The horrible thought of Autumn's sweet body in another man's bed filled him with rage and pain.

Rachel gaped at him, her mouth hanging open. "Lord, if that's not just like a man. You don't want her for yourself, but you don't want anyone else to have her." She arched an accusing brow at him. "I certainly hope you don't think Autumn's going to sit around pining for you. Oh, no. She'll be snatched up by some handsome devil quicker than you can count to two. One who'll share her dreams, even help her with them." His mother leaned back in her chair to eye him. "I'm kind of looking forward to having her and the brand new husband over for dinner from time-to-time. Aren't you?"

A chill coursed through his entire body, reaching deep into his soul to encase his heart like a lead coffin. Could he pretend seeing Autumn lovingly touched by another man wouldn't eat him alive inside? A part of him was dying. The part called hope.

Rachel smiled warmly. "I didn't think so. That old saying's true, opposites attract."

Attraction didn't even scratch the surface of his feelings for Autumn. But would they end up making each other miserable? "I'm not sure I could sit back and let her turn Whittaker Oaks into Noah's Ark."

"Okay, Mr. Attorney, let's get down to facts, something you *do* understand, because you sure don't know squat about women and how to get along with them. Now, how many acres is Autumn using for her animals?"

"Less than ten, so far."

"Wow, that much." Rachel's eyes sparkled with mischief. "She sure is overrunning the

place all right."

Cal shifted uneasily in his chair. "But she'll build an animal rescue clinic and God knows what else. Garret mentioned she also wants a free petting zoo for children."

"So what? You deposited the check from the studio, took out a loan, which you'll be able to pay off after the movie's made. And your business is growing. Within two weeks you'll have enough money to purchase the property next door, double the farm's acreage. Excuse me, where's the problem?"

Cal flushed. "Autumn's animals aren't Thoroughbreds. This farm has been in our family five generations. We have to protect our name. I don't want it turned into some nationwide joke."

"Listen to yourself. That hogwash sounds like stubborn, irrational, male pride. The same blind logic your father used to fight any changes I thought he should make to this place. Do you think Autumn should be ashamed of using the money she earns writing books to help animals?"

"Of course not."

"But you expect her to give up her dreams for yours. That's real big of you. I'm sure she'll welcome that idea with open arms." Rachel sighed. "If you can't respect her and learn to love her unconditionally, then you don't deserve her. You know, you really are part of this farm – the horse's behind."

He couldn't argue with that. Worse, he wanted to learn to love Autumn that way, but it was hopeless. "It won't do any good to talk. We're incompatible, and that's all there is to it."

"You don't want my advice, but you're getting it. Son, you aren't incompatible unless you *want* to be incompatible. If I had ten cents for every time I got so frustrated with your father's inability to see I might be right, I could stop buying lottery tickets. James, God rest his stubborn, ornery soul, never would give an inch, not until I'd backed him against a wall. Even when he knew he was dead wrong. Your father was a good man, but he broke my heart more than once, son. Don't be so bull-headed with Autumn. Try using a little thing called communication and practicing that horrible word you hate."

"Compromise?" He choked.

She shook her head, chuckling softly.

Cal remembered the first time he'd heard that word. When he was seven, his father had shouted to his mother to shut up. She'd yelled back and the first of many bitter arguments had ensued. Afterwards, Cal had spent several days acting as the messenger between them. Back then, she had tried to hide her tears from Cal, but he'd seen them. More than once. He didn't want to treat Autumn the way his father had treated his mother.

Maybe his mother could shed some light on Autumn's need to save the world. "How'd Autumn get this way?"

"You're asking the wrong person, but I have a theory. Displaced love."

Totally confused, Cal narrowed his eyes. Here comes more of the Psych class Mother took at the community college.

"She's replacing something she lost. Her animals love her no matter what. They never reject her. Once she has a family of her own, someone who gives her the love she never had as a child, the animal rescues might taper off."

"Will they go away completely?"

Rachel jabbed him in the ribs. "Noooo. It's not going to be that easy for you, young man. You make it sound like she has the plague. The woman's the most tenderhearted soul I've ever met. She loves all critters, including your precious Thoroughbreds." Twinkling laughter escaped her and she smiled with genuine affection. "Calvin Whittaker, you're hopeless, you know that?"

"Dad, come quick," Josh yelled. He bounded through the back door and into the kitchen. "Miss Piggy took her vest off and we can't get her to do nothin'."

Pleased for some obscure reason, Cal smiled as he stood and let Josh pull him out the door. His mother's chuckles rang out behind them. He grinned and realized for the first time why he was so happy. Nothing was ever boring, something new was always happening with Autumn around.

"I wouldn't miss this for the world," he said to Josh as they rounded the corner of the pen.

Cal stopped dead in his tracks, dragging Josh to a halt.

"Be a nice girl," Autumn pleaded, holding the vest with one hand and reaching out the other to the overweight pig. "Please let us put your vest back on. Dr. Jacobs wants to surprise his little girls so you have to wear this."

Autumn and Melanie hunkered down, one on either side of the pig, who sprawled out like a queen on the fresh hay.

"Stop eating the snaps off your new outfit," Melanie said in a serious tone.

Together, they tried to shove the pig's front feet into the armholes of the red-checked vest. The pig grunted and pushed both of them backwards with its snout. Autumn glanced in Cal's direction, as if feeling his gaze.

"Well, don't stand there grinning like an idiot," she yelled. "If you want them gone, give us a hand."

"Okay, I'm smart enough to know when I'm licked," he said as he knelt beside her.

He couldn't believe he was helping to dress a pig, but he wanted them off his property. Today. Rachel and Josh stood on the sidelines laughing. Cal bent and gripped the tub-of-lard. The fat rolled in his hands as he lifted its front. They shoved the vest onto the animal's feet then Cal released the weight.

As they forced the vest over the pig's head and smoothed it on her back, the animal stood and knocked both women backwards. Melanie landed butt first in the hay.

No such luck with Autumn. He reached upward and broke her fall as her body fell on top of him. Her bottom landed against his crotch, not hard enough to damage his family jewels, thank God, but enough for him to realize he would embarrass them both if he didn't get that slow-moving, tantalizing object off him fast. As if burned by hot coals, he shoved her aside and rolled away from her.

Autumn glanced his way. "Are you hurt?"

"If I am, are you willing to kiss it and make it better?"

She looked toward his zipper. Her eyes widened and she blushed.

Cal shifted and glanced away. She'd seen the hard bulge of his rising desire flex against the denim. The evidence of his need for her was too damned obvious. He groaned inwardly, distinctly uncomfortable and feeling oddly vulnerable.

Thirty-minutes later, they were saying "cheese" in front of Dr. Jacobs' white limo, while

his wife and their red-headed four-year-old twins hugged their newly adopted pets. Autumn snapped several pictures of them loading Miss Piggy and Miss Puddles into the car for their trip home.

As the snapshots developed, Autumn stood toe-to-toe with Cal. She gave him an I-told-you-so grin and presented each photo to him like a trophy. "For the fireplace mantel in the living room, Mr. Smarty-Pants."

"None of this makes sense," he whispered to Autumn, shaking his head in bewilderment.

"What makes you say that?" Autumn whispered back.

"Something must be wrong with this doctor. Why would a wealthy, respected cardiologist shove pigs into a limo and take them to live in his plush home?"

A soft chuckle made them jump. They glanced around and Doctor Jacobs smiled. Cal chuckled as Autumn turned beet red.

Cal drew the doctor aside. "Sorry about that. You must be crazy – about pigs?"

Dr. Jacobs laughed, shook his head, and pointed to the animals. They sat like dogs on the back seat and stared out the window.

"Don't tell them, they'll be offended." He renewed his helpless chuckles. "There's only one thing I'm crazy about – my family. I do a lot of things I swore I'd never do to keep them happy. Something tells me if you marry Autumn one day, you'll find that out real fast for yourself. Good luck."

Cal glanced at Autumn and gulped. Did he dare take the next step with her?

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Autumn held the phone tight and asked Sean Heaton, the realtor, to repeat what he'd said. "I said you can have the sixty acres you wanted. The owners changed their minds. They've agreed to sell parcels."

She dropped onto the nearby stool in the kitchen. Her heart raced. Was Cal actually willing to let her have half the land he wanted to purchase? She recalled Rachel had said he needed another thirty acres for the training facility. He'd end up with sixty acres, just like her, more than enough for them both. Maybe it was true.

"Are you sure Cal won't mind? I thought he planned on doubling the size of his ranch."

"Cal said to give you whatever land you wanted. I talked to him. Trust me. This is what he wants."

The sound of heels clicked on the kitchen floor. Autumn glanced toward the hall. Cal walked in carrying a black Stetson in his hand, a harried look on his face.

"We need to hustle if we're going to meet those two movie studio photographers by the stable," he said.

Her breath caught when her gaze met his warm silver-gray eyes. He looked every inch a cowboy in his hip-hugging jeans, leather chaps, powder-blue shirt, and well-worn boots with spurs. The padded leather vest he wore for protection fit snugly against his broad shoulders. He looked irresistible.

She put her hand over the mouthpiece. "It's Sean. He says he talked to you, but I

wanted to check.”

“What he says is true. Tell him I said to give you the land you want,” Cal shouted at the phone.

She smiled. This would be perfect. Cal wanted her near him, or at least that’s how he could have meant it. Their land would be adjacent to his. She’d be near Josh, and if a relationship did develop between her and Cal, she’d live within a stone’s throw of Kayla. The world suddenly seemed welcoming and warm. Everything was going so well—her writing, the animal rescue shelter, and vet clinic. And helping Kayla. All the pieces were in place for a happy future. Thanks to Cal, it would all work out.

“Did you hear him, Sean?” Autumn asked with a smile.

Sean chuckled. “Yes. I told you he wants you to have the land. I’ll get back with the owners and set up a time we can get together. How about if we schedule the paperwork for one o’clock on October 9th?”

Autumn bit her lip as she considered the date. “Yes, that would work out fine. Thanks.” She hung up the phone, crossed the distance between them and hugged Cal. “Thank you for helping me and Kayla.”

He looked surprised, and maybe a little sad, but his hands pulled her a little closer and lingered on her waist. His head lowered and rested on her forehead. When he stepped away from her, she wanted to pull him back into her embrace. He closed his eyes briefly then opened them.

“I need to go before they think I deserted them,” Cal said.

By the time they arrived at the barn, Luke had finished his rope tricks, and Garret was on the horse. He grinned as he caught sight of them and pulled his Stetson low, holding onto the rope. His eyes went wide as the horse moved forward full-force against the chute’s closed gate. The photographers snapped pictures. Once they finished, Garret jumped onto the fence, a cast still on his fractured wrist, and Luke took his place.

He mounted with ease, wrapped the rope around his gloved hand and lifted the other into the air. He set his heels where the neck meets the shoulder of the horse and nodded for Garret to open the chute. The bronc broke for the freedom of the arena amidst shouts of, “Ride ’em, cowboy,” from a shapely blonde who’d come to cheer Luke on.

Autumn chewed her lip as the horse bucked wildly, trying to toss Luke off. She moved closer to Cal with each twist and turn. He put a comforting arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. When he held her like this, she felt everything would turn out fine. Not just today, but every tomorrow. Little by little, she hoped to show him love was alive and well, beating within their hearts, waiting for them to discover the depth of their feelings for one another.

The horse lowered its head and bucked high in the air, fighting with all its might to unseat Luke. His booted feet moved back and forth rapidly in time with his body while photographers snapped pictures. When the buzzer sounded, two trainers on horseback rode up beside Luke to help him dismount, and then led the bronc away.

Storm clouds gathered in the distance. Autumn shivered, feeling as if someone had walked over her grave. “Are you going to ride a bronc, too?”

“No, the photographers want me to ride the bull.”

Autumn stared at the huge angry beast moving into the chute. Much as she loved

animals, she failed to see anything good about this one. Especially when it held the power to hurt Cal. It pawed the ground and snorted. Thank goodness Cal had sent Josh and Rachel to stay at Ethan Hill's ranch. She glanced at Cal and saw the warmth she hoped to find in his eyes. "The night we kissed for the first time I asked you to be careful. Do you remember?"

His hands went to her waist and he fingered the small of her back, rubbing back and forth, up and down. "I'm not likely to forget our kiss or the conversation we had." His voice deepened with intimacy, sending heat racing up her neck and face. He smiled. "I told you I intended staying in one piece."

"And I'm holding you to that."

Cal removed a glove from his pocket and slipped it on. Brazen and confident, he strolled across the arena, climbed the fence, and lowered himself onto the bull's back. With one gloved hand gripping the rope encircling the bull's head, Cal tucked the end of the rope tightly around and between his hand, tucking the fingertips of his glove into his fist for a more secure hold. He raised the other hand above his head and nodded for them to open the chute.

The photographers moved closer to the action as the angry bull charged to freedom. He lowered his head, bucked and spun around at the same time, while cameras flashed. When the bull had no luck throwing Cal off his back, he lunged head first against the fence. The leap jarred Cal forward, dangerously close to the bull's horns.

Autumn gasped and covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a scream. Her lips moved in a silent, frantic prayer for him to emerge from this encounter unharmed.

Her heart pounded against her chest. Why had she agreed to these pictures? Bull riding might be all in a day's work for Cal, but it sickened her to see the man she cared for in danger.

She listened.

*Ring the buzzer. End the ride.*

Nothing.

*Why don't they ring it? End the torture.*

Cal pushed himself back. The bull lowered his head again, pawed the dirt, and snorted. Dirt flying around them, the enraged animal charged toward the middle of the arena, then spun around and aimed for the fence. At the last moment, he turned and staggered along the barrier. Cal's leg took the blunt force of the impact and scraped hard across the metal railings.

The buzzer sounded.

All hell broke loose.

Before Cal could dismount, the bull bucked. He twisted, spinning violently, first one way, then the other. Autumn screamed as Cal flew through the air. He landed hard on his shoulder. For a moment, he lay still, then rolled over on his back and gasped for breath.

A clown ran into the arena to distract the bull but found himself nearly trampled and lucky to escape injury.

The bull lowered his head and charged toward Cal.

"Oh my God," Autumn screamed and scurried over the fence.

Her heart pounding in her ears with a deafening roar, she glanced at the horrible scene. The angry monster bore down on Cal with his nostrils flaring and foam dripping from his mouth. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she rushed into the corral waving her arms and taunting the beast. "Toro. Toro. Here. This way," she shouted repeatedly. Her mind



screamed at him, "Change your course, dammit."

"Never mind me," Cal yelled to Luke and Garret, who had both hopped inside to help him. "Get Autumn out of here."

Cal rolled across the ground, away from the path of the bull. The furious creature rammed the fence, turned and snorted. Anger poured from his small black eyes as he thundered across the arena toward Autumn.

Cameras flashed.

She froze.

Time slowed to a crawl.

Why couldn't she move, run?

She didn't want to die.

Colors brightened as the bull zeroed in on her location.

## Chapter Ten

"Autumn, run," Cal roared. "Damn it, woman, move!" He waved his arms furiously.

Jarred from her daze, Autumn spun at the sound of his voice. Tears gathered in her eyes as a barrage of cameras flashed, blinding her. The pounding of hooves thundered in her ears.

She glanced behind her. The bull's angry eyes and foaming mouth loomed closer. She forced herself to run, feeling like she was in slow motion.

The angry beast snorted. Dust rose like smoke choking her. Her labored breath came in uneven pants as she veered toward Cal.

"Keep coming, honey," Cal shouted, appearing through the black dust cloud.

He sprinted across the arena, closing the distance between them. As his strong arms crushed her trembling body against his, the air whooshed from her lungs.

"Oh, Cal," she gasped, clinging to him.

Without stopping, he turned her body, grabbed her hand, and pulled her along. Once they were moving in unison, he released his hold on her. His long legs set a grueling pace as they ran side by side across the corral, dirt flying all around them.

Her stomach lurched as she caught sight of the bull over her shoulder. He was close. Too close. His foul stench still burned her nostrils while adrenaline rushed through her veins.

They sped toward the safety of the barricade. Cal grabbed her around the waist and heaved her over the fence where she dropped into Luke's waiting arms. Luke lowered her to the ground, then reached out to Cal. He grabbed Luke's hand and vaulted over the corral's metal bars. The monstrous beast hammered the fence.

Once Cal reached her, he pulled Autumn against him, enfolding her in his arms. Dust covered their clothes; tiny particles clung to their face and hair.

"I almost lost you, baby," he whispered.

Minutes later, Luke and Garret shouted to distract the bull as it charged the fence again, then halted. For one second, the beast stared at Autumn. His nostrils flared, and he pawed the ground.

She shuddered. How close he'd come to killing them!

Autumn watched as Luke and Garret herded the bull back into the chute. As they accomplished this task without mishap, relief filled her, so strong she swayed with weakness and would have fallen if Cal hadn't been holding her.

She shivered. He turned and spun her around.

At the sight of his handsome features and his lanky, perfect body safe and intact, a sob rose in her throat. She swallowed hard, fighting to hold it back. Without warning, her limbs grew weaker. The full force of their encounter with the bull hit her like a wrecking ball.

"Cal," she cried as her legs buckled.

In one swift movement, he caught her up in his arms before she touched the ground. He gathered her close, so close she could feel his heartbeat against her cheek. Loud. Safe.

Once again, lights flashed from the photographers invading their private world.

"We're leaving," he murmured close to her ear.

He held her possessively against his muscular chest. His shirt stuck to him with the

sweat of the exertion. He walked slowly from the fenced area to the lush grass of the paddock.

Inhaling the scent of his spicy cologne and deeper muskiness of his body, she tightened her arms around his neck. His lips brushed the top of her head and his heated breath rustled her hair. "Where are we going?" she asked.

Cal didn't answer. Not that it mattered. As long as she was safe in his arms, she didn't care where they went.

A wave of weariness swept through her, and she sighed with contentment as she relaxed even more against him.

"Together," she whispered and smiled when his heartbeat raced double time against her cheek.

"Don't tempt me. I'm still torn over whether I should beat you for that ridiculous stunt or make love to you," he muttered.

His voice was raspy, sensual. Her arms circling his neck, she fingered the muscles of his nape beneath the cotton shirt and stared at his lips. Longing to kiss him, she pushed her fingers through his thick hair.

"Am I truly that naughty?" she teased. She reveled in the fact that for once in her life she was a woman with power to affect the man she wanted.

Stumbling, he gasped and smiled down at her. "You know damn well you are, you little vixen. It appears to me the only way to keep you out of trouble is to get you in my bed."

"Before that happens, you want to talk, right?" She exhaled a breath, the tension returning to her limbs. Talking was the last thing on her mind right now.

"Yeah, talk. Communicate. I've been told by people who know me pretty well that I'm no good at it."

His heart hammering in his ears, Cal gazed into the depths of her blue eyes. They seemed to plead with him to make love to her. Heat pooled in his groin. He'd never wanted a woman this badly in his life, or waited this long.

He frowned, torn between what was right and what he wanted. Her innocence was precious, a gift. Could he take that from her? What did he have to offer in return?

With a groan, he realized he'd put this off far too long. It was time, past time they both satisfied their fierce sexual need for each other. More than anything, he wanted to be the one who taught her the pleasures she'd been born to experience only with him.

Still holding her next to his heart, he walked up the porch steps. Once they were inside, he kicked the door shut. He climbed the stairs, strolled down the hall then into the bathroom. After she switched on the light, he deposited her on the vanity chair.

His pulse kicked up a notch as longing for her stirred deep in his blood. He locked the door, then turned and leaned against the frame. Emotions warred inside him as he tightened his lips, and his gaze slid to her mouth.

He walked across the room and knelt before her, holding the sides of the vanity chair. "We really need to talk about what happened today."

Her fingers stilled his lips.

"Shhh. Later, please, not now." Her hands moved across his shirt and touched the shoulder he'd landed on in the arena. When she squeezed a little, he winced from the pain. "How badly were you hurt?"

"Just bruised." He brushed her hands away.

"I want to *see*."

He hesitated, then nodded reluctantly and removed his shirt, letting it drop to the tile. She grimaced at the purple bruise across the top of his shoulder and arm.

"I've had worse roughhousing with my brothers."

She leaned forward and kissed it tenderly. Her lips sent a sizzle through him that tingled up his shoulder and neck. His sharp intake of breath made her jump.

"Did I hurt you again?" she asked, tears misting her eyes.

"Just the opposite," he whispered, touched by her concern. A stronger feeling of tenderness surged through him.

He stood. What should he do? She wanted him, he reminded himself. They wanted each other. So how could it be wrong?

He reached up and gently wiped a smudge of dirt from her face. "I think you'd feel much better if you had a nice, long shower." He paused for a second and then added, "Would you like me to join you?"

"Oh, yes." She stood without hesitation. "Very much so." The violet in her eyes darkened.

"Good, because I'm going to give you every pleasure in the world, honey."

He turned the dual jets in the shower on full-blast. After flipping the light on beside the shower's entryway, he hung plush towels on nearby hooks.

His gaze strayed to Autumn. He'd never seen her look more beautiful than she did standing there blushing, or more insecure.

Damn, but her mouth was tempting.

*Easy does it.*

"By the time we get in, it'll be nice and warm." He turned to undress her.

As if by magic, her fingers unsnapped his jeans. For a second, he forgot how to breathe. Her hands made contact with his erection as she rasped his zipper down. He almost groaned from the sheer pleasure of her touch.

"I got it," he whispered, fearing he might come if she touched him again.

Autumn ignored him. She knelt and shoved his jeans and briefs off, freeing his fullness. When she looked up, he expected to see shock, maybe a little fright, but instead unadulterated hunger burned in her eyes. Her sweet mouth was mere inches from his shaft, now hot and ready. It took every ounce of willpower he had not to take her.

*Easy does it.* The mantra was getting harder to remember, let alone follow.

"You're beautiful." She stood and slowly walked around him. "So strong." Her hands and fingers took a tour of his back and chest, and finally her lips placed tiny kisses on the hollow of his neck. He took a deep, calming breath. Her boldness thrilled and made him proud she wasn't afraid to show she wanted him.

"Lady, you are good for my ego." Steam rose in billows from the doorway, leading into the heart of the luxurious tiled shower. A ledge covered one wall, allowing the bather to sit while enjoying the heat, but right now, the real inferno seethed inside him.

"May I?" he croaked and reached for the buttons on her blouse. She stepped back.

*Easy does it.*

"I'll join you, go ahead," she said.

He wanted to allay any fears she might have. This was a little scary for him, too. He'd

never been anyone's first. "We'll never do anything you don't want us to do."

Her lips curved into an irresistible smile. Excitement danced in her eyes. "I know."

Cal stepped inside the shower. The hot water sluiced over his chest, easing his tension, but only a tad. He grabbed the soap and lathered his body. Wintergreen tingled on his skin.

"Would you like some company?" she asked.

"I thought you'd never ask," he said with a smile and stepped under the shower spray to rinse off.

Tonight is for her, he reminded himself. He returned the soap to the holder.

Then the lights went out—literally. Total darkness enveloped him. Like standing in the middle of a deep, wide bat cave. He blinked then blinked again. He couldn't see a thing to save his life.

"Autumn, we had a power failure, sweetheart." He needed to find the entryway. "Don't panic. I'll light candles around the hot tub." He took a step forward and her palms flattened against his chest as she joined him in the shower.

"I turned them off."

His ears must have become water-logged. Did she say she turned them off? Why? Then it dawned on him she was even more modest than he'd expected. It's the first time a man's seen her without clothes and vice versa. Sweet. Did she realize how precious she was to him?

She leaned forward, her lush breasts pressed into his chest, and her naked body brushed against him. *Boy, did he want to see her body. Right now.*

*Okay, Mr. Attorney, what brilliant words are you going to say to ease her fears and get the lights back on?*

The water pounded both their bodies. Her nipples pebbled against him. She laughed, and he almost groaned when the tight nubs wiggled against his chest with each of her chuckles.

"Where's my bath gel? No, don't worry. I'll find it." She turned, and her bottom bumped his thighs. He still couldn't see a thing, but he'd grown harder than granite.

If he didn't know better, he'd swear he'd been set up. By this innocent little siren, who managed to stay closer to him than a tree frog on glass in this huge shower. This was her own brand of feminine water torture. Topped off by jasmine, he thought as the tantalizing fragrance rose to tempt him. He guessed she'd found her gel.

"This is one of those times we need to negotiate, Autumn." Her knee bumped his. She'd turned around again. "Right now I can't see a foot in front of my face."

She laughed. "I don't think that's the part of our anatomy we need to see." It sounded like she knew exactly what she was doing to him. "We could try Braille." Her fingers moved up his chest.

A thud echoed against the walls. Something hit the floor. Then the only sound he heard was the force of the water jets.

"You okay?" His imagination went wild. He reached out, but found nothing but air. His heart thudded.

"I dropped the tube." Her hand touched his thigh and slowly slid around to his buttocks. "I'll hunt for it."

He groaned and almost lost his grip with reality. "No!" His hands found hers and

removed them from his butt. *Mercy, woman!* "I want the lights on, you want them off. Let's compromise." For the first time in his life, the word didn't choke him.

"Did you just say compromise? But you don't believe in that." Her full breasts rested against the backs of his hands. "You said that's what a man does to keep peace when a woman nags him to death. Right?"

He looked up, allowing the water to beat his face and cool his hot brow. "I was wrong." He couldn't see a thing, but would bet she grinned from ear-to-ear over that particular admission. "We need to be sensitive to each other's differences."

She leaned into him. "I thought we were."

He groaned and fought the urge to caress her. "Oh, yeah." Although their physical differences tipped the scales by a long shot at the moment, she knew damned well what he meant.

She moved away. He missed her touching him. Then he couldn't sense her presence at all. *Where'd she go?* "Your dreams in life and mine. We can work on them, sweetheart. No doubt we'll fight like hell, but each of us can give a little."

Maybe a lot, he thought. His eyes began to adjust to the darkness and he made out her shadow near the light switch.

The lights came back on. He blinked several times until his eyes could focus again.

"My point exactly." She stood near the entryway and leaned back against the wall with a sultry gotcha-smile. Her wet body lay exposed to his appreciative eyes. His gaze lingered on every gorgeous, erotic part, savoring every soft, feminine curve that called out for him to feel, touch, taste. The water beaded along her chest and slowly rolled between her breasts and lower until it collided with her belly button – an innie.

His breath caught in his throat.

With three eager steps, he closed the space between them. He folded his arms around her and backed them under the warm jets. "You beautiful minx, I'll teach you to tease me. I'm going to torture every lovely, tanned inch of you for that dirty, low-down trick. You frustrated the hell out of me."

Once he located the gel, he squirted the liquid in his hands, and set the bottle on the corner shelf. "Come here."

She quivered as he worked his hands over her damp shoulders, and then moved down, taking his time to memorize every luscious curve. Her breath caught as his hands lifted her breasts, enjoying the weight, capturing the tips with his fingers. His thumbs teased them into hard peaks. The needy sound like a moan that escaped from her lips made it much more difficult for him to keep the resolve he'd made not to make her his until she knew the truth.

He wanted her to experience her first climax, but how much of this sweet torture could he take?

The lavender tint to her blue eyes darkened. He wiped soapy foam away from her breasts, following the silky path of the water that rinsed her, all the way down. His hand rested between her warm thighs, where it belonged. He lowered his head and brought his lips to hers, open, inviting, willing.

She sighed into his mouth. Her tongue touched his lower lip and then dueled with his. Heat shot to his groin at the intimacy of the deep kiss. Her mouth tasted sweet, like something he'd searched for, craved all his life.

They broke away, panting and staring at each other in awe. He flipped the water control knob down to almost nothing and turned the duel jets into a fine heated mist.

"I can't seem to think. All I want is you," she said.

"Don't think, sweetheart, feel. Tonight is for you." He moved to her breast, his tongue licking and circling a hard, dark nipple. She shuddered as his mouth covered the tip and suckled. He throbbed, on fire with want.

He straightened and then he leaned her back until she lay on the ledge covering one wall of the shower. Her welcoming arms reached out to him. Never had he seen such desire in anyone's eyes.

Once she found out the truth, what look would he see? Hate? The thought of losing her scared the hell out of him.

"Don't stop. Please, Cal."

"You're beautiful, Autumn. So responsive." He knelt, kissed her stomach, separated her legs, and moved lower. She gasped and brought her legs back together.

"Let me do this, sweetheart." She separated her legs for him. His fingers sought her folds, his tongue and mouth covering her softness in the most intimate of all kisses as he delved into her sweetness.

She trembled. Her soft whimpering sounds of pleasure almost drove him over the edge. She called his name, her voice sensual, needy. It was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard. She shuddered each time his tongue flicked against her bud.

"I can't breathe," she whispered. His hands moved to her breasts and plucked the nipples. "Oh, my God, Cal!" She screamed her release and quivered against him. Her back arched as she crooned his name in a breathless whisper.

He circled his tongue inside her to extend her pleasure and her tremors continued. She moaned and he moved to hold her close. His erection pressed hard against her belly, his arms wrapped around her. He squeezed his eyes shut, never wanting to let her go.

Moments later, he peered down at her. When she drifted back to earth, she smiled up at him, the dreamy after-glow lit her face.

"I'm still alive."

A chuckle escaped him. "Damn, but you make me feel good, woman."

Never had he known another woman like her. He couldn't let her go, and the irony frightened him. Only days ago, hadn't he wished she were gone? All that had changed. For the first time, he knew what he wanted. Her in his life, forever.

He smiled at her, and shook his head in amazement.

Autumn had experienced her first climax. The world had moved for her. And he'd given her that gift.

She nipped at his throat, sending chills up his spine. When her tongue licked a path up to his cheek, his breath caught. She gazed deep into his eyes. "I'm not a woman yet, Cal."

Sharp, painful need rocked him.

"You gave me a wonderful gift. Freely. Lovingly." Her gaze moved to his steel-hard shaft. "Take me to bed, and accept the one I'm offering you."

With a gasp, he grabbed towels and dried her, then himself. After retrieving the condoms and handing them to her, he picked up her warm, moist body and carried her to his bed. Smiling, she snuggled against him, her arms around his neck.

"When you hesitated, I was afraid you were going to reject me," Autumn admitted. She studied the warm caring on his face as he deposited her on the king-sized bed.

"Never," Cal whispered. He placed the box of condoms on the nightstand and slid down next to her.

She stretched, moving her legs back and forth under the sheets. A peach scented candle shimmered, bathing the room in a warm, soft romantic haze.

"Cut that out." Autumn squirmed and turned her head to the side, sinking deeper into the pillow. She moaned as his moist tongue traced the shell of her ear and then dipped inside. When his hot breath blew against it, she shuddered. "That tickles."

"Where?"

"All over. Goosebumps. See." She lifted her arms and shoved the covers to her hips. His gaze devoured her breasts.

He licked and kissed his way up one arm and back to her ear. "That's what it's supposed to do."

Without mercy, he nibbled her earlobe and neck. A fast-moving parade of shivers marched up her spine, sending delicious sensations tingling throughout her body.

"Oh, you have a nice butt." She reached under the covers and gave his bottom a pat, lingering to enjoy the feel of his warm muscular flesh. "Tight. Must be the running."

He groaned. "I can't say anyone's ever said that, but I like the sentiments and the way you deliver them." He cupped her breasts, his thumbs moving back and forth over her aching nipples, wreaking havoc with them. "Now, these are incredible. Lush. Sensitive. Soft, until I touch the tips, then they grow hard."

"Too large," she admitted and moaned with pleasure.

His smile turned wicked. "A man's playground is never too big, sweetheart. They're perfect."

She sighed and ran her fingers through his dark hair when his tongue and lips paid homage to her breasts. "Cal," she whispered. Her voice sounded desperate. She ached deep inside.

He lifted his head. "Easy does it. We have all night. Your first time, we should build slowly."

She let out a long impatient breath. "I'm a fast learner and you're a good teacher." Slow wasn't in her vocabulary tonight.

He rolled onto his back and sighed. "You are not making this easy. I'm burning up, and you're tossing dynamite on the flames."

She pushed herself to a sitting position. Her gaze moved down the outline of his body, draped from the waist down by the covers. Something was sticking up in the air. "Is that your knee?" Her jaw dropped.

"Lord, woman you're gonna be the death of me." His lips twitched as he wiggled his toes. The comforter moved at the foot of the bed. He winked. "My third knee."

She blushed. "Wow, it's powerful."

He burst out laughing. "Honey, it doesn't stay this way."

"It is every time I've peeked at it."

"You've been sneaking around peeking at my manly parts?"

She nodded, smiling shyly.



Cal grinned. "Do you have any idea how much I enjoy your innocence and honesty? Wanting you gives me a super-sized hard-on," he said.

The intensity of his stare made Autumn's mouth go dry. Her nipples tightened. Acting on desire, she slid her hands around his neck and pulled him close. When her breasts met his hard chest, she rubbed them against him.

"I love it when we're skin-to-skin," she said.

He raised himself up and pushed her back against the mattress. His mouth descended on hers, first gentle, coaxing and then growing more demanding. He leaned forward, his body heat covering her. His tongue delved into her mouth then withdrew, coming back and tangling with hers.

A whimper passed her lips when his mouth withdrew. He kissed the swell of each breast. She melted inside. His mouth covered one nipple as he slid his hand down to her abdomen, circling her navel with his finger and then venturing inside.

"Every inch of you is incredible. Delicious." He groaned.

He moved lower, his hand resting on the mound between her legs. His hardness pushed against her thigh. Hot dampness formed between her legs as her need for him became unbearable.

She closed her eyes and moved her head from side to side, as his hand inched toward her center. "Please," she whispered.

His thumb touched her bud, teasing it. One finger slid into her gently and then retreated. She grew slick.

"Look at me, sweetheart. I want to see the pleasure I give you as you climb, then shatter in my arms."

Two fingers slid into her gently, stretching her a little, retreating and then going deeper. Each time he entered, he widened the space a little bit more. She pressed against his skilled fingers as they probed within her, then deeper back over her sensitive bud.

"You feel so good."

She opened her eyes. Sweat beaded on his brow. He lay over her and suckled her breast, pulling on her nipple until it ached with desire for him.

Biting her lip to keep from screaming with pleasure when he moved to the other breast, she reached out her hand. Her fingertips tentatively touched the tip of his hard length and he moved nearer. She wrapped her fingers around him. His ragged breath startled her, and she snatched her hand away.

He kissed her palm, raw hunger in his eyes. "Everything you do is perfect, Autumn, but," he smiled, a pained look on his face, "touching me makes it impossible for me to take you slow and easy the first time. I want to give you pleasure, not pain."

She reached for him again. "I want you, Cal. Please don't treat me like I'm some fragile porcelain doll. I need you." This time he didn't stop her busy hands as they stroked and caressed his taunt flesh.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "You want to do the honors?" He reached on the nightstand and retrieved a packet.

"Oh, yes." Her heart thudded with excitement against her ribs as she heard foil tear, and he handed her the condom.

She pushed the covers back, thrilled at being able to look at his arousal to her heart's

content. He was so beautiful. Proud. Strong. She wanted him inside her.

His silver-gray eyes sparkled with excitement. A moan left his lips as he guided her, and she unrolled the latex over him.

"That was sweet torture," he said, his voice hoarse.

He smiled and moved her under him. His fingers plumbed her depth again and again. Like the ebb and flow of the tide, his expert hands brought her to the brink of satisfaction. He held her suspended. Then he retreated, pulling her back.

"Now who's torturing who?" she asked, panting. She ran a finger down his back, her fingernails raking his skin, enjoying the way his body arched toward her touch.

"Relax and don't forget to breathe deep," he whispered.

He kissed her tenderly, and then positioned himself between her thighs. His gaze riveted on hers at the brink of their joining. She saw the strain on his face.

Ever so slowly, he slipped inside her a little at a time and then stopped. Sweat lined his brow, and his jaw tightened as he pushed harder. A sharp pain caused her to cry out and clutch his back as he filled her.

"You're so tight." He stopped and lay still, deep inside her. His breath came in short pants as he feathered kisses on her cheeks and eyelids. "You okay?"

She nodded.

"Let your body adjust to mine."

For a moment she did as he asked, enjoying the way their bodies fit together. So perfect. Two meshed as one. She smiled at him and lifted her hips, amazed at the jolt of pleasure when the small movement drew him farther into her.

"How long can we stay like this?" she asked.

He slid in and out. "Are you sure you don't want more?"

She moaned, buried her face in the crook of his neck, and cleaved to him. He set a rhythm, slow at first, then building in intensity. Spirals of deep pleasure shot through her body, heating it to a sizzle. She trembled and urged him on, pushing her hips against him and meeting each fierce thrust.

Her back arched as she sought her release.

"You're near." His thumb moved across her hard bud.

She shook her head. Her body stiffened. "Not without you," she gasped. "Together." She wrapped her legs around his waist and drew him into her.

He groaned and thrust.

"Yes!" she shouted with triumph when he shuddered with his release and his penis pulsed.

He hugged her tight and whispered her name as they both exploded. Her internal muscles squeezed him with each spasm that rocked her, relishing every intense warm sensation. She trembled, and they clung to each other, gasping for breath. Utterly exhausted, she listened to the steady rhythm of his heartbeat and floated for a long while.

"God, I hate to leave your body," he whispered. He kissed her face and held her in his arms as he separated from her. "I've got to clean up. Be right back."

Seconds later, he returned to the warm bed and her arms. She snuggled against him and sighed with contentment. "Thank you."

He kissed the top of her head. "Sweetheart, that's my line."

She trailed her hands over his broad chest, fingering the fine hairs. Her heart overflowed with love for this man. She kissed his flat nipples. Could they truly compromise and overcome their differences?

"Do you know what I want?" he asked.

Awestruck when his arousal nudged her stomach, she giggled. "I have an idea."

"That's later. I mean now."

She lifted her head and stared at him. "What?"

"To talk."

"Oh, no. We have the house to ourselves until noon, and we aren't going to spend that time arguing."

"Okay, but I want to understand what makes you tick up there in that pretty little head of yours." He touched her forehead with his finger.

"You think that will help us respect each other's differences?"

All of a sudden he avoided her eyes and the switch in his demeanor caused Autumn's heart to plummet.

"Uh-huh. I'll believe it if we're still speaking to each other after our little talk."

## Chapter Eleven

Autumn curled up in bed beside Cal and brushed her lips over his cheek. She yawned sleepily, a feeling of warmth coursing through her. Cal shifted and drew her close, his arms encircled her as she lay her head on his chest.

Her mind shifted through hundreds of e-mails, comparing his friendly banter to his hot-and-cold mood swings since she'd arrived. He was awake, she could feel the tension in his body. She glanced at his face and caught the fearful look hidden deep in his eyes. "What are you worried about?"

His arms tightened around her. He frowned and nestled her deep into his arms.

"You and me," he muttered with a dark look.

Her heart pounded as panic increased. Something was wrong. She'd known it all along, and now she was finally going to find out the reason for his erratic behavior.

Did she really want to know?

No. The word streaked through her mind. Anytime she'd ever been happy, something had happened to snatch it away. "In other words, we're going to fight."

"More than likely."

"Well, let's have at it."

Straining to sit, she moved away and pulled out of Cal's arms, unashamed of the passion they had shared, but more than a little afraid of losing him. She snatched the covers up protectively, confused, and jumbled by the emotional roller coaster of loving Cal.

"First, we need to talk about the way you scared me half to death when you scrambled over the fence. You tackled that bull like a Marine charging an enemy bunker site."

Leaning her head back, she fought the fluttering sensation in the pit of her stomach that his nearness caused. She glanced at the lines of deep concern etched on his tanned face. Her pulse sputtered as longing for him stirred between her thighs. She wondered if he wanted her as much as she wanted to wrap her body around him.

"Rule number one of communication," she began, "is that it's a two-way street. *You* scared the ever-loving wits out of me when you fell. You lay on the ground gasping like some dying guppy, while the bull snorted and charged, intent on rearranging your face."

Cal rolled on top of her holding himself up on his elbows. Autumn's senses soared. His warm eyes looked deep into hers.

"I had the breath knocked out of me, but I recovered and rolled away in time." His voice became husky. "You risked your life for me. Don't ever do that again. Promise?"

Autumn pushed a strand of his hair back in place and threaded her fingers through the soft thickness. "I'd say we're even," she whispered. Tears misted her eyes at the thought of his sacrifice. He was willing to die for her. "You risked your life for me. Don't ever do that again. Promise?" She traced his lips with kisses as she spoke.

He fell silent, which said it all.

She smiled at how much he cared for her, even if the dope wouldn't admit it. Would she have the courage to bare her soul to him?

Without hesitation, she leaned forward and kissed him. When she smoothed her hands down the hard planes of his abdomen, he pulled back and lifted his hands in surrender.

"I meant it." He stared at her as he emphasized each word. "We are going to talk. Be truthful with each other, and I don't want anyone interrupting us."

Cal tossed the covers off, walked naked to the door, turned the key in the lock, and grinned. "Oops, no pockets." He laughed and threw the key with ease onto the dresser.

She smiled a little, fighting to remain serious. If she had any doubt about what she had planned for them the rest of the night, it had vanished the instant this gorgeous, tempting hunk crawled back into bed with her.

How would he react to what she'd done? *He wanted truthfulness, here goes.*

"You locked the door because Luke and Garret are still in the house. Okay, truth time. You sent Rachel and Josh to Ethan Hill's in case anything bad happened today." She blew out a breath. "Well, I asked Luke and Garret if we could have the house to ourselves tonight. They won't be back until noon tomorrow."

He quirked an eyebrow. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down when he swallowed several times. "So we could talk?" His skepticism, bordering on outright disbelief, showed on his face.

She smiled thinking of all the things she wanted to try. "Nooooo. So I could have you all to myself for the night."

She jumped when the phone on the nightstand rang.

Cal rolled over and snatched up the receiver. "Hello." He sat upright. "Mother, is something wrong?"

The vein on the side of his neck jumped.

"We're both fine. Put Josh on." He held his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to her. "Luke explained to them what happened to us today because we don't know what they'll print in the newspapers or have on TV. Josh is bound to hear about it. Now he won't go to sleep until he talks to us."

Autumn wished she could put her arms around Josh and calm his fears.

A big grin spread on Cal's face. "I love you, too, son. It was nothing. A bull chased me around the corral, that's all." He grew silent. "Miss Autumn's not hurt. Honest. Here, I'll let you speak to her."

She took the phone from him. "Sweetie, your father wouldn't let anything happen to me. He showed that bull a thing or two."

"Make him stop riding them."

Her heart broke at the worry she heard in Josh's voice. She turned to Cal. "Promise us you won't ride another bull."

"Scouts' honor."

"Okay, Josh, he promised. You get to sleep and we'll see you in the morning."

"I love you, Miss Autumn."

"I love you, too, sweetie, always. Goodnight. Sweet dreams." She handed the phone to Cal. Come tomorrow night she had no doubt Josh would stroll into her room, crawl into her bed, and talk it all out. She turned toward Cal.

The way he kept staring at her and not saying a word, she got cold feet. She'd never seduced a man. What if he rejected her? Her hands shook as she sought an excuse to busy herself.

"There's a bottle of liniment in the bathroom. Rachel had me use it each day I worked

that lovely job you suckered me into.” She slipped on Cal’s shirt to cover herself and walked to the sink, knelt, and opened the cabinet.

“Don’t go to any trouble.” Cal stood in the doorway, zipping up his low-riding jeans.

“Nonsense.” She pulled out a can of shaving cream. “I see it.” Leaning against the cabinet, she turned her head to the side and reached *way* in the back, far as her arm could stretch. “I’ll rub it on your sore muscles and then give you a nice massage.”

Her hands tightened around the bottle, and she jerked. Bars of soap and a black box tumbled out, landing at her feet.

Almost nose-to-nose with the items, she glanced at the label identifying the contents of the box. *Super Condoms*. Wow! Super Ones! Her jaw dropped. These were not here a few days ago, but then he was a man. She didn’t want to blush, but her face heated.

“These are yours. I didn’t mean to intrude.” She’d put one on him, but had been too nervous to really pay attention to anything except following his instructions. Her fingers itched to take one out and examine it closely. Curiosity killed the cat, she reminded herself. These were his condoms—Super size.

Her eyes immediately zeroed in on his crotch like a heat-seeking missile. The bulge fascinated her.

Unashamed, she stared at his firm body, admiring his washboard abs. Her gaze traveled from his strained zipper to his muscular thighs and hip-hugging jeans. Her slow perusal ended at his face. When her eyes met his, he looked anything but comfortable.

“They aren’t mine,” Cal said. His voice remained calm. He snatched the box up and stuffed it back into the cabinet. “I mean they are, but I didn’t buy them.”

Her eyes widened. Wicked thoughts raced like greyhounds around the track in her mind. Women bought condoms for their lovers. Had a woman given these to Cal? Maybe Autumn was now one in a line of lovers he’d had, uh—

Oh, hell now she couldn’t even make herself *think* the word.

S-E-X.

The letters formed in her mind. Despite her modesty, a delicious shiver swept through her.

She exhaled slowly. *Get a grip on yourself*. “Guess you can never have too many of these?” She tried to make light of the condom situation. “I mean...one of us had to be prepared, when, ah, if—”

Heat flooded her as she forced the bold words past her lips. Her heart pounded.

She glanced at the cabinet, the box tucked safely inside. How many did it hold? Must be a lot. How long would it take him to use them all up? If they weren’t there a few days ago...

Her stomach lurched. Maybe he needed to restock quite often. Did he have more than one lover?

*Man-oh-man*. Her palms perspired and she coughed.

“It’s not what you think,” Cal protested. “Luke bought them for you and me—your, er, our first time.”

Her eyes widened in disbelief. “Luke knows I had never...”

A wave of nausea hit her. She swallowed hard. When she’d asked Luke if she and Cal could have some privacy tonight, he’d winked at her. At the time, she’d been flattered he

didn't know how green she was. She slid to the bathroom floor, leaned against the wall, and placed her head on her knees.

"Does Garret know?" Her embarrassment swelled like an atomic cloud over her head.

"Yes."

Rachel must have guessed from her dumb questions about men. She lifted her head and stared at Cal.

"You didn't *tell* them, did you?"

"No, the truth is —"

He didn't have to explain, she knew. "It's happened before," she interrupted. "Some men take one look at me and they can tell. They shy away from me like it's written across my forehead or something."

"I don't know what to say to make you feel better, Autumn. If I stumble over this, I'm sorry. In the first place, sex is a natural part of life. That's the way we were brought up. Hell, my Mother bought my first condoms."

Her mouth opened and closed. "Oh my goodness. Really?"

"Nothing to be ashamed about. But when you found them, I didn't want you to get the wrong idea."

"Such as?"

"I don't believe making love is something that should be done casually, like enjoying flavored jellybeans. I'm a one-woman man, but even though we'd agreed to it, I never assumed for one moment you still wanted me in your bed."

Warm relief rolled through her, and she almost sighed out loud. He didn't have a harem, only her.

"So far you're saying all the right things, Cal. I wished I'd grown up like you, but protecting Kayla from Reverend Jenkins scared me."

"I know," he whispered.

She studied the tenderness and understanding in his eyes, longing to confide everything. "I thought all men were liars, out to hurt us. I didn't have anyone I trusted until I met you on the Internet. It was the first time I was able to talk to someone about everything, including—you know."

"Sex."

Her face heated with awkward embarrassment and frustration at her inability to say the word. "At ten, I was adopted. At seventeen, when I became interested in boys, my parents became overly protective." She laughed and glanced over at him. "They'd probably frisk a man who came to the door for us to see if he was carrying condoms."

Cal smiled at her, amusement on his face. "I imagine raising girls is different than raising boys. We're the big bad wolves fathers protect their daughters from."

"Mine would probably shoot first, ask questions only if necessary, or to inform the next of kin where to pick up the body."

"I admire them," Cal muttered. "I'd probably keep a gun loaded too if I had a daughter. I might need two, if she was sweet and looked half as good as you."

"Thank you," she said with a smile. She'd never thought of herself as pretty until she looked deep into Cal's eyes. They didn't hide his desire for her.

"You aren't afraid of me, are you? Because you have no reason to be. I'm bullheaded at

times, guess you noticed, but I'd lie down and cry uncle anytime you wanted."

Lord, she hoped he'd give in to her that easy.

"A woman has a right to give her body, when and if she wants, Autumn. And to say no. It's a word I completely respect. No man should belittle you because you say no or not date you because you won't put out. A relationship is more than sex."

"My parents taught me it's a big step in my life, one I shouldn't take lightly. I have to care about someone before—"

"We think alike on that, but you have to be tempted or you're not human."

"Oh, yeah, but if you'd ever met my parents, you'd know why guys didn't push the envelope. They're scary."

"But you aren't a kid anymore."

"That's what I keep telling them and getting nowhere. That's one reason Kayla and I are moving. We love our parents, but living so near to them in Houston gets smothering at times."

Cal nodded with understanding. "You'll like living here. I know about loneliness, Autumn. I'm glad you felt close to me. Honored you asked me to teach you about love, but you don't really know me."

"Maybe not, but I know you love Josh and your family. And you want me."

Unmistakable desire gleamed in his eyes. Cal lifted her hand to his lips and kissed the pulse point, fueling her resolve to continue.

"When I froze in the arena, I thought I was going to die, and the one thing I regretted with all my heart was that I would never know what it felt like to become a woman. To have you make love to me like I dreamed of so many times. Not anyone else—just you, only you."

"You ready to go back to bed?" he asked huskily.

"Oh, yes." Every nerve ending in her body thrummed with heat when he lifted her into his arms and carried her to bed.

"Am I going to end up in your book?" he asked, laying her across the bed and following her down.

"Since you're my only inspiration, what do you think?" she teased, sitting up and planting a kiss on his cheek.

"Then I better give you plenty of research." He pulled her into his arms and rolled her onto her back.

She grinned at him, excitement sizzling through her body. "My sentiments exactly." She pulled away from him and stood.

"Where are you going?"

"To get the box of condoms. Hope there's enough for tonight. You get the chocolate syrup."

"Lord, I've created a monster." He rose from the bed and headed toward the door. "You are determined to kill me tonight," he said with a laugh.

She wiggled her eyebrows. "But what a way to go. I love you Calvin Whittaker."

He turned, and the pain she saw on his face ripped at her heart. Had she said the wrong thing?

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Liar.

Cal called himself every kind of lowlife imaginable when he woke up. So much for her worry about whether he would respect her in the morning. Hell, he thought the world of her, loved her and the ground she walked on. He had absolutely no respect for himself after last night.

He'd seduced her.

The smell of coffee brewing drifted from downstairs. Someone had come back to the house before noon.

He glanced at Autumn, snuggled against him. *You deceived her. You're not the man she thinks you are.*

*She trusted you. And how did you repay that trust? You let her believe all those lies. Even when you had an opportunity to tell her the truth, what did you do? Did you fess up, fall on your knees, and ask her forgiveness? Oh, no. You cowered in the corner, afraid she'd think you were rejecting her. You gave into your own selfish needs and made love to her instead.*

*What are you going to do about it?*

Damned if he knew.

Making love to her hadn't solved anything. It would make things a hell of a lot worse if she found out the truth before he had a chance to tell her. Now it looked like he'd taken advantage of her to save Whittaker Oaks from a lawsuit. Used her to make sure she didn't suspect a thing.

Well, he'd fulfilled his end of the bargain she thought he'd made in the e-mails, but at what price?

He rolled away from Autumn's warmth and stood beside the bed. She looked so peaceful sleeping. He enjoyed just listening to her breathe. She'd given him a night he would remember for as long as he lived. But she was unaware of exactly who she'd said she loved last night—a liar. A coward of the worse kind, one who looked after his own family and to hell with her feelings. He'd said from the very beginning if anyone got hurt it would be her, not his family.

Well, he'd done it. Hurt both of them.

Sliding into his jeans, he finished dressing and quietly left the bedroom.

"You look like shit," Luke said with a wink when Cal entered the kitchen.

Cal walked to the coffeepot, and poured himself a cup of the strong brew.

"I knew you'd smell the wake-up fumes and float toward them. I came back early to make sure the two of you were up before the rest of the family dropped in on you. Particularly Josh. He'll make a beeline for Autumn the second he flies through the door. She still sleeping?"

"Yeah, like a baby." He joined Luke at the table.

"Mrs. Kimball said her bookstore's sold enough tickets for two full busloads of people to come here for Autumn's book signing and tour."

"I know. Autumn and I talked about it last night. We went over the specifics of the event. Each one of us will need to make sure everything runs smoothly. This is real important to her."

"Will do."

Cal crossed his arms and grew silent. He was sinking in the quagmire of guilt and fear. "I'm in trouble, and I don't see anyway out of it to save my life."

"You wanna talk about it?"

Cal took a swig of the fortifying liquid and set his cup down. "I had every intention of telling her the truth last night, honest to God I did, Luke. I tried several times, but one thing led to another." He put his fists over his eyes and rubbed hard.

"Okay, enough said, I get the picture."

"She told me that besides the lies of Reverend Jenkins, at the time her father died, they owned a dog. Social Services took it to the pound. It was a cocker spaniel named Blondie."

"Damn. That explains a lot about Autumn's need to rescue animals and Kayla becoming a vet."

"Yeah. Autumn ran away twice to the pound and hunted her dog. The authorities lied to Autumn. They told her Blondie had been adopted."

"What happened to Blondie?"

"They euthanized her."

"Damn."

"She hates liars, Luke. Dammit, I'm going to lose her for sure if I tell her the truth, especially after we made love. She'll never trust me again as long as she lives."

"Then don't. Why risk it?"

"But what if she finds out?"

"She won't." Luke smiled and patted him on the back. "Tell her after you're married and have a half-dozen kids. By then it won't matter."

"I'm not sure I can live with myself if I don't tell her. This guilty conscience of mine is eating me alive right now, say nothing of how I'll feel years down the road."

"Then you better decide what you want the most, your peace of mind, or her."

Cal glanced at the clock on the wall. "I better wake her so she can hop in the shower before the rest of the family arrives. She's going to be a little shy about our becoming lovers, so no winking or sly remarks, okay?"

"For crying out loud, I know how to treat a lady. You're the one who can't get it right."

"Shit, I know that. I've done nothing but screw this whole thing up since she set foot in the house."

Cal turned and hurried back to Autumn's bedroom. Once he reached it, he paused in the doorway long enough to look at the angelic smile she wore, one of contentment. Was she dreaming about him?

"Wake up, sleepy head." He rested his knee on the mattress, bent over, and kissed her until her eyes opened.

"Good morning, darling." She reached for him in the same tender manner she had all night long. This time he stepped back.

"Oh, no. You start that seduction routine, and we'll never get out of that bed today. Rise and shine. You have forty-five minutes flat before Josh comes to hunt you."

"Ohmygod!" She threw the covers back. Not bothering to hide her nakedness from him, she flew into the bathroom.

Cal put what little was left of the box of condoms in the nightstand. He smiled when he grabbed up the bottle of chocolate syrup. He'd never be able to see another one without

looking at Autumn, who'd probably blush until she was ninety about her research experiments. He chuckled.

Damn, she had a talented mouth.

Soon as he heard the shower spraying, the phone rang. He yanked up the receiver. "Hello."

"You said to report back to you when I had something else," Neil said without preamble.

Cal listened to a summary of basically what Autumn had told him already until Neil said, "I kept wondering why that movie producer's wife, Jessica Noble, bought the movie rights to *Hearts Entwined* and took such a keen interest in Autumn, let her be so actively involved with the movie. Kinda unusual, if you ask me. Anyway, I found out she had an affair with London Sinclair, Autumn's father. He was her first love. Some say she never got over it when he left her after five years and married Vivian."

"Wouldn't that make her hate Autumn?"

"Doesn't look that way. Since she never had any kids, I figure she thinks of Autumn as the child she might have had."

"Then she has taken Autumn under her wing. That's good."

"Hey, you looked at the newspaper this morning?" Neil asked.

"I haven't had time."

"Make time. And brace yourself, 'cause it ain't good."

## Chapter Twelve

"Are the publicity shots in the morning's paper?" Autumn asked.

Cal stepped into the study with the newspaper stuffed under his arm and locked the French doors. He jerked the paper open, almost ripping it apart. As he stood in the middle of the room reading, his jaw tightened and his biceps flexed.

"Well?" she asked.

"They covered more than our publicity shots." He spread the paper across the desk.

Ten minutes later, Autumn was still staring at the headline, "Deadly Affair For Autumn Blessing And Her Stud Cowboy." She reread the article and descriptions underneath the accompanying pictures feeling like she'd been run over by a bull.

*How could they?*

She opened and closed her mouth, but no sound came out.

"Hype for the movie. You're big news, that makes you fair game," Cal explained.

"Fair? There's nothing fair about this garbage."

Cal shook his head. "Honey, it isn't as bad as it seems."

"Oh no? Try telling that to my parents when they read the part about our 'love nest' exposed."

He rubbed the entire length of her back. When she stepped away and began to pace, he settled into an over-sized chair.

She didn't want sympathy. She wanted revenge.

"Look at the picture of you carrying me. The photographer caught us staring at each other with lust. Buckets of it. All we needed were bibs to catch the drool."

"Well, I have to admit that's pretty hot. I think I'll cut it out and frame it." Cal winked.

"You'll do no such thing. I'll never live this down. And the way the reporter slanted his story. How we spent a lot of time in the barn each afternoon. The romantic picnic. Good grief! People will think we're sneaking around making love all over the place."

Her mouth tightened again as she stared at the last snapshot, Cal kissing her hair as he carried her, and reread the words, "A Cowboy's Blessing." It intimated that she was Cal's personal property, his lover, and she'd come to the ranch to live with him during the filming of *Hearts Entwined*.

The longer she looked, the angrier she became. "You're an attorney. Let's sue the pants off them right now."

Cal leaned back in the chair, strong hands interlaced behind his head. "We can't."

"Why not?" Astonished, she stared at him. He gawked back at her as if she'd asked the dumbest question in the world, one that didn't deserve an answer. She tightened her lips, ready to fight.

"I asked you a question," she said.

Cal quirked an eyebrow and regarded her with a rakish grin. "Because it's true."

"What?" Her jaw dropped.

"Would you want to testify in open court about your personal problem and why you came here to live? Or the orgy we had?"

She stared at him in amazement. *Orgy?* How could he even *think* such a thing, let alone

have the audacity to say it? "I beg your pardon? It was not an orgy."

"Which time? The shower, twice in bed, and let's not forget the titillating chocolate syrup episode. Lord knows I can't." His eyes seemed to look beyond her, back to last night. "Or maybe in the hot tub, while the whirlpool jets massaged our bodies, then against the wall, because we kinda got carried away again."

"Cut it out." Her face and neck heated. My God, had it happened that many times? She'd lost track of how often they'd made love. Evidently, he hadn't. "You're playing attorney for the wrong side, and I don't like it one bit."

"We made love, Autumn. L-O-V-E. Deeply. Passionately. I agree. We connected emotionally, as well as physically, but the definition of an orgy is an overindulgence in any activity." His sexy mouth turned up in a wicked smile and his eyes brimmed with humor. "I'd have a hard time convincing a juror that five times in one night doesn't meet that definition."

She threw her hands up in frustration. "You're missing the whole point. When that photo was taken, I was a virgin. So, he had no right to insinuate that anything sexual had already occurred between us. It was an out and out lie, because nothing happened before last night."

"I see." He raised a brow. "Let me get this straight. Our lawsuit should be based on timing. You came here to get laid. Up until last night you hadn't, but we were on our way to do it when the picture was taken."

She blinked at him, irritated by his blunt statement. "I'm not a brilliant attorney, but I thought timing was everything."

"It is—in murders. Somehow, I don't think that applies here. One second after we met, the heat between us was a nuclear meltdown. Have you forgotten our first kiss?"

Her breath caught in her throat, and she stifled a groan. When she'd made the first move and scared the hell out of him, it had backfired. All her inhibitions had flown south.

"Honey, we almost set the damn sheets ablaze. You were in bed, and you wanted me to join you. It took every ounce of strength I had to walk away from those tempting arms you had locked around my neck. Let me tell you, plenty was going on, and I have the burn marks to prove it."

Autumn sank into one of the leather chairs in the corner, defeated. "We can't get a retraction, can we?"

Cal studied his boots and then glanced at her. "No, and making a big deal of it would rehash the details and only cement the notion in people's minds."

The phone rang, Cal answered it and then handed her the receiver. "It's your sister. She sounds worried," he whispered.

Autumn held it against her shoulder, anticipating the worse.

"Have you seen this morning's paper?" Kayla asked.

"Yes, but you know how they love to exaggerate. Honestly, it's nothing to get concerned over."

"You're doing it again." Kayla grew quiet.

"Doing what?"

"Treating me like I'm eight, and you have to protect me."

How many times had they had this argument as Kayla grew up? "I'm sorry. It's a

habit."

"I know, but this time's different. I want to help you. Don't deny it. This newspaper article means trouble. Lucky thing our parents are on vacation and it'll take a few days for them to catch wind about this."

Defeated, Autumn sighed. "Okay, I won't even try to deny it. Once they read it, I figure they'll be on the doorstep."

"Right, and we can usually handle them, so I want to come there to help. Please see if it's still okay for Sarah to stay at Whittaker Oaks. If it is, she'll arrive at six today. She's far enough along with her pregnancy she can travel, but I don't want to leave her alone."

"You're determined to do this?" Autumn shuddered at the thought of her sister getting involved in this mess, but didn't see any way to stop her.

"Yes."

Autumn placed her hand over the receiver. "Cal, I wrote you about Sarah, the high-risk pregnancy. Can she stay here for awhile?"

Cal nodded.

"It's okay," Autumn said.

"Good. You've never let me down, sis. Now it's my turn to help you. We'll both see you this afternoon. Bye."

Autumn heard a click and then the dial tone. She hung up. "Sarah and Kayla will be here at six o'clock this evening."

"That's fine. Is Kayla coming to rescue you?"

She shook her head. "Not me, you."

He chuckled. "I don't need protecting, Autumn."

"You will."

All hell would break loose when her parents saw those pictures. They would come to check out Cal. From their perspective, they would see her as being placed in mortal and moral danger and then seduced—compliments of Cal, an older, experienced, man-of-the-world, with no regard for scandal. A hustler even willing to use their precious daughter to increase his business.

Rational and mercy were not words they practiced when they believed someone had taken advantage of her. Four relatives could attest to that fact. Her adoptive parents had sued them for every dime they stole, plus interest, from her late father's estate and then put them behind bars.

She stood, leaned back against the wall, and sighed. "What in heaven's name am I going to do? The scandal will be on TV next."

"Probably. It sells movie tickets." Cal rose and stood toe-to-toe with her. He rested one hand on the wall above her head and leaned toward her. "What are you worried about, sweetheart? Some people would say this is good publicity for a romance author. On the bright side, the public might think it's just a publicity stunt."

She raised a hand to his clean-shaven cheek, remembering how she'd watched him shave, enthralled. How smooth his skin felt to her touch. The woodsy scent of his cologne surrounded her. She swallowed hard and almost sighed when he drew nearer.

Would there ever be a time this gorgeous hunk of a man got within twenty feet and she didn't ignite?

"Lots of things are worrying me. You wouldn't understand."

"Try me."

"Okay, to name a few. My reputation. Facing your family and my parents, and now the whole world the day after we made love. I cherish what we had last night, and I wanted that part of us kept private. What if reporters start prying, following us, wanting juicy details? What do I say? How do I handle it?"

"You're not alone. I'm a man. You're a woman." His hands moved to circle her waist, caressing the curve of her hip. "We both have healthy sexual appetites. Nothing to be ashamed of there. What we do behind closed doors is nobody's business but ours. We can't stop them from taking pictures when we're in public, but in private—that's another matter. If they step over that line, they'll have to face me."

"Did I tell you my parents are scary?" Fear clawed at her mind. Her parents loved her and would automatically take her side, but Cal? They'd eat him alive.

"I recall you mentioning that, but we can handle them, sweetheart. Together."

His hand moved lower, cupped her bottom, and pulled her against him. She exhaled a ragged breath. There was no doubt about his full arousal. Or the ache between her thighs.

He lifted her chin with his finger. "I always want you within reach of my fingers, hands, body." A moan rose deep in his throat. "If we had time, I'd lay you on top of that desk, newspaper article and pictures be damned, and take you. You'd forget your fears about the future, and I'd make you ignite in a slow-burn." His breath fanned her cheek and moved to her neck, and then her ear.

"Oh, my." She sighed, her body already on fire for him.

"Miss Autumn." A child's voice shouted in the hall.

They jumped away from each other.

How could she have forgotten Josh was on his way?

When Cal was close, she forgot anyone else was on the planet. *Is this what love does? Makes all logical thoughts flee and shoots your body full of raging hormones? No wonder people spend so much time on a honeymoon.*

"I need a cold shower," Cal croaked. He jerked his shirt out of his jeans and tugged the bottom low.

Autumn fought a smile as he attempted to conceal his arousal. She was in love and gloried in the fact he found her desirable. "You poor thing."

He rolled his eyes and then gave her a warning look. "Woman, this is not funny. I'm in agony."

She winced when he groaned with his first step. No sooner had he unlocked the doors than Josh bounded into the room. He glanced from her to Cal.

"Did you miss me?"

"Heaps," Cal said, ruffling his son's dark hair.

Autumn plopped in the nearest chair and opened her arms to Josh. He ran to her, and she pulled him onto her lap. His excited eyes studied her.

"You look different. How come?"

Cal took a seat and watched them. As Autumn squirmed at Josh's question, he fought his urge to jump into the conversation and ease her mind. Last night she had worried that everyone would take one look at her and know they'd made love. She was right. The warm

glow on her skin and face spoke of a woman who'd been well-satisfied.

"I know why." Josh touched the thick braid across her shoulder.

It reminded Cal of how much he'd enjoyed brushing her hair. He loved feeling the weight of it, and the silkiness of the strands between his fingers.

Josh tugged at the blue ribbon running through the braid. "You have one pigtail instead of two."

Autumn glanced at Cal. The intensity of the love she beamed from across the room floored him. He never wanted to lose her, but he would if she discovered the truth before he found a way to tell her.

"Your father and I have a surprise," Autumn said.

*We do?*

Cal gaped at her, he hadn't proposed, couldn't be that. When he did, he wanted to do it right. Dinner, dancing, champagne, knock-your-eyes-out ring, down on one knee—the works.

"Thanks to your father, I'm getting the land I want." She grinned. Her whole face lit up. "Guess where?"

"Where?" Josh's eyes sparked like fireflies.

"Right next to yours."

Cal almost fell out of the chair. Autumn acted like he'd okayed the deal. He didn't remember doing that, but who knows what kind of promises he'd whispered in the heat of passion.

"We'll be neighbors." Josh hugged her, and she smiled.

*Ahhah.* Cal recalled a vague phone conversation between Autumn and Sean that he'd heard only the tail-end of. Cal had pestered Sean to give her what she wanted, but it never occurred to Cal they were talking about *his* land. Why would it? The one-hundred-and-twenty acres Cal wanted to buy were one package. When did the owners decide to sell the acreage in smaller lots?

He needed a second to adjust to the idea she wanted half the land and the added shock that it didn't matter. His love for Autumn was the only thing he cared about now.

Autumn and Josh jabbered away. In two weeks, she'd shown more love for Josh than Donna had shown for him in his entire life. Josh deserved a mother like Autumn, but Cal didn't deserve her love—not until he leveled with her. That had to come before he asked her to marry him. Trust was an integral part of making a marriage work. Without that basic building block, their love wouldn't survive.

He had to find a way to tell her the truth, without crushing her spirit. Then he would beg her for forgiveness. She'd been duped from day one. He'd never be the man Rachel led Autumn to believe he was. She needed to know the truth. He loved her and owed her that much. A nagging sense of doubt churned within. Did Autumn really want him, or the man she thought he was, Rachel's fictional Cal? He had to prove where his heart really lay and risk losing her forever. It was the most important challenge he'd ever faced.

As a wild idea formed in his mind, he wondered if he could pull it off on such short notice. He had to get moving right away. It meant sacrificing the plans to double the size of Whittaker Oaks, abandoning his father's dream. The death of one dream and the birth of another—one Cal wanted with Autumn.

He glanced at Josh and Autumn, who listened to every word Josh told her about what



he did while he had stayed at Ethan's house, with such intensity. His son blossomed, thrived even under her loving nurture, they had bonded so quickly. He was relieved to know that whether she ever forgave him after tonight, her love would always be there for Josh.

"Josh, how would you like to spend the day with Miss Autumn while I take care of some business? That new movie's out you wanted to see."

"Can I get popcorn and a soda?"

"Yes."

Josh jumped up giving him a high five.

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"Would you repeat that?" Rachel asked as she rummaged through the freezer. "I think my hearing's gone bad."

Her teasing was only the beginning of what Cal would have to endure to win Autumn's hand, but she was worth it. Mother loved seeing him eat a truckload of crow. He took another big bite.

"While I don't approve of the methods you used, I'm grateful Autumn's here with me. I'll be forever indebted to you for bringing her into my life."

Rachel took out prime rib and placed it in a pan in the refrigerator to thaw. She slanted a stricken look his way. "I never, ever meant to put either of you in danger. Your grandfather always made bronc and bull riding sound so easy when he spun those yarns."

Tears gleamed in the corners of her eyes. Moved by her pain, Cal hugged her gently against him and kissed her cheek.

"I know. I'm sorry I ever asked if you were trying to kill us." He paused and stepped back. "I need your help tonight."

She winked at him. "You want us to get lost again."

"No. We're having three dinner guests around six o'clock. I'd like you to break out a bottle of our best wine, fine china, candles—everything really first class."

He thought about the list of things he'd need to accomplish. They had milk for the pregnant lady, who couldn't have any wine. The rest of them could help Autumn and him celebrate when he gave her the deed to the sixty acres. He planned to take her somewhere private, tell her the entire scheme—all the lies he'd told. But first, he wanted to give her the deed so she would know it came without any strings. He owed her that for the low-down, skunky way he'd treated her. The land would be hers, no matter what happened to their relationship.

He'd called Sean to see if he could round up the owners of the property and have them meet him at the bank. In about an hour, he'd know if Sean had succeeded or not. Either way, Cal would make sure Autumn knew it would be hers before he unburdened himself of the guilt he'd been carrying for so long.

"I won't bother to ask questions. This is a surprise you're cooking up for Autumn, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"I've seen you talking to Luke and Garret several times, then running back and forth to your room."

"Yeah, they're hoping I pull it off, too."

He'd already phoned the ob-gyn, Dr. Roger Steinman, whose specialty was high-risk pregnancies. Roger boarded Thoroughbreds at the farm so Cal had asked him to drop by for a fancy dinner to meet a new patient. The lady would have excellent prenatal care the minute she arrived.

"Have you told Autumn the truth?" Rachel asked.

Cal shook his head. "I'm going to tell her tonight."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

Uneasiness settled in the pit of his stomach. "No, but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't. I want us to start out on the right foot."

She nodded, but he saw the same unanswered question on her face that raced through his mind.

*Would he lose Autumn?*

One hour and forty-five minutes later, Cal sat in the rocker looking out his bedroom window anxiously waiting for Sean's call. Something had gone wrong or he'd have called already.

When the phone rang, Cal snatched up the receiver.

"Sean?"

"Uh-huh, but I hate to tell you I couldn't get them to do it. They're from up north, Yankees, and don't know us from an anthill. Since you're an attorney, they think you're pulling a fast one on them and Autumn."

"How?"

"They gave their word to Autumn they'd sell her sixty acres. Unless she's there for the deal, they don't want any part of selling all the land to you."

"That's crazy. I'm trying to surprise her. Once the land's mine, I can deed it to anyone I want later on. What's the real reason, Sean?"

"Rumor has it one of the owners saw Autumn at the horse auction. He's got the hots for her, and believes this will get him on her good side if he looks out for her best interest."

Every jealous bone in Cal's body jumped to alert. "Oh, he does, does he! Tell them to meet me in thirty minutes at the bank to sell *me* the land or I'll slap them with a lawsuit so big their heads will spin for two years. They gave me their word they wouldn't parcel the land and I would have first bids on it. You remind them I have it in writing. They knew the date I planned on buying that land—all of it—and I'm holding them to their original promise or I'll see them in court."

Sean laughed. "I never had any doubt you'd get your hackles up when it came to your woman. Once I deliver your message, they'll be there with bells on. Want me to point out the city slicker with the hots for Autumn when we meet at the bank?"

"Most definitely."

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Enchanting.

That's the word Cal chose to describe Autumn as she came down the stairs. She wore a champagne-colored silk skirt and top that shimmered with every movement. It clung,

accentuating the swell of her breasts. His gaze roamed the length of her curvaceous body. He smiled, his attention drawn to sexy little pink toenails that peeked out of strappy gold-toned sandals.

When she reached the landing and walked into the living room, he forgot to breathe. Her waist length hair cascaded down her back, beckoning him to touch. With every step, the side slit of her dress gave a tantalizing view of long, tanned legs.

"I didn't want her to be the only one surprised tonight," his mother said beside him. "When she mentioned Kayla was coming, I told her we were having a few other special guests, too."

"Miss Autumn," Josh yelled.

The boy flew to her. Autumn bent and deposited a kiss on his cheek. He looked like a little man in his suit and tie.

Glowing, Autumn crossed the floor to where Cal stood leaning against the fireplace. She pointed to the picture of Miss Piggy and Miss Puddles that rested on the mantel and gave him that sultry gotcha-smile.

His heart did a flip-flop.

"That burgundy dress really suits your skin coloring, Rachel."

His mother smiled and hugged her.

Autumn turned to him. "You clean up pretty good, Cal." She gave him the once over, then straightened the collar on his taupe shirt and gave his nutmeg sports coat a tug at the bottom.

When he buttoned his jacket to make sure no one would notice his erection, Autumn winked at him. Damn, she didn't miss a thing, the little vixen.

He loved her. She'd changed him for the better. And tonight he stood a good chance of losing her forever. By becoming the very thing she hated—a liar. He felt like the prince turning back into a frog.

"The smells coming from that kitchen and dining room are making me hungry." Luke dressed for the occasion in his one and only navy blue Sunday suit.

"What do you have cooked for us tonight?" Garret's red power tie flashed like a neon sign against his stark gray suit.

Rachel ran down a mouth-watering menu of rib roast, twice-baked potatoes, snow peas, avocado-shrimp salad, and her homemade yeast rolls. By the time she'd finished, everyone wanted the guests to arrive fast. Cal glanced at the grandfather clock. Five-fifty. The guests would arrive in ten minutes.

He fingered the deed to the one-hundred-and-twenty acres in the pocket of his jacket. His name was listed as the owner, but Cal had signed papers this afternoon, and Sean was working to transfer ownership of thirty acres each to Autumn and Kayla. It would take a couple of days to get the paperwork processed and recorded at the courthouse.

"Autumn, you have a phone call, sweetie," Rachel said.

Cal followed the sexy way Autumn's hips swayed as she left.

Ten minutes later, she returned. However, her stride had changed from a slow, relaxed almost sensual walk to a faster, agitated almost aggressive one.

The sound of a car pulling up in the drive drew Cal to the window. Roger had arrived in his fancy red sports car.

"Josh, help Grandma get the food on the table while our guests arrive," Rachel said. "I got a special dessert with your name on it I want to show you, sweetie."

Cal smiled as Josh traipsed behind Rachel.

Everyone moved to the wraparound porch to greet the first guest. Roger waved as he got out of his car. Cal glanced at Autumn's face. The sweet softness he had grown accustomed to had disappeared. In its place was a tightness around her mouth and hardness in her eyes. Not the Autumn he knew and loved.

*Something was wrong.*

That uneasy feeling in his stomach turned into a raging volcano as acid poured into his gut.

Cal turned to see a semi pull into the circular drive and park. He hurried toward the truck.

"Where do you want her?" the big burly driver said as he stepped from the vehicle's cab. A loud bellow came from inside the bed of the truck and Luke ran toward it.

"What's that?" Roger asked.

As the driver opened the door and put the off-ramp down, a soft female voice crooned in a calming, melodic tone. They all moved to the back of the truck to get a closer look.

The blood drained from Cal's face.

Inside stood a very pregnant American bison in all her glory. A buffalo.

"You expect me to care for a buffalo?" Roger asked. "Hell of a joke, Cal." He rounded on him. "As you know I have two sets of preemie twins due any hour and your humor, well old buddy," he slapped Cal on the arm, "just isn't funny. Later." Hurrying to his car, he folded his large frame inside and sped away.

Kayla stepped from the bed of the truck, her cropped black hair, oval face, and lavender eyes reminded Cal of a young Elizabeth Taylor. She lead the mammoth beast down the ramp.

"I'm glad to see you." Autumn's voice sounded shaky.

Kayla waved at Autumn, then turned toward Luke. "If you find Sarah a stall, I'll get her bedded down. She'll be fine, but I want to check on her off and on during the night."

Flashing her a smile, Luke led Kayla and Sarah to the barn.

Autumn strolled over to Cal and stood toe-to-toe with him. What he saw broke his heart. Her chin quivered, but she didn't cry, instead a shower of anger and hurt rained from her eyes.

"That phone call was from William Harper, one of the owners of the property next door. He said you bought all one-hundred-and-twenty acres this afternoon. Did you?"

Cal's heart dropped to his stomach. The man who had the hots for Autumn had decided to play his card, the dirty snake. "Yes, but I can explain."

She shook her head. "I don't want to hear it. I've always looked after Kayla and our babies. I'll find other land."

"You don't have to."

She arched a brow. "Yes, I do. I want to know how you could possibly forget Sarah was a buffalo when we had discussed it online numerous times. I explained to you how worried I was about her. She'd lost two babies already."

*Oh God, why hadn't he finished reading her e-mails?*

He felt like a man watching someone light a dynamite fuse. It would only take her a

little while to figure it out, when she did, his heart would explode.

Why hadn't he told her the truth earlier? Before they'd made love. He could almost see the wheels spinning in her mind. His palms grew clammy. Perspiration lined his brows. She wouldn't listen to any excuse he might have now. She'd only consider it another lie. It was too late for forgiveness, but maybe there could be understanding.

Her eyes widened and he watched helplessly as she figured it out.

Dammit. What could he do? What could he say?

"You couldn't possibly have written the e-mails." She shook her head, a look of confusion on her face. "Who did?"

"My mother," he managed to say past the lump in his throat. He put his hand on Autumn's arm. She shoved it aside, and gave him a dirty look. "Please don't do this to us," he begged.

She blinked several times and glanced away before bringing her gaze back to him. "I didn't do it, Cal. You did. All by your lonesome. But don't worry, your secret's safe. I won't blow your movie deal. From now on it's strictly business between us."

"Let me explain," he pleaded.

"Are you going to tell me you didn't lie? Or is this going to be the first true words you've ever said to me?" She fisted her hands at her sides, anger in the tightness of her jaw.

He exhaled a slow, defeated breath. "I admit it, I lied to you from day one, but there was a reason."

Her chin quivered again. The pain he saw was eating him alive. "Three hundred thousand of them, the price of your movie contract, not to mention the publicity. That says it all."

"Please listen, sweetheart, you mean the world to me. The money had nothing to do with it."

She held up a hand to forestall any more talk. "I won't listen to another word. You only get one chance to lie to me. After that, I don't believe anything you say."

"I'm sorry," Cal whispered. The words seemed inadequate to express the sorrow he felt at hurting her.

"For what, Cal? The lies? No, you'd have told me the truth sooner. The sex? My begging for it like some fool. No, that probably gave you a laugh. My finding out? Yeah, that I'll buy."

It couldn't end like this. He had to make it right. But how? Tears filled the corners of his eyes. He wanted to explain his side, beg her to forgive him, but Kayla and Luke returned. A look of concern passed between the two of them at this situation.

Autumn spun around. "Kayla, please help me. I need to pack."

"What about the book signing next week?" Cal hurried to catch up with her, grasping for anything to keep her near.

She sped toward the house. Kayla followed, a worried look on her face. "I'll be here. It takes place as scheduled."

Maybe with a little time to cool off, he could get her to listen. At least he'd see her for the book signing. "We'll make sure it runs smoothly," Cal said.

"Good, because if it doesn't, I'll see you in court." She threw open the porch door and rushed inside, nearly knocking Rachel over.

"Autumn, honey, wait," Rachel called out. "Please, it's all my fault." She hung her head.

"Rachel, I..." Autumn stammered, the pain in her voice cut through Cal. "He knew, and he didn't care..." Autumn never looked back as she hurried toward the stairs. "I'm leaving right now, movie or not."

## Chapter Thirteen

"It's my fault." The chaise lounge scraped on the stone deck as Luke adjusted the back, then plopped down beside Cal. "When they first talked about Sarah's pregnancy, I should have asked, not automatically assumed it was a woman."

Cal slumped deeper into the cushioned chair by the lighted pool, scanning the faces of his family who'd gathered to lend him moral support. The smell of chlorine drifted across the screened lanai. He would never forget the pain in Autumn's eyes, or what she'd said. He'd caused her such grief with his dishonesty.

Now that he'd come to know Autumn, he couldn't imagine his life without her. Dammit, they belonged together. Somehow, he had to win back her trust and convince her to stay. But how? If he told her about the land, she'd just think it was another trick.

"You tried talking to her again?" Garret leaned his chair back and propped his feet on the table.

Cal nodded, recalling the crying he'd overheard before she stomped barefoot to the door and opened it. He'd ached to hold and comfort her as she stood there with red, swollen eyes.

"I tried three times. Kayla made it crystal clear to me that unless it's business, Autumn won't listen to anything I have to say." His eyes stung with tears as he fought to get control of himself. How could he get past Autumn's wall of silence?

"It's my fault," Rachel whispered. "Me and my matchmaking."

Cal tightened his lips against the urge to agree with her, reining in his temper because he knew his mother loved Autumn like a daughter. Besides, if not for her meddling, he never would have met the woman he'd come to love with all his heart. He belonged to her and she to him. "No, I owe you for the two of us getting together, even if it was only temporarily."

Guilt clawed at him. If only he'd trusted Autumn enough to tell the truth when she first arrived. However, being cynical, he'd imagined lawsuits. Why hadn't he realized he could trust her? Was he a total moron?

The soothing sounds of the cascading waterfall in the center of the pool normally relaxed Cal's tension. Not now. His eyes strayed to the hot tub and the rising steam. The image of holding Autumn in his arms last night while bubbling heat lapped their naked bodies sizzled through his mind. His whole body tightened with longing.

*Whatever it takes, I want her back.*

"Thanks, all of you for trying to make this easier, but the truth is, it's my fault." Cal took a long swallow of iced tea. "I'm the jackass who decided to lie in the first place, then didn't have the heart or guts to tell her the truth when I had the chance. At some point, I realized she would never hurt us, but I hated to ruin the illusion for her. I wanted to live up to this grandiose ideal she had of me as a big-time cowboy. Hell, I was afraid once she came to know the real me, she'd run. I didn't want to take that chance."

"There's enough blame for everyone." Garret set his glass in the metal tray on the table. "You didn't hear any of us insisting on owning up to the lies. I'm ashamed to admit it, but we all betrayed sweet, little Autumn."

Autumn was his woman, but how could he convince her of that? Had he ruined things

for them? He cursed himself. *Why didn't you tell her you loved her?* the voice inside his head screamed. Now she wouldn't listen to anything he said and she believed he'd used her. That idea tore at him the most. Didn't she realize he may not have *said* he loved her, but he'd shown her with every touch?

"Would it help if we got Sean to verify you're transferring land to them?" Luke asked. "We could back you up and show her proof in black and white."

"She wouldn't believe any of our friends, any more than she trusts us right now. My biggest fear is she'll jump to the conclusion I'm trying to buy her silence to avoid a lawsuit."

"A bribe?" Garret's voice turned to disbelief.

"Exactly," Cal snapped.

Rachel stood. "I've heard enough of this blame game. We're getting nowhere. I owe her a big apology, too. While I'm there, I'll see if she'll agree to stay at the lakeside cabin. At least that'll buy us time for her to cool off."

Fresh out of ideas other than kidnapping, Cal wouldn't turn down anyone's help. "Don't tell her about the land. It's my gift to her, no strings attached. Once I have the paperwork as proof, I'll give it to her."

"I won't mention it. It may be the only foot you can get in the door to apologize and reason with her face-to-face." Rachel walked toward the French doors leading from the screened lanai into the house. "I'll fix a tray and see if I can get them to eat something."

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Autumn sprawled on her belly across the bed and rested her head on her arms. Her head felt stuffy and she could hardly breathe.

Kayla grabbed a box of tissues and set it next to Autumn. "Sit up, blow your nose, and then tell me what happened. How did he hurt you?"

Autumn sniffled and obeyed her sister's kind but determined voice. She grabbed a handful of tissues and wiped at the tears sliding down her cheeks. Kayla's reassuring arm slid around her shoulder urging her to let it out.

"You warned me about becoming too friendly with a man I met on-line. Well, you were right. I was a big fat joke to the Whittaker's. The whole family made a fool of me."

"How? I can see maybe Cal. I mean, oh hell, you're scaring me. What did they do to you?" Kayla's tone demanded an answer.

Autumn blew her nose and then buried her head in her hands. She wanted to forget about her shame, not relive it.

"Look at me, sis. If you're worried about telling me about the sex, I heard the tail-end of your conversation. I'm not a child. I know the two of you were lovers, so does the rest of the world by now."

A soft knock on the door made Autumn's stomach lurch.

*Cal again.*

"Go away," she shouted.

"It's me," Rachel replied softly, a plea in her voice.

Kayla lifted a brow. "You want me to let her in?"

Autumn stiffened, then snatched another tissue from the box, and wiped her face. She



nodded and Kayla opened the door.

Rachel stood in the doorway holding a silver tray with a generous helping of assorted homemade goodies. The scene was painfully reminiscent of the previous time Autumn had thought of Rachel as a mother figure. Now, she wasn't sure what she felt—except pain and anger.

"Here, let me help." Kayla hurried to Rachel's side, took the tray, and carried it to the writing desk.

"I'd like to talk to you." Rachel's sweet face looked haggard, her gray eyes brimmed with remorse.

Autumn took a calming breath.

Rachel settled in the rocker beside the bed. Kayla hopped onto the mattress near Autumn and crossed her legs Indian-style. She glanced between Autumn and Rachel, clearly mystified.

"Dear, I never meant to hurt you," Rachel began in a choked voice. "I corresponded with you as Cal because I wanted so desperately to rescue my son from a life of loneliness. Over the months we became friends, I came to believe with all my heart you were perfect for one another. I still do."

Kayla stared at Autumn with a puzzled look. "Rachel pretended to be Cal?"

"Yes," Autumn snapped. "I poured my heart out to the person I believed was Cal, the person who'd become my best friend. I thought I'd finally met a man who understood me. But, no! It was all deceit and lies." She glared at Rachel. "Let me guess. You forged their signatures on the movie contract, didn't you?"

Rachel hung her head. "Don't you see? Cal lied to protect me and Whittaker Oaks. He knew I'd go to jail and the studio would sue if we didn't go through with the contract. What other choice did he have?"

"He had a choice." Autumn pinched the bridge of her nose, determined not to cry again. "Between the time I arrived and his initial decision to hurt *me* rather than his family and Whittaker Oaks, he must have come to realize I would never betray his trust." Autumn winced at the icy pain stabbing her heart. "He had another option. It's called the truth. He used me."

Rachel gasped, and Kayla patted Autumn's arm in support.

"I know my son. Right now the only thing he's thinking about is how to convince you to stay. That's not the actions of a man who used you."

Autumn stiffened and crossed her arms, ignoring Rachel's words. So many things made sense now. Cal warning Josh not to get too close to her. The surprise and disgust Cal had for her babies, wanting them off his property. And her.

She remembered the time she'd told Cal she loved him and silence had been his only reply. She wasn't about to buy any of his mother's malarkey now. No doubt, she was still playing the matchmaker. "You're wrong. Cal doesn't care about me."

"Sweetie, you're gambling with the rest of your life. Please..." Agony writhed across Rachel's face and she twisted her hands helplessly. "I'm begging you, give Cal a chance to defend himself."

Autumn shrugged, even as tears surged to her eyes. Gritting her teeth, she managed to hold her sorrow at bay. "What could he possibly say that would explain his despicable lies

and deceit? How could I ever trust him again?"

"I don't know what he'll say, Autumn. I only know it will come from his heart."

When Autumn first met Cal, she'd thought his feelings for her had come from his heart, but she'd been wrong. She didn't need him to tell her he was sorry, that he didn't love her. Everything he'd done had been to save this ranch, including having sex with her. At the memory of their tender lovemaking, more tears welled up within her. It had all been a lie. Oh, yeah, he wanted her for sex, but he didn't love her. She couldn't bear hearing his confirmation.

"I have no right to ask, but I hope you'll do something for me. There's a lakeside cabin not far from here. My boys use it for fishing. You and Kayla can stay there and be near your babies until you leave. Cal will not bother you, and Josh can come and see you. Will you do that for an old foolish lady?"

Autumn didn't want to give Josh any reason to doubt her word. Even if her relationship with Cal had ended, she would not allow that to affect Josh.

"Yes, if you'll also do something for me."

Rachel looked hesitant. "If I can."

"Start at the beginning, and tell me everything about this entire charade."

Thirty minutes later, Rachel smiled sweetly and stood. "That's it. Now that you know the whole story, including every matchmaking scheme I've pulled on him, I hope it helps."

"It does." In a way, she felt sorry for Cal, but having a scheming mother didn't excuse what he'd done. "Rachel, please give him the last missing page of the contract. He has a right to know the studio has an option to film my sequel at Whittaker Oaks." Autumn could imagine his reaction to that wonderful news.

"I'll see he gets it tonight."

Somehow, that didn't seem enough payback. Unless—she remembered a calendar shoot the studio wanted, but she had set it aside, thinking it too risqué. Was it still an option on the last page of the contract? She closed her eyes, picturing the clause, which had been left to her discretion.

She opened her eyes and glanced toward Rachel. "Please point out Paragraph Five, Subsection C to him. I want the calendar shoot done tomorrow before we move to the lakeside cabin."

Rachel's eyes widened with understanding. "Will you be at the photo-shoot?"

"No." Autumn didn't think she could stand looking at him, remembering all that had gone between them.

"I put several teabags on the tray I brought up. If you dampen them and lay them over your eyes for awhile, the swelling will go down." Rachel's chin trembled. "You must hate me. I hope you find it in your heart to forgive me one day."

How could she hate a mother who acted out of love? "I don't hate you, Rachel. You were thinking of Cal and Josh." She hugged Rachel. "Don't you see—Cal should have told me the truth. I deserved that much from him."

"I had so hoped you two would rescue each other. Won't you at least say goodbye to him before you leave?"

Autumn sighed. Fear of more heartache and rejection seemed to weigh her down. "I don't know."

Rachel's shoulders slumped as she walked to the door. She opened it and turned around. "Think about it, Autumn. He kept up the illusion because he thought you'd be disappointed in the real him. Even condemned prisoners are given a chance for last words," she said as she slipped out of the room.

Kayla gave Autumn a sympathetic smile and retrieved the teabags. "I'll wet these. You look like hell." She went into the bathroom, returned, and held the soggy teabags out to her.

Autumn relaxed into the pillow and laid them across her eyelids. She sighed. "Well, now you know the whole disgusting story. Aren't you going to say 'I told you so?'"

"No. I was wrong."

Autumn snatched the tea bags off and stared at Kayla. "What? Haven't you been listening? Doesn't that explain the poop-duty? He never wanted me or our babies here. Not from day one. It also explains his wanting to know the other ranchers in the running who wouldn't sign the contract. He hoped to get out of it."

"I don't blame him. How else could he feel faced with an invasion? I've got to give Cal's mother points for ingenuity. However, it sounds like once he got to know you, he changed."

"Whose side are you on?"

"Yours. And I think Cal is, too."

"What are you basing that wild assumption on? What Rachel said about him worrying I'd be disappointed in the real him is just another stab at matchmaking."

"It's based on two things. The look on his face when you said, 'Begging for it like some fool probably gave you a laugh.' Sis, I've never seen a grown man with tears in his eyes. He flinched like you'd slapped him. And I believed Rachel's explanation. When she said Cal was heartbroken and wanted to apologize and convince you to stay, it tore at my heart. How about yours? Do you feel anything at all?"

Autumn's simmering anger heated to a boil. "Of course! Maybe this will come as a shock to you. After Cal said we could have the land we wanted, he bought it right out from under us. Was that an act of love?"

"No, so what he did was wrong, but he tried to explain why, you wouldn't let him. Everyone deserves a second chance."

"To what, sell me another pack of lies?"

"To save you both from a lifetime of regrets." Concern etched deep lines on Kayla's forehead. "What happened to believing in fairytale endings and everlasting love?"

Autumn winced. "Thanks to Cal, I grew up. I don't need a knight-in-shining-armor. Prince Charming is a toad after all."

"You're hurting and need time to heal. And don't try to lie to me. You fell in love with Cal and you still love him. Okay, he's just a man. Forgive him. Like everyone, he has faults and makes mistakes."

"I don't want a man who's perfect, but I do want one I can trust. Cal wouldn't know the truth if he stepped in it."

Autumn lifted the receiver and dialed the photographers.

"We talked about this calendar shoot when you decided against it." Kayla shook her head. "Don't do it. Let me remind you, revenge is a two-edged sword. You're going to regret this big-time, sis." Kayla tried to snatch the receiver from Autumn's hand.

She jerked it back. "I already do."

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Cal couldn't believe how fast the photographers had turned one wall of his bedroom into a backdrop for the photo-shoot. They'd invaded the master bathroom nearby, racks of costumes hung inside for easy access. He stood with his brothers on a raised platform serving as a stage and glanced around at the bank of equipment and bright lights.

"Well, at least we know what's on the last missing page of the contract," Garret muttered.

"We don't mind the option to film a sequel here," Luke said. "Hell, we're happy for Autumn, but this photo-shoot is something else. Are you sure this will win her back?" Luke whispered.

"No, I'm not sure, but we're damn well going to do it. When I said I'd do anything to get her back, I meant *anything*," Cal assured his brothers.

Autumn walked into the bedroom. What was she doing here? Her hand skittered to the buttons on her shirtdress. When her gaze moved to the bed they'd made love on, she almost stumbled into the chair in front of the stage.

His heart ached at the pain and determination etched in Autumn's face. She had such pride.

A stout gray-haired man bustled into the room dressed in a polo shirt and khaki slacks. "Ah, Autumn, there you are." He spun toward them, two cameras dangling from his neck. "I insisted the author attend this session so we can capture the essence of what the studio had in mind for her book. Okay, men. You'll find wardrobes in the bathroom. Here's the order of the shots—one for each calendar month plus a cover layout." The photographer handed them each a piece of paper, including Autumn. "Countless women want to see your hard bodies, so loosen up, and let's make the shoot hot and sexy."

They each read down the list. Cal swallowed hard when he got to briefs and finally the worst—nothing but a smile and pride.

Okay, it was bad, but they could handle this.

He noticed Autumn looking his way. "Smile," he told his brothers. "I don't want her to see this is getting to us."

They smiled like jackasses.

"We'll start with the cover shot of you in complete cowboy outfits." When they stood there dazed, the photographer said, "Hop to it, boys."

Ten minutes later, the backdrop had changed to a western theme, complete with fences, wagon wheels, and a barn. They paraded back on the platform looking like a bunch of rhinestone cowboys. At least they were fully clothed. Lights flashed and Cal breathed deep. One down and twelve more to go.

"Okay, men. Lose the shirts. Undo the top buttons of your fly and pull down those jeans a notch or two. Women across America want to see tight abs, skin, and those sexy bellybuttons."

"If that little pervert says sexy or hot to me one more time...I'm going to deck him," Luke grumbled to Cal.

"Based on the costumes, I can't see a theme to this calendar shoot, can you?" Garret asked.

"I think we're it," Cal said. He unbuttoned his shirt and saw Autumn's gaze glued on his fly. She might not like him, at the moment, but with the way her eyes flashed desire, certain parts of him she still liked a whole bunch. Damn, now was not the time to get hard and embarrass himself. He breathed deep, counted to ten, and shoved his jeans lower.

"Did you see the swimsuits with red hearts we have to wear?" Garret shot daggers at Cal.

"No," Luke said. "I had too much trouble pouring myself into these jeans. They're strangling my balls."

"A beach scene in November, like it never gets cold in Florida," Garret complained. "Strippers wear more clothes."

"Damn," they muttered in unison.

"Smile," Cal whispered between gritted teeth. He glanced at the front row and recognized the hot, bothered look on Autumn's face. The same one she wore when she'd begged him to take her against the wall.

She frowned at him.

"This stinks," Garret said. "We start out with clothes and with each progressive month we lose more and more until our family jewels are hanging out in public."

"Damn," they said in unison again.

"If I ever ask you for advice about women, shoot me, because you don't know Jack," Luke said between clenched teeth.

"Cal, swap places with Garret and turn a little so the bruise on your shoulder won't show," the photographer yelled.

Cal shuffled to the other side and cursed.

"It still shows. Autumn, dab some pan makeup on his shoulder." The photographer threw a small container toward Autumn, who caught it in mid-air.

Autumn stood, walked up the stairs, and fumbled as she removed the lid.

"Baby, please, we need to talk," Cal whispered as her fingers lifted the dark glob of makeup and rubbed it gently onto his shoulder. He hissed, suffering a testosterone rush from her touch. It took everything he had to fight his arousal.

"Did I hurt you?" she asked.

Cal flinched at the coldness in her voice and eyes. She wasn't overly concerned about him.

"No, I hurt you." His voice trembled with regret.

Her hand shook while she blended the makeup over his skin until the tan color concealed the bruises. "I just want this whole thing over."

"I know, sweetheart."

"Does this bother you?" Her lips had tightened into a thin line.

He thought about the way both of them were hurting. "Yes."

She snapped the cover shut. "Good." She marched down the stairs and took her seat.

"I had this coming, all of it!" Cal shouted and her jaw dropped.

"Perfect. Smile for me, boys," the photographer said.

Lights flashed several times, almost blinding Cal. Thank, God, one more down. He

blinked and tried to focus on Autumn.

Was she still there? Had her expression changed? He rubbed his eyes and blinked again. He couldn't see a thing except lights as big as the sun and dots swimming.

"Okay, men. We're going to move to a shower backdrop and shoot you wearing towels, then bathrobes. Try and act like you're having fun. It's great publicity. Women across America will be drooling as they flip from month to month."

Fifteen minutes later, Cal shook his head and exhaled a ragged breath, anticipating the worse.

"Okay, drop the bathrobes."

The robes hit the stage. They posed in briefs with little cartoon bulls on them, wearing big embarrassed smiles. Hell, he'd stand in front of the camera butt-naked all day and shout Uncle if it would get Autumn back in his life.

The photographer clapped his hands. "There's been a change from the author. No birthday suits. She wants the last shot to come full circle. Back into the cowboy outfits, without the hats this time."

They all breathed a sigh of relief.

After she got this little bit of well-deserved revenge out of her system would she give him a chance to grovel? Damn, he needed her. What would it take to get her back?

Her soft voice next to his ear startled him.

"Cal," Autumn murmured as he walked off the stage, "my parents are coming tomorrow. I-I wanted to warn you."

Great! What choice did he have? If he defended himself, and hurt her father, she'd never forgive Cal.

If he didn't fight back, he was a dead man.

At least maybe then she'd come to his funeral.

But he wouldn't bet on it.

## Chapter Fourteen

Cal tilted his head back, downing the shot of whiskey and vodka called an Earthquake in one gulp. The sad refrains of Ronnie Milsap's "Since I Don't Have You" playing on the jukebox tore at Cal's heart. Yeah, without Autumn, misery had walked in, plenty of it. He motioned to the bartender, who'd already made sure Luke was the designated driver. "Hit me again."

Luke pointed to four empty glasses lining the bar and shook his head when Cal added another one. "You trying to beat your old record?" He frowned. "You tied one on after Dad died, when you got the stupid idea the fights you two had caused his heart attack. I haven't seen you touch hard stuff since then."

Cal hiccupped. "She hates me."

"Imagine that." Luke glared at Cal. "It's time to go home. Besides you're liable to start singing and that'll get us kicked out for sure."

When the bartender clunked another glass of the amber liquid in front of Cal, his head swayed. Luke put his hand on Cal's arm and pushed him back to an upright position.

"Are we moving?" Cal grabbed the sides of the bar to steady himself. Blue cigarette smoke drifted in the air like a slow moving fog, choking him. He coughed and glanced at the blurry clock hanging next to a dusty moose head, too bleary-eyed to read the time.

"Which one of you is Whittaker?" All the heads in the bar, including Cal and Luke, turned in the direction of the gruff voice.

Cal craned his head around, toward the entryway and squinted to see through the smoke filled air. Uh-oh. Bad idea. Giants with angry faces swam underneath green overhead lights. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and fought to focus.

"I think I'm drunk." Cal slurred his words.

"I *know* you're drunk." Luke chuckled.

Someone pointed in their direction and the wavering mirage headed toward them. Cal couldn't trust his eyes, so he asked Luke, "What do you see?"

"Three muscle-bound gorillas in neon-purple shirts big as tents." Luke did a double-take. "Holy shit, The Bone Crushers. Remember? Dad took us to see them in tag team wrestling matches lots of times, and we watched them on TV."

Shoulder-length black hair gave The Bone Crushers a wild look. Huge fingers curled into meaty fists, garish tattoos of pirates, and skulls danced as they flexed corded forearms. They stopped near Cal, who felt dwarfed by their size. His gaze swept from the top of their heads down to their booted feet, then back up again. Man. All of a sudden he was really dizzy.

"Which one of you low-life's is Cal Whittaker? We want to talk to you about our daughter," the seven-footer said.

Cal imagined their daughter, a seven foot Amazon princess that could break his back like a twig. Although Autumn qualified as a princess, she was no Amazon, so he relaxed. "Sorry, don't know your daughter." He lifted his glass and took another gulp, but most of it dribbled down his shirt.

Luke stepped forward. "Gentlemen, my brother is in a sad shape, as you can see.

Woman troubles." He smiled. "Now, I can assure you, we are not acquainted with anyone who could be your lovely daughter."

Their eyes darkened with anger. "You're even bigger liars than Autumn said."

Cal choked, his drink burned as it went down his windpipe. He slammed his forehead on the bar, his sinuses smoldering in pure agony.

"Holy crap!" Luke said. "No wonder she warned you her parents would freak out."

They crossed their arms, big as logs, and scowled. Cal looked around for help, but everyone in the bar remained motionless, gaping at the pachyderm-sized men, who, judging by the tension in their bodies, were about to trample him senseless.

He was a dead man.

The Bone Crushers sauntered to three round tables, lifted them like matchsticks and shoved them together. Gathering chairs in a circle, they snagged a passing waitress. "Hot coffee, black and strong, and keep it coming."

She nodded, wide-eyed, turned and dashed to the back like a hound chasing a rabbit.

"We better join 'em." Luke slipped off the stool.

Before Luke had a chance to help Cal down, the biggest brute picked Cal up by the front of his shirt and deposited him none too gently into a seat.

"I'm Rupert Blessing." His voice rattled through Cal's drunken head. "These are my little brothers, Timothy and Harden. We're Autumn and Kayla's uncles."

"Uncles?" Luke gasped.

"Huh-uh," the one with biceps the size of a tractor tire corrected, "Legally we're also their parents."

Cal fought waves of nausea. The waitress set a pot of coffee and cups on the table, then hightailed it back behind the bar. Cal didn't blame her.

Rupert poured coffee for Cal, watching as he gulped the steaming liquid down. Cal ignored the hot, burning sensation invading his tongue and mouth.

"You made Autumn cry." Rupert pointed a menacing finger at Cal. "But you're the luckiest son of a bitch in town because she begged us not to kill you."

Cal found hope in that last statement. Maybe he could avoid an early demise.

"If I had my druthers, you'd be dead meat, but Kayla thinks you deserve a chance to explain," Rupert finished.

"Rachel told us her part," Harden said. Cal tried to focus on the crescent scar above his left eyebrow. "We wish she hadn't played God with our little girl's life," Haden added.

Timothy refilled Cal's cup, urging him none-to-gently to drink up. Then they sat back and glared over at Cal with their arms crossed, looking like great stone gods ready to pass a death sentence.

"Kayla has a notion the two of you are in love." Timothy snorted and spat a wad of chewing tobacco on the floor.

"Is that true?" they asked in unison.

Cal sat dazed, surprised as their deep voices shuddered through the bar. He thought of the feel of her skin, her violet eyes filled with passion, the little sounds of contentment she'd made after they'd made love, and didn't hesitate. "Yes."

The Bone Crushers stood, the tiny chairs toppled backward onto the floor with a thud. They left the tables and huddled, heads bent like linebackers. Cal couldn't hear what they



said, but one of them growled and pointed at him. Another one vehemently shook his head. Then they disbanded and walked up to Cal.

This was it. He was going to die.

Rupert nodded. "Then you better find a way to convince Autumn you love her."

Cal breathed a sigh of relief. "I thought you were going to kill me."

The Bone Crushers glanced at each other.

Rupert shot Cal a warning look that sent cold chills up his spine, sobering him instantly. "The jury's still out."

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Autumn stood on the balcony of the log cabin surrounded by majestic oaks, staring at the lake. Everything was beautiful; the sun reflected a dazzling starburst on the water's surface, the gentle breeze rustled the leaves, yet none of this could lighten the heaviness around her heart. Cal hadn't contacted her. If that's what she'd wanted, why was she so miserable? Why had she confided to Kayla that she wished she'd taken a chance and heard him out? What if he did reject her? Could that hurt worse than this gnawing feeling she'd been wrong?

Her heart sensed the instant Cal stepped onto the balcony. She turned, taking in his navy trousers and cream-colored polo shirt. At the sight of him, her breath caught, and she longed to hold him in her arms, wipe away the circles beneath his bloodshot eyes. He walked hesitantly toward her, holding out two envelopes.

"Please. Open them, after I leave." Their fingers touched as he handed her the envelopes.

It sent an ache through Autumn. She noted the sadness in his eyes before he walked toward the French doors. He turned around and stared at her.

"You have no reason to believe me, but I'm sorry for everything, sweetheart. I wanted so badly to be that cowboy you fell in love with on the Internet." He hesitated. "I don't know if you'll ever forgive me and trust me again, but I have to know one thing. Do you regret making love to me, Autumn?"

Not wanting him to see her tears, she stared at the lake. Vivid memories of his gentle and passionate lovemaking coursed through her heart. She shook her head. "No, but, I don't want you to feel obligated because it was my first time. I wanted you."

"Obligated? Dammit, Autumn, couldn't you feel how much I loved you every time I touched you?"

She spun around to confront him and heard only his fading footsteps.

Through misty tears, she opened the first envelope. Two deeds tumbled out. One for thirty acres in her name and another for thirty acres in Kayla's name. Cal had included a note saying, "A gift of love from me to you, Autumn." She recognized his chicken scratching and ran her fingers over the scribbles.

Quickly, she ripped into the other envelope. Her jaw dropped when she held a cream-colored wedding invitation. Tears brimmed again as she read the names of the bride and groom: Gone South and Sir Galahad.

*Oh, Cal.*

Autumn ran to Kayla.

"He loves me," Autumn cried out shaking the envelopes in front of her sister's stunned face. "Cal really loves me, look," Autumn handed her the invitation.

"I always knew he loved you, goose, I told you that. Stop listening to your hard head and listen to what your soft heart's been telling you."

"But he's abandoned his father's dreams...for me." Her lower lip quivered.

"Oh, no, we don't have time for crying." Kayla shoved Autumn lovingly toward the French doors. "Hurry, let's get dressed for the horse wedding."

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Autumn stepped into a fairytale world.

Cal's hard work had transformed the barn into a wedding chapel. A minister stood near the happy couple. It was an exact duplicate of the scene in *Hearts Entwined*, down to archways with tiny pink roses. Decked out in a bow tie and top hat, Sir Galahad rubbed his head against his lover. Gone South looked adorable with her tail braided and wearing a veil. Josh waved, holding up a bouquet of carrots and jingled the bells they would tie to the horse's manes after the service.

"Oh, Cal." Autumn's voice faltered as he walked up to her in a gray suit with a flower in the lapel.

Cal pointed to the film crews. "I called them in to shoot the marriage ceremony of the two horses. I wanted to prove to you how sincere I am in fulfilling this contract. They can dub in shots of the 'star' actors later and save time and film."

Autumn moved closer to him. He maneuvered her into one of the stalls amidst smiles from everyone who loved them both—including half the town.

He reached out and touched her cheek. "I love you, Autumn. Forgive me for all the lies. I wanted to tell you the truth after I got to know you, but I thought I'd lose you if I did."

"Do you know how badly you hurt me?" her voice almost broke.

"Yes, I do, sweetheart, because I hurt both of us, but I can't change the past. Believe me, I would if I could. I'm asking you to take a chance on me again. I'll be anything you want me to be. We belong together."

"Yes, we do." She slipped her arms around his waist to lean against him. "You make me feel so beautiful, so loved." He kissed her and she felt his erection nudge her belly. She stepped back and winked. "That's my cowboy, always raring to ride."

He chuckled in her ear. "Oh, yeah, all night long. I heard the editor liked your second book and the love scenes you added."

She laughed. "I'm working on another one."

"Can't wait to help with those scenes. If you agree to marry me, we're going to have the shortest engagement in history."

"And lots of kids," Autumn added.

When they opened the stall, everyone clapped. Misty-eyed Rachel and Abigail gave them each a hug.

Josh loped up to them dressed in a gray suit identical to Cal's and proudly handed his father a small velvet box. Cal lowered himself to one knee; Josh did the same.

"Autumn Blessing, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife?" Cal's voice cracked, but her eyes never wavered. With trembling hands, he opened the box and offered her a ring.

Autumn's heart jerked against her ribs.

"Will you be my mom?" Josh's face and his eyes were shining with sincerity.

Unable to speak over the lump in her throat, she could only nod.

"Oh, Lordy, Harden, that was beautiful," Timothy blubbered, blowing his nose in a lace hanky.

"Hush up, you fools. She ain't said yes," Rupert scolded, discreetly wiping his nose.

"Timothy, Rupert, we're gonna be grandpa's." Harden grinned, displaying a golden tooth, clapping both blubbering men on the back.

Cal winked at her, and she blinked back tears, taking hold of the most beautiful pear-shaped diamond she'd ever imagined. For a moment she could only stare at the twinkling gem, amazed. During her darkest days, she'd almost given up hope on ever finding the type of love she'd offered her bevy of rescued animals, yet she was with Cal and they'd rescued each other; with love.

"Yes, to both of you," she managed to whisper before tears of joy streamed from her eyes. Cal rose and slid the ring on her finger, brushing a kiss on her hand and knuckle.

Autumn's big, soft-hearted parents each took turns giving her a bear-hug and wishing her happiness. Luke and Garret thanked her for straightening Cal out. Rachel fussed over her like a mother hen, wanting to fatten her up and put color back into her cheeks.

Josh's lips parted and he stared at Autumn. "Why is she crying?"

"Women cry when they're happy. Or sad." Cal put his arms around Autumn and hugged her close.

Josh wrinkled his brows. "Which one is she now?"

"Ask her," Cal suggested.

Josh tugged on her dress. "Mom, aren't you happy?"

Autumn lifted him into her arms. *Mom*. She cried harder, even when Cal's strong embrace enveloped them both.

"Completely," she whispered, smiling into Cal's eyes.

## Epilogue

"This has been the longest nine months of my life." Rachel, Abigail and the entire family had been camped out in the hospital delivery room lounge for hours.

Kayla laughed. "Think how Autumn felt."

"Poor Autumn." Rachel tsk, tsked. "She could hardly waddle to her computer last week."

"What's taking so long?" Rupert paced the length of the corridor and back before stopping in front of his brothers, Harden and Timothy.

Rachel studied the gentle-giants. Lord, if Autumn carried children that big, she'd be in delivery another twelve hours.

"Hopefully, it won't be much longer." Rachel patted Josh's hand and smiled at Luke, who was busy talking with Kayla.

The doors swooshed open and Cal hurried toward them wearing blue surgical garb. His grin stretched ear to ear. "It's a boy. And a girl."

"How's Autumn?" Rachel asked.

"Bossy as ever. Telling me that just because she had two doesn't mean she wants to stop until she's had at least six."

Harden and Timothy grinned. "That's our girl."

But Rupert hovered over Cal. "How is she?"

Cal clapped him on the shoulder. "They gave her something to make her sleep, but you all can see her tomorrow. She's happy, but exhausted."

Everyone crowded around Cal, shaking his hands and congratulating him.

"They're so small." Cal looked at his big hands in wonder. "I'm kinda afraid to hold them."

"You'll get over that," Rachel assured him. "Remember how it was with Josh?"

Cal hugged her. "Mom, I know you're going to spoil them rotten, just like you do him." He glanced at their family, gathered around the room. "We all will. I hope they have Autumn's violet eyes."

"When can we see them?" Kayla asked.

"Well, little sis, you're in luck. Have to wear surgical gowns and masks, and keep your distance, but the nurses said I could take two visitors in at a time. They want me to limit it to the grandparents and siblings, and we can only stay five minutes. Josh, how would you like to come with me and meet your little brother and sister?"

Josh jumped up, eager as a puppy and tugged Cal's hand. "Come on!"

He gazed at his son with affection in his eyes. "Lord. It's hard to believe you were once as small as the two tiny bundles snuggled in your mom's loving arms."

"What're you waiting for?" Josh asked. "Let's go."

"Hold your horses. Once they get them settled in the nursery cribs, we can look to our heart's content."

Rachel motioned for Rupert, the worrywart of the bunch, to join Cal and Josh on their trek down the corridor.

"We did good," Rachel whispered to Abigail, wiping a tear from her eye as she plopped

next to her on the plastic orange chair. "Just got me to thinking."

"Oh, no," Abigail muttered. "I know that look. Forget it. You are not talking me into another one of those fool matchmaking schemes. Besides, you swore a Bible oath, Rachel Whittaker, and that's the end of it."

Rachel's shrewd gaze traveled between Garret, Kayla, and Luke. "I swore not to bring another woman onto the place for matchmaking." She pointed to Luke and Kayla huddled in the corner together. "Kayla came to Whittaker Oaks herself, so she don't count. I'm keeping my word."

"You got a mighty peculiar way of looking at things, Rachel."

"You going to help me without fussing?"

Abigail wrinkled her brows and gave her a harrumph. "You gonna ask me to do anything illegal?"

"Of course not." Rachel tucked her chin in indignation. "But it worked the first time, so here's what we should do for victim—I mean son number two," she waved for her friend to bend her head closer. It might not be illegal, but it was liable to get mighty tricky.