

Rosebud

Yellow Rose

THE ROCKING 'D' RANCH

by

Jo Barrett

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The Rocking 'D' Ranch

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Contact Information: info@thewildrosepress.com

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Chapter One

The scream, lodged in Abigail's throat, choked off her air, pulling the darkness in around her as fear held her captive. She was going to faint, then it could do whatever it wished. Her mind screamed for help, but not a word made it past her lips. Beady eyes watched her with each step, waiting for the right moment to pounce.

Smack!

Abigail let out a screech and leapt from her chair.

"For crying out loud, Abby," John said.

A shudder racked her body as he lifted the newspaper, uncovering the horrid remains.

"It wasn't even as big as an eyelash," he said.

She formed a few semi-coherent words amid her chattering teeth. "C-c-can't help it. I'm t-t-terri-fied of sp-sp-spiders."

He grinned. "No kidding?" Patting her on the shoulder, he gently turned her away. "Go get a cup of water or something while I take care of this. And I'll do a quick hunt for anymore. Okay?"

Abigail nodded and walked on shaky legs to the water cooler. John was her co-worker and a really nice person. She couldn't blame him for a little teasing. She'd put up with it for most of her life, but no one ever understood her aversion. But then she hadn't ever explained it to them either.

Her personal life was off limits. The one time she'd bared her soul, laid it open to the man she loved, he walked out on her. Never again would she tell anyone about her childhood.

Abigail lifted the cup of water to her lips and forced her nerves to calm, but they only shifted focus to a different problem. Today was her last day at Harper Textiles. The company was closing, and she didn't have another position as a bookkeeper lined up. Without a formal education, no one wanted to hire her.

She'd learned her accounting skills on the job, and had worked her way into a comfortable position with a decent enough wage. After all, it was only her and a few plants. No family, no pets, just her, Abigail Simmons, and her aversion to crawling things.

Turning to go back to her desk and finish packing her personal belongings, her foot caught the leg of the small metal snack stand beside the water cooler, sending it and all the munchies crashing to the floor. With a sigh, she knelt down to pick up the mess. This was par-for-the-course. She was a klutz, jinxed, a walking disaster. The only thing she was good at, the only thing she never managed to make a mess of were numbers.

John appeared and helped her pick up the snacks. "Your cubicle is critter free, Abby."

"Thanks. I'm sorry for making such a fuss."

"Hey, we all have our fears. So, are you excited about your trip?"

She sighed as she placed the last pack of chips on the shelf, hoping they weren't too crushed. "Excited isn't the word I'd use. I wish I could get my money back."

"Look, everyone needs a break now and then. Something will turn up when you get back. You're an ace at accounting. Go west young lady and enjoy yourself," he said with a big grin and a chuckle.

Abigail smiled and released some of the tenseness from her shoulders. "It will be nice to see Nance again. It's been almost ten months."

Several years earlier, Abigail and Nance Becket had bumped into one another one day—literally—at the corner coffee shop.

Papers covered with clothing designs fluttered to the ground along with Abigail's green bar reports. Nance let out a deep laugh, not the least bit upset, and introduced herself. They'd been friends ever since. Abigail missed her terribly.

Abigail and John turned and started toward their adjoining cubicles.

"You see? There's more than one reason to go and enjoy yourself," John said.

"Sure, but a dude ranch?" He chuckled and she punched him in the arm. "It's not funny."

"Sorry, Abby, but you've never even seen a horse up close much less rode one. I wish I could be there to witness it."

"I'll happily hand you my ticket, then you can enjoy the horse experience."

He dropped into his chair and held up his hands. "No thanks. I happen to like living. My wife would not approve of me bunking with Nance. Although...the idea has merit," he said, waggling his brows.

Laughing, Abigail threw a wad of paper at him before she resumed her packing—after a careful perusal of her space for any other uninvited creatures, of course.

Plane travel was for masochists. Abigail gritted her teeth and counted to ten—again. If the man seated beside her read over her shoulder one more time, she'd scream! Or at the very least, give him a severe frown.

Oh, who was she kidding? She would put up with this stranger's rude behavior for one more hour, then she'd be free of him. If only he didn't smell like Peter.

Why did so many men have to wear that particular cologne? Didn't they have any imagination? Didn't they know that only heart breakers wore that scent? John didn't wear any scent, thank

goodness. Then again, she wouldn't be seeing him anymore. Abigail sighed softly. She was going to miss his friendship.

She shifted in her seat, vainly attempting to put some distance between her and the man seated next to her, which was a wasted effort. He was huge, and his bulk already pressed against the armrest.

If only she hadn't let Nance talk her into this. She had no business going on vacation to a dude ranch in the middle of Texas. But the blasted plans had been made and paid for long before she knew Harper Textiles would be closing its doors. There was no way to get her money back, so why not have a little fun?

Why not, indeed? Abigail was a reclusive individual, with no great love of the outdoors. That's where the crawly things lived. She'd had her share of them a long time ago.

Nance's convincing argument flitted through her mind. "Oh, come on. It'll be fun. A week of relaxing will be good for you before having to find a new job."

Fun, Abigail thought with a tiny sniff. She didn't have time to have fun. She needed to find a way to pay her rent. And she detested traveling—flying to be specific—and wasn't very good with people. That was why accounting suited her so well. She preferred her numbers and columns to making small talk.

The man beside her stirred, obviously annoyed she hadn't turned the page. She fingered the corner, then snapped the book closed. She couldn't focus well enough to read anyway, and if it irritated him, then all the better. It was the least he deserved for being so rude and for wearing Peter's scent.

Oh, for heaven's sakes, when was she going to let that horrible piece of her life go? It had been over and done with for nearly three years. She needed to stop thinking about him.

"Would you like a refreshment?" the attendant asked.

Abigail nodded and took a soda, pushing the redundant lecture from her mind.

Opening her serving tray, she set her cup and the can down. She glanced out the window at the blue sky, thinking of wide-open spaces, and wondering what Texas would look like. Absently, she popped the top of her soda and poured it into her glass.

“Hey, watch it!”

She tried in vain to stop the spill from dripping onto the man’s leg from the tray. “I’m so sorry,” she said, dabbing at the mess with the tiny napkin. Thankfully, the attendant returned and took care of things.

The man glared at her and she offered him an apologetic smile. In response, he snapped open a magazine and ignored her.

Her curse had struck again. No matter how simple the task, if it didn’t have to do with numbers, she, in all likelihood, would bungle it. Oh, well, she hadn’t wanted to make his acquaintance in the first place.

The long, tedious flight finally came to an end. She hobbled off the plane, exhausted from hours of waiting in the security line, then the long flight from the east coast, the plane changes and more waiting. Why anyone chose to fly anymore was beyond her comprehension.

Emerging from the crowd in the baggage claim area with her battered case in hand, she went in search of the person who was supposed to give her a ride to the ranch. She’d been told to meet him at the main exit from the lower level of the airport, and that he would have a sign with the Rocking D Ranch written on it. But as her gaze searched the crowd, she didn’t see anyone with a sign.

Exhausted, she set her bag down and waited, not quite sure what else to do. But she did have the number of the ranch...somewhere.

Sitting on her suitcase, she fumbled in her purse. “I know it’s here,” she murmured.

“Are you Miss Simmons?”

Surprised, she toppled backward with a tiny shriek. Long arms wrapped around her, catching her before she landed on the hard tile.

Abigail looked up into a pair of chocolate brown eyes, set beneath the brim of a battered cowboy hat. Her gaze traveled the sharp angles of his face. He looked as if he hadn't smiled in a very long time. Strange that she should think that, but it seemed right, somehow.

His brow furrowed a moment as he returned her perusal. "Are you Miss Simmons?" he asked again.

Abigail took a deep breath to answer, but let it out with a whimper. He smelled like leather and something else—the outdoors perhaps. Whatever it was, she loved it. It was nothing like anything she'd ever smelled on a man before.

He cleared his throat. "Ma'am, are you all right?"

"Oh—uh—yes. I'm sorry. I'm Abigail Simmons."

"Then I'm here to take you to the Rocking D," he said, lifting her to her feet.

"Oh, good. That's—good."

His hands slipped away, leaving a lingering tingle, and he picked up her suitcase. "This it?"

She nodded, clutching her purse to her chest, knowing she looked like an absolute fool.

"Then follow me," he motioned toward the door.

Jeremiah Coltrane, Colt to his friends, didn't care one bit for the way Miss Simmons looked at him. It made him look back at her the same way—with interest. And he didn't have any time for that sort of thing. He had a ranch to run, one he was about to lose if he didn't do something quick.

At least she was a paying customer. The ranch hadn't had too many of those lately. Not since his accountant ran off with half his

liquid assets. Ted and he had been friends for years. He'd managed all the marketing as well as the books.

Colt still couldn't believe his old high school buddy could do such a thing, but he had. He hoped the lousy son-of-a-bitch enjoyed himself on his money, cause if he ever laid his hands on Ted again, he'd kill him.

He tossed the lady's bag into the back of the truck then opened the door. She eyed the length of the pickup then the interior before climbing in. He hid a wry grin. Not what she expected, no doubt, but the Rocking D was a working ranch. He couldn't afford a luxury vehicle, nor did he want one. He climbed in and made his way out of the airport parking lot. Miss Simmons relaxed a little once they were underway.

Colt sighed. He supposed he should make some sort of small talk or something. Mason usually handled the guests, but he had a baby due any day now, and didn't want to chance being over an hour away when his wife's time came.

"So, where are you from?" he asked.

Miss Simmons stifled a yawn. "Raleigh, North Carolina."

He nodded. A city girl. It figured. She probably didn't even know how to ride. And that look she'd given him—hell—he was likely the first cowboy she'd ever seen. Shame. She had a nice little figure. Although he didn't have time for a quick romance, he didn't mess with the ones who had crazy notions about cowboys. If he was going to star in any woman's fantasy, he wanted it to be because of himself, and not because of what he did for a living. He'd been down that road before.

"My friend. Nancy Moore. Has she arrived yet?" she asked.

"I don't believe so. Why didn't you travel together?" He only asked because it meant another trip into town. They'd have saved him a mint's worth in gas if they'd arrived together. Still, Mason had a point. Cater to the guests as much as possible, they were his livelihood at the moment.

“She lives in California,” the lady said. “We haven’t seen each other in a long time. We thought we’d meet each other halfway.”

“Well, I guess this is about as halfway as you can get.”

“Yes,” she said, covering another yawn. “I’m sorry, I’m not much for traveling. It wears me out.”

He nodded, and they fell into a comfortable silence, which suited him fine.

About thirty minutes away from the ranch, her purse slid to the floor of the cab. A quick glance told him she was fast asleep.

He turned his attention back to the road with a soft chuckle. She had to be exhausted to fall out that way, but he figured it was better than being bombarded with a bunch of questions about Texas, or fending off any interest she might have in him.

A weight landed on his shoulder. He grinned and looked at the top of her raven black head. She smelled real nice. Light and flowery—arousing.

Colt shifted uncomfortably in his seat. This was the last thing he needed right now. He considered shrugging her off, but it seemed kind of cruel, what with her being so tired and all.

Deciding he could take a little discomfort, he let her be, and shamefully enjoyed the feel of having a woman rest her head on his shoulder. It had been a long time. A very long time.

Chapter Two

Abigail awoke with a start, not sure where she was or why she was being tossed around. As she pushed away her drowsiness, the bouncing ceased.

“Sorry,” the man said. “Every time it rains, it washes out part of the road.”

She blinked a time or two and rubbed her eyes. “No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I can’t believe I feel asleep like that.”

His mouth turned up the tiniest bit at the corner.

So he did smile, sort of, but not often, she’d wager.

“Not a problem. You’re here to relax, right?” he asked.

“Yes. I suppose you could say that.” But she didn’t see how that was possible with her life in limbo back home.

“This is it,” he said, pulling to a stop in front of a small office.

“I’m sorry, I just realized I don’t know your name,” she said.

“Jeremiah Coltrane, but everyone just calls me Colt,” he said, with a tap to the brim of his hat.

She smiled at the little show of chivalry. “It’s nice to meet you Mr. Coltrane.”

He shook his head with a nearly imperceptible smile and climbed out of the truck. “Just Colt, ma’am.”

Abigail quickly followed. “Thank you for the ride,” she said, trailing after him into the office.

He nodded, dropped her bag, then disappeared through another door.

What had she done wrong? He hadn't seemed upset about her falling asleep. What did she miss? Why the cold-shoulder?

Abigail shook her head faintly. Jet lag was definitely setting in. After her ridiculous display in the airport, then falling asleep—God, she probably snored horribly or drooled on him—no wonder he didn't want anything to do with her.

"Don't mind him, ma'am," an old man said from behind the desk. "He can be a might gruff at times. You Miss Simmons?"

Abigail turned to him, forcing a smile to her lips. "Yes."

"We've got a room all ready for you. Come on with me. I'll show you the way." He hobbled out from behind the desk, grabbed her suitcase, and went out the door.

She followed his awkward stride down a dirt road, past a barn, to a small cabin. "Oh, how nice. I hadn't expected anything like this."

"Your friend said she done all the arrangements," he said with a chuckle. "Said you'd never get around to it."

She smiled. "She's right. She had to practically twist my arm to come—not that the Rocking D isn't a wonderful ranch," she added quickly. "I just hate traveling."

"I don't care for it much myself." They stepped up onto the porch and he opened the door. "Here you go." He set her bag inside. "There's a list over yonder on the table with all the eatin' times and riding schedules. If'n you need anything, just give old Jess a holler."

"Thank you."

"You're welcome." He turned to leave then paused. "Oh, and your friend said she was gonna be a might late. Probably be Wednesday afore she gets here."

"Oh." Abigail sank to the edge of the bed. Four days alone on a dude ranch. What had she been thinking to come on this crazy trip?

“Ah, now, don’t go frettin’ none. We got a swimming pool, and some fine trail horses. There’s plenty for you to do afore she gets here.”

She grinned at the old man’s worried frown. “Thank you. I’m sure there is. I’ll be fine.” She glanced at the table with the list. “Are riding lessons on the schedule?”

“Nope. But I’ll set one up for you first thing in the morning.”

She thanked him, and once he was gone, she fell back on the bed. “I have completely lost my mind.”

The next morning Colt spied Abigail Simmons in the dining hall and made himself scarce but quick. He didn’t like how she made him feel—edgy and aroused. All she did was sleep on his shoulder for a couple of minutes, and he was having dreams that rivaled anything his imagination had ever dished out before. Of course those sounds she made when she slept, soft inviting murmurs, hadn’t helped much either.

“Whoa there,” Jess said, catching him before he could slip out the kitchen door, unseen by the guests. “You got a riding lesson this morning.”

His shoulders sagged. “Don’t tell me. The guest I brought in yesterday.”

“Yep, that’s the one. The one I caught you eyeing from back here last night at dinner,” Jess said with a chuckle.

“As usual, old man, you’re way off,” he lied. But if he’d told the truth, Jess wouldn’t leave it alone.

She was the reason he had his heart set on working down in the south pasture. Far away from temptation. He just couldn’t handle this sort of distraction right now, no matter how much his body thought otherwise.

But he also had a ranch to run.

With a heavy sigh, he focused out the window over the sink on the riding coral. “Tell her where and when. I’ll be there.”

Abigail sat quietly in a corner by a window and enjoyed the view as she sipped her coffee. The terrain was not what she'd expected, but it was beautiful. The low rolling hills reminded her of home in a way, although the plant life was radically different. She expected wide-open spaces with cacti and rocks, not hills covered with live oak. She fell in love with it the minute she saw the sunrise. Grinning into her cup, she silently thanked Nance for practically forcing her to take this trip.

"Well, now that don't look like enough to feed a bird," Jess said.

Abigail turned her head and smiled at the craggy faced man. "I'm not a big breakfast eater, but it was all wonderful."

He nodded. "You 'bout ready for your lesson?"

She rubbed her suddenly damp palms on her jeans. "I guess so."

"Ah now, it ain't nothin' to fret about. Colt will take good care of you. He's the best teacher I ever seen."

Her heart fell low in her stomach then leapt back into place. Why, she wasn't sure. "Oh. Well, if you're sure he doesn't have other things he needs to do. I mean, if there are other chores—important things he has to do, I can wait."

"Nope. He's out by the coral waitin' on you. And anyhow, he's the boss, so if there was something else he needed to do, he'd say so."

"Boss?"

"Yep, this here's his ranch. Been in his family for a couple generations."

"I see." With half a smile, a nervous one at that in discovering the handsome cowboy was the owner of the ranch and not just the hired help, Abigail rose and followed Jess's directions on where to go. His parting comment about Colt not biting didn't bode well. Apparently the man wasn't just gruff at times, but all the time.

Maybe her lovely display the day before wasn't what had him practically running in the opposite direction.

Colt heard a soft familiar sigh, more of a coo, and turned to find the source. Miss Simmons was all eyes for the Appaloosa he had on a tether. He knew the appreciative sound hadn't been for him, he wasn't that stupid, but it felt kind of nice to think it for half a second. Especially when he wanted to make a similar sound at the sight of her. The jeans she wore molded her tight little behind perfectly. Watching her ride was going to damn near kill him, no doubt about it.

"She's beautiful," she said, leaning against the railing.

"Miss Bell's won her share of ribbons."

"Is she the one I'll learn on?"

"Yep." He brought the horse over to meet her pupil, and noted with an internal sigh of relief, that the little lady wasn't afraid. "Come in and we'll get started."

He went through the basics then helped her get on Miss Bell. Yep, those tight denims were going to kill him before the morning was over. For several minutes he led her around the coral, then let her try her hand at it on her own. Miss Bell was the gentlest, most forgiving horse he had on the ranch. A baby could learn to ride on her.

Colt propped one boot on the rail and watched, admiring the lady's natural feel for riding, and her form—every single inch of her. She wasn't beautiful, not by Hollywood standards, but damn pretty. Girl next-door sweetness poured from her in buckets. Her mid-length braid swung back and forth as she made another circuit around the coral. He couldn't help wondering what it looked like undone. But he'd dreamed about it down, lying across his pillow, a sated look on her face.

"Am I doing this right, Mr. Coltrane?"

He blinked away the image and cleared his throat. “Um, yeah. And it’s just Colt, Miss Simmons.”

“All right—Colt. And please, call me Abby.”

She smiled down at him, her dark eyes soft and sweet, and his breath hitched in his throat. That smile was too much like his dream.

“Well, that’s it for the lesson,” he said quickly, eager to get her out of reach before he did something stupid. “I’ll make sure Jess sets you up with a gentle trail horse when you decide to ride.”

She slid off Miss Bell and turned to him, her face glowing with pleasure and pride. “Thank you. Thank you so much.”

“Sure.” He gathered the reins and moved as far away as he could. Even though the woman had just gotten off a horse she still smelled as sweet as she did when she’d appeared. It was starting to make him think things, make him want to do things he couldn’t afford to do.

Abigail rubbed Miss Bell’s neck as pure joy filled her. “And thank you, Miss Bell. I don’t think I’ve ever had so much fun.” And without any mishaps, she realized, feeling on top of the world.

Now if she could only make herself move away from Colt before she made a complete fool of herself, her morning would be perfect. But the man held her with those chocolate eyes, partly shaded beneath his battered hat. She felt like a little girl again looking in a store window wishing for what she couldn’t have.

That last thought brought her out of her silly daydream. Although men were interested in her from time to time, it never lasted long. Her klutziness would strike and send them running in fear, terrified of permanent damage.

Except for Peter.

If there was ever a thought that cooled a girl’s ardor, that one was it.

“Well, thank you again for the lesson,” she said.

Colt nodded and she headed for her cabin where she planned to talk herself out of liking the cowboy who couldn't remember how to smile. Her life was complicated enough as it was, she didn't need to muck it up with romance.

"As if," she snorted. If anything happened between her and Jeremiah Coltrane, it would be nothing but a fling, and she didn't do flings.

Abigail had made a vow when she was a kid as she watched her mother with her latest *boyfriend*. She would not under any circumstances trade her body for a meal, or a roof over her head, or even for self-gratification. It would be for love and nothing else.

But she wasn't a virgin. Oh, no. Peter had taken care of that.

"The sorry sack of..." With a sigh, she closed and locked the cabin door and stripped out of her clothes.

"I have got to let that go. Somehow, I've got to," she mumbled on her way to the shower, remembering the sharp stab of pain in her heart the night she'd told Peter of her childhood. The night he'd acted as if she were a leper. The night he stormed out of her tiny apartment and never came back.

"But that's the past," she said with finality as she stepped beneath the pounding spray.

Chapter Three

“Don’t you think that there stall’s clean enough?” Jess asked.

“Huh? Oh.” Colt set the pitchfork aside and grabbed his shirt to wipe away the sweat and dust clinging to his body.

That woman had done something to him. He couldn’t think about anything but the way she’d gone from being happy to almost sad in the blink of an eye before she’d walked away.

Jess propped his bony arms over the edge of the stall. “So what’s got you so worked up?”

“Nothing. Just got stuff on my mind.”

He cracked a laugh. “Yeah, I reckon so. She’s mighty purty.”

Colt ignored the remark and moved on to the next stall.

“Barker called again,” Jess said, thankfully changing the subject. But Colt had a feeling they weren’t done with Miss Simmons.

With a shake of his head, Colt said, “The answer’s still no thanks.”

“Told him so, but he’s persistent.”

He paused and looked at Jess with a crooked grin. “Well, we both know I’m the best.”

Jess’s eyes narrowed as he struggled to hold in his smile. “You ain’t done no serious breakin’ in more than five years.”

With half a chuckle, Colt returned to mucking out the stall. “That doesn’t seem to be an issue with Mr. Barker.”

Jess let go with a chuckle, then changed the subject on him again. “That little girl’s ridin’ out with your group in the morning.

Thought I'd let you know so's you could pick a good horse for her. Seein' as how you know how good she rides and all."

Colt paused in mid swing of the pitchfork. He knew the old man had something up his sleeve. Maybe he could get Mason to take the trail, or Hank, or—hell—anyone else.

With a sigh, he tossed his load, knowing full well, it was his turn. And he didn't much like the feeling of running from a woman. "Fine. I'll take care of it."

"Figured you would." Jess turned and headed out of the barn. "Seein' as how you're sweet on her," he added with a backward glance and a grin.

Colt jabbed the fork into the earth and glared at the old man. "I am not sweet on anyone, least of all some skinny city girl who's got crazy notions about cowboys."

Jess's face sobered. "She ain't no Stephanie."

He gritted his teeth so hard his jaw popped. "I know she's not Stephanie." The last thing he needed was to be reminded of his ex-wife and her betrayal. She'd wanted a rodeo star for a husband, not a simple rancher.

"Glad to hear it," Jess said. "Then maybe you won't be so bullheaded and let this one get away." He slipped outside before Colt could respond.

"Damn mother hen. Still treats me like a kid," Colt grumbled as he loaded the pitchfork again.

Jess had been on the ranch for as long as he could remember. Although he didn't ride trails anymore, and was now the office manager, he was more than an employee. He was Colt's godfather. He'd stood by him the day Colt lost his father, then shortly after, his mother, and even helped him get over his divorce. Colt couldn't remember a time the old man hadn't been here.

But did he have to stick his nose into his business all the time? If he wanted a woman in his life, he had plenty to choose from. He didn't need some old codger's advice on dating.

Nearly an hour later, sweat dripping into his eyes, Colt's head finally began to clear. He would beat this attraction without too much trouble, he thought as he wiped his brow.

"Excuse me."

Colt's gut twisted up into a knot at the sound of her voice. Against his better judgment, he turned to his guest.

She chewed her bottom lip while refusing to meet his gaze. "I'm really sorry to bother you, but Jess said I had to ask you."

Jess again. It figured. "Ask me what?"

"He's going in to town this afternoon for supplies, and I was hoping I could ride along. He said I had to ask you if it was okay."

"Just tell Jess to pick up whatever it is you need." With that he forced himself to turn back to his work—work that he'd finished from the looks of things.

"Well, I didn't really need anything. I just wanted to see the town. I missed it, if you'll recall on my way here."

"There isn't much to see. An old mercantile, a few shops, a diner—that's about it."

"I'd still like to see it, but if it's against company policy or something, I understand."

He lifted his head as she turned to leave. "Wait. If you've really got your heart set on going, it's okay by me. Tell Jess I said so."

She turned and smiled brighter than the afternoon sun. "Thank you. I promise I won't get in his way." She spun around and proceeded to knock some tack off a hook, then stumbled all over herself trying to catch it. "I'm sorry."

Colt blew out a steady breath. "I'll take care of it."

"No, I can get it," she insisted.

He came out of the stall and bent to pick up the tack.

"I hope I didn't break anything," she said.

She lifted her head and he was struck all over again, just like at the airport, by her scent, the soft flush in her cheeks, and the rich warm brown of her eyes. "I'm sure you didn't."

"I'm glad," she said, her voice soft and sweet.

"Colt?" Jess called from the end of the barn. They both jumped like a couple of kids caught fooling around in the hayloft. Which wasn't such a bad idea, he thought, then shook off the crazy notion.

"My leg's acting up, I'm gonna soak it for a spell," Jess said. "You mind running into town for a few supplies?"

Great. And here he'd just promised Miss Simmons she could go. He hung the tack back on the hook with a heavy sigh. "Yeah, I'll go."

Jess disappeared as quickly as he'd arrived.

Odd, the old man's leg seemed just fine. Colt shot a glance at the lady, realizing Jess was playing matchmaker again.

His day just kept getting better and better, he thought with a sigh. "Give me about twenty minutes to take a quick shower and meet me by the office," he told her.

"All right, and thank you."

"Sure." He didn't look at her, didn't want to get caught up in that tight little package all over again, but he could hear the swish of her jeans as she hurried out of the barn.

"I am in so much trouble." The kind he didn't need or want.

Strike that. He wanted, all right, boy did he want. But he couldn't afford to waste his time on a woman.

Abigail wiped her damp palms on her jeans as the truck ambled down the dirt road to town. Colt smelled so good—fresh and clean, and all male. Her mouth actually watered.

She turned her head to the view out her window and swallowed. This was not going well. She was liable to throw herself at the man before they made it back to the ranch. What was wrong with her?

“You feeling okay?” he asked.

“Fine. I’m fine.”

“Well, like I said, there isn’t much to see in town.”

“That’s okay. I just needed to get out after being cooped up in planes all day yesterday.”

“You should’ve taken the afternoon trail ride.”

“I decided to wait till tomorrow. I need to work up the courage.”

He chuckled roughly, but it was a nice sound. Warm and rich. “You’ll be fine.”

They traveled the rest of the way in relative silence, with Colt remarking on some of the wildlife Abigail saw from the road.

“I just need to get a few things from the grocery store,” he said. “Why don’t you wander down to the mercantile and I’ll pick you up there?”

Abigail nodded and made her way up the street. She meandered around the store, giggled at a few of the tourist gag gifts, and even eyed a western blouse with beautiful embroidery across the chest. She was holding it up to herself in a mirror when Colt appeared behind her.

“You should buy it,” he said.

He shoved his hands in his pockets as his gaze held hers in the reflection. “It’d look nice on you with your—um—hair down over your shoulders.”

His Adams’ apple bobbed as he swallowed, and she held in her cat-in-the-cream smile. He liked her—her hair, anyway, but it still felt good.

“Thank you, but I can’t afford it,” she admitted sheepishly, and returned the shirt to the rack.

He nodded, but his brow furrowed. She’d said too much with that statement. The cost of room and board at the Rocking D wasn’t exactly cheap.

“Ready to go?” he asked, thankfully letting the comment slide. She wasn’t up for a bunch of questions about her messed up life at the moment.

With half a smile, she followed him to the door and knocked a stack of postcards to the floor in the process.

“I’m so sorry,” she told the sales lady, and dropped to her knees to pick them up.

“No harm done,” she replied.

Colt crouched down and helped Abigail pick up the mess. She couldn’t look at him. First she sleeps on the man, then she knocks his horse stuff to the ground, and now this. God, when would her curse leave her alone? At least he was still intact.

“I’m sorry I’m holding you up,” she said. “I just have this knack of bungling every little thing. I’m sorry—I just—I’m sorry.” *And I’m babbling.* She clamped her lids closed wishing she could just disappear.

Colt took the last of the cards from her trembling hands and pulled her to her feet. This was twice, three times, if he counted the airport, when she’d had some sort of accident. Maybe she wasn’t comfortable around men.

Or maybe she wasn’t comfortable around him. She’d skedaddled pretty fast after her lesson that morning. Maybe this had little to do with crazy female fancies, and more to do with real attraction.

He looked down into her fretful gaze. “You’re not holding me up, and no harm was done,” he said.

She chewed at her bottom lip with a faint nod. Thank God he remembered where they were or else he would’ve tasted those now dewy red lips once and for all.

Still holding her hands, he turned to the sales lady. “Do we owe you anything?”

“Not a thing. Ya’ll have a good afternoon,” she said with a wave and went back to the counter.

Silently, he guided Abby out of the store and back to the truck, not once did he let go of her hand. It felt pretty good nestled inside his.

“I’m sorry,” she said softly once they were back on the road.

“Nothing to be sorry for.”

She turned to him, but he kept his attention straight ahead. That little bit of handholding and the lost look in her eyes had his brain dancing around some pretty dangerous ideas.

“You don’t understand,” she said. “So far you’ve been spared.”

He chanced a look in her direction. “Huh?”

She shook her head. “I’m not just a klutz, I’m cursed. Whatever I do, I end up making a mess of it.”

“Accidents happen to everybody,” he said with a shrug.

“Not like mine. Things always go drastically wrong around me.”

“It can’t be that bad. You’ve just had a string of little mishaps, that’s all.”

She sighed and rested her elbow on the door, her chin in her hand. “Tell that to Mrs. Woods, my next door neighbor. I don’t think she’ll ever forgive me for the weed-whacker incident. Her poor flower garden.”

Colt stifled a chuckle. “Could’ve happened to anybody. Those things can be tricky.”

“She should’ve known better than to trust me with her yard work. Especially after what happened to Whiskers.”

“Whiskers?”

She sighed with a nod. “Her cat, a long haired Persian. Needless to say Whiskers was about the only hair left on the poor thing after meeting up with me. But it’s growing back, he looks almost like a cat again.”

Struggling to hold in his laughter, he clenched his jaw and cleared his throat. “Poor puss.”

“It wasn’t a pretty sight, but at least it wasn’t as bad as what happened to Mr. Erskine. I think the cast comes off next week.”

“I’m afraid to ask,” he mumbled, but waited for the tale. It had to be a doozy.

“You know those stationary bikes people workout on? Well, I managed to make the one in the office gym un-stationary. It flew across the room as if it’d been possessed or something. Mr. Erskine broke his leg when it knocked him over a weight bench. Needless to say I didn’t go back to the gym after that.”

The laughter started out soft, he was barely holding on, but he couldn’t help it. One glance at her flushed red cheeks and he burst out laughing.

She giggled low, and covered her mouth. “It isn’t funny. I told you I’m jinxed.”

He stifled his laugh. “No, you’re right. It’s not funny.”

They glanced at one another and burst out laughing. The last few miles were some of the lightest, happiest, moments Colt had experienced in a long time.

He pulled into the courtyard, and they climbed out of the truck.

“Thank you for letting me ride along,” she said.

“No problem. I’m just glad I made it back in one piece.”

She playfully punched his arm.

“Hey, careful, you might break something,” he teased.

She wagged her finger at him with a smile. “You’ve been warned.”

Upon waking the next morning, Abigail could barely contain her excitement. It was her first real day of riding. That is until she saw who would be riding the trail with her. She hoped Colt would at least ride way in the back behind her, anything to keep her eyes from straining to watch the man. The dreams she’d had the night before still had her insides fluttering.

After a small speech from Colt, they started down the trail. He rode behind her, all right, but close enough she could feel him.

Oh, for pity's sakes. Feel the man? "It must be the air here. It's making me delusional," she mumbled.

They left the buildings behind and Abigail was happily distracted by the view. She took long, deep breaths and reveled in the feeling of freedom. Nance was right, she needed this. Work, her life back home—what was left of it—could wait till she rejuvenated herself. Everything would turn out okay.

The group stopped and dismounted to stretch their legs a bit. Sliding down off her horse, Abigail couldn't contain the sheer pleasure of it all.

"I can tell you're having fun," the lady behind her said.

Abigail turned, opened her mouth to reply, but barely managed a squeak at the sight of thing sitting before her.

Then it moved—in her direction.

A scream, her finest, she was sure, built in her throat then bolted from between her lips. A large hand had clamped down over her mouth almost the instant she'd begun.

"Calm down," Colt hissed in her ear. "You'll scare the horses."

Paying him no heed, she struggled against his strong arms and his hand over her mouth as she watched the hideous creature.

"You've got to calm down," he insisted.

Panic-stricken, she waved frantically at the thing coming closer, it's long hairy legs reaching for her. With a final muffled shriek, she fainted.

"What the hell?" Colt grappled to catch Abby as she went completely limp in his arms. He looked to where she'd pointed and caught sight of a tarantula moving along the edge of the trail. He brushed it away with his boot, not wanting anymore fainting females, then hauled the woman up into his arms.

The group started closing in. "It's okay, folks, she only fainted. The lady had a little run-in with nature. She'll be fine in a minute."

But he wouldn't be if his heart didn't stop pounding against his chest. He'd been moving up the line of riders, making sure everyone dismounted without any problems, then heard Abby scream. It had sent a horrible chill down his back. He'd never heard such absolute terror. He was lucky he'd been only a few steps away or they'd be chasing the horses all over God's country.

He found a spot on a rock outcropping as Jake encouraged the crowd to move away and give the lady some privacy. Although out of sight, he could hear the young man's lecture regarding the local wildlife. Apparently his ranch hand had learned some new things from the classes he was taking at the local community college.

Satisfied the rest of the group was occupied, Colt turned his attention to the unconscious woman in his arms. He patted her cheek gently, and her lids fluttered. "Abby?"

With a groan, she opened her eyes and looked into his. For a second it seemed as if she would be okay, then her eyes widened with a tiny squeak, and she flung her arms around his neck while pulling her legs up higher. If he didn't know better, he would swear she was trying to crawl into his skin.

"It's okay, it's gone," he said, attempting to calm her.

"Are you sure?"

Her entire body shook, and it was making him more than a little uncomfortable. "I'm sure."

"I'm s-s-sorry. I'm t-t-terrified of sp-sp-"

"Spiders," he said, halting her in mid stutter before the feel of her quivering breath against his skin drove him over the edge.

He reluctantly peeled her arms from around his neck. The woman was scared half out of her mind, and all he could think about was sex. Maybe Jess was right. Maybe he should find himself a woman. But just for fun. No strings. And not Abigail

Simmons. Instinct warned him that she was dangerous, and not because she was accident-prone.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to cause so much trouble,” she said shakily.

She lifted her head, and he noted tears tripping over her lashes. It was like a sucker punch to the gut. He couldn’t stop himself from brushing them away with the pad of his thumb. Mesmerized by the feel of her skin, he let his fingers slip down the side of her face, relishing its smooth, creamy texture. He knew this would happen. It was one reason he avoided her at dinner last night. Their trip into town had been too pleasant.

Her soft sigh touched his cheek, and he lifted his gaze to hers. Her dark eyes were warm, the fear he’d seen, mere moments ago, was gone.

“Damn,” he whispered, then gave in to the urge, and placed his lips to hers.

Sweet and soft, yet like nothing he’d ever felt before. It was better than taking his first jump atop a thoroughbred, roping his first calf, or riding his first bull. It was like tasting heaven for the first time.

Stunned, he lifted his head, not quite certain what had just happened, but certain that if it happened again he would be in very deep trouble.

“You ready to move on, Colt?” Jake asked.

They both jumped to their feet, putting some definite distance between them.

“Uh, yeah. Yeah, we can move on. Um, Miss Simmons is feeling better now.”

Jake grinned and tapped his hat to her then turned toward the horses.

“Well—thank you,” she stammered. “For—um—catching me when I fainted.”

Colt glanced at her with a nod and noted she was just as confused and embarrassed by what had happened as he was.

Silently, he escorted her back to her horse. He noted her scanning the ground for more spiders and quickly hid his grin as she turned to mount up. It wasn't funny, this fear she had, but it was sort of cute.

As she slipped into the saddle, Colt winced. He'd had his hands around that tiny waist a few minutes ago, what ever possessed him to let go?

He rubbed his forehead, wondering if the sun had gotten to him, as he made his way to his horse. Here he was lusting after a guest, one he knew he shouldn't get involved with, and yet he was pretty sure he wasn't going to be able to keep from kissing her again if the moment presented itself.

Chapter Four

Flashlight in hand, Abigail eased out onto the porch, carefully scanning for anything that crawled. She figured she might as well enjoy the night sky since she couldn't sleep, and braved her way outdoors.

"Who am I kidding? There's more than one reason why I can't sleep."

She touched her lips with the tips of her fingers clearly remembering the feel of Colt's mouth against hers. No kiss had ever felt so good. Not even when she was head-over-heels in love with Peter had a kiss been so all encompassing. It was an amazing thing. The man she had loved with all her heart and soul hadn't made her feel like this.

Or she could have imagined it. Maybe she was finally over Peter and Colt's kiss was nothing special. She'd just blown it out of proportion since she hadn't been kissed, not so thoroughly, in over three years.

"Yes. That has to be it," she mumbled.

"Is there a problem?"

She jumped and flattened her back against the railing, clutching her flashlight to her chest. "Oh, you scared me half to death," she said through several short breaths.

"Sorry." Colt studied her, fascinated by the way the moonlight glimmered off her hair where it hung lazily over her shoulders. No dream, no fantasy, could come close to the real thing standing before him.

He'd worked late in the office trying to straighten out the mess Ted had left him, but with little luck. Still, knowing bed wouldn't hold much for him but torture, he'd stared at the numbers till they blurred in front of him.

Finally beaten, for the night at least, he'd turned out the light and stepped outside. His gaze slid to Abby's cabin of its own accord. The bobbing light on the porch urged him to investigate. Or so he told himself.

He tampered the rush of desire building inside him and cleared his throat. "I saw the light. Thought there might be a problem."

"Oh. No, I just wanted to see the stars. I missed them last night."

"But it's moon bright. You don't need a flashlight."

"Um, well, I wanted to make sure that—well—"

"Ah. I understand. I doubt you'll find much more than a stray cricket. The cats that roam around here, pretty much keep the unwanted guests away."

She sank onto the porch step and flicked off her light. "I suppose you think I'm pretty silly."

"Not silly, but, maybe a little more afraid than most folks."

"Yes. I suppose I am."

He leaned against the corner post. "I'm not too partial to snakes, myself." *I should leave. Turn around and walk away.*

But he couldn't take his gaze off her. The halo surrounding her from the moon drew him in, called to him, beckoned him to take her into his arms and hold on until the sun rose over the horizon.

She giggled softly. "I don't think I want to meet any of those either. I won't, will I?"

Abigail felt her throat tightening at the thought of yet another creature to fear. Then he smiled, just a little, but enough that it tickled her insides in the strangest places. Could that be somewhere in the vicinity of her heart?

“No, I doubt you’ll see any snakes,” he said. “It was a fluke you saw that spider today. I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve spotted one.”

She shuddered, remembering the grandfather of all spiders. Rubbing her arms, she forced her nightmares and childhood memories to the back of her mind.

Colt leaned toward her, placing his hand on her arm. “Hey, are you okay?”

All thoughts of spiders vanished.

“You’re cold,” he said. “You should go back inside.”

“No. It’s—I’m—”

He crouched down beside her. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have mentioned this morning.”

How could this be? How could a man she’d known for less than two days make her feel this way?

“You really are terrified of sp—uh—those things, aren’t you?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said hoarsely. But it was his touch that had her skin tingling and her brain malfunctioning to the point of incoherent speech.

“I had a bad experience when I was little.” Why had she said that? She never discussed the cause of her fear.

Colt slid his fingers down her arm, shamelessly relishing the feel of her skin, then wrapped them around her hand where she continued to grip the flashlight. He gently pulled it from her grasp and set it on the deck beside her.

Sitting on the step below her, he said, “Tell me about it. Maybe it’ll make it less frightening.” He had an overwhelming urge to ease her fear, but knew the sound of her voice was what he craved.

“It’s—personal,” she said.

“What if I tell you something personal about me first? We’ll trade secrets,” he said with a chuckle, laughing at himself and this

stranger he'd become. And all because he'd seen moonlight in her hair.

"You don't have to do that," she said.

"But I want to." He truly did. For the first time in a very long time he wanted to talk about his past.

He propped his elbow on the porch, close enough he could feel the heat from her body, and looked out into the night. "I was married once. We met while I was on the rodeo circuit. Stephanie loved the rodeo. But after my father died we came back here to settle down." He lifted his gaze to the stars. "At least I did, anyway. She wasn't happy on the ranch."

"I'm sorry."

He glanced at her then looked away. "Yeah, well, it's in the past."

"It doesn't stop hurting though, does it?"

"It doesn't hurt so much these days." He tilted up his hat and gave her a look. "You've got a similar tale," he said matter-of-factly.

She sighed heavily, and if he wasn't mistaken he saw a glimmer of tears in her eyes. "Yes, but we never married." She gazed into the night. "I promised myself I'd never let anyone get that close again. That I would never love that way again."

"I made a similar promise. Doubt I'll be able to keep it though." Now why in blue-blazes had he said that?

He decided to change the subject before he talked himself into something. "So what's the story about this fear you have?"

Her mouth pulled down in a worried frown.

"I'm sorry. If you'd rather not say—"

"No, it's all right." She looked down at the edge of her shirt and plucked at it. "When I was little we didn't have much money. My mother and I had to live—we had to live in an unpleasant place for a while. One night, I awoke to a tickling feeling." She swallowed hard enough he could hear it.

“Hey,” he said, reaching for her hand now balled into a fist. “You don’t have to finish.”

Her fingers slid between his and squeezed. “I woke up and found them, hundreds of them, crawling on me. I screamed and screamed, trying to get them off.” She shivered. “My mother was—she couldn’t help me. I ran outside and kept running until I found the pond in the park and jumped in. I nearly drowned.”

“Christ.” He was lost as to what to say in light of so terrible a story. Her fear was more than justified.

She let out a nervous laugh. “Oh, I’m sorry. I’m probably cutting off your circulation.” She quickly released his hand and jerked her arm back, sending the flashlight tumbling down the steps. They both reached for it at the same time, butting heads. She attempted to catch his hat as it slipped from his head. It ended up on the ground.

She sighed heavily. “You’ve now been inducted into my injured hall of fame.”

Colt dusted off his hat with a wry grin. “It was just an accident. No harm done.”

“Not yet, you mean.” With a shake of her head, she tilted back and looked up at the night sky. “It’s beautiful.”

“Yeah—beautiful.” He couldn’t take his eyes off her as the light shimmered off the midnight strands.

Without thinking, he leaned forward and kissed her glistening lips. Her tiny gasp made him pause. Then she inched closer, bringing their lips together once again.

Yep, he was in trouble. He was smitten by a pint sized city girl who thought she was cursed, was terrified of spiders, and could set him on fire with a simple kiss.

Not quite sure what to make of her late night visitor, the next morning Abigail decided it might be best if she just acted as if nothing ever happened. After all, he’d left her with a quick

goodnight after that kiss. But the man made her feel things she hadn't felt in a long time, and she wasn't sure what to make of it.

So what if they'd talked for hours last night and shared an innocent kiss or two. It didn't mean a thing. They'd become friends, that was all. The kisses were a fluke, a mishap of a sort—nothing more. Just as Jeremiah Coltrane was nothing to her.

Then why can't I stop thinking about him?

Determined to put it all behind her, she went to the dining hall. Jess gave her a smile and a wave, as did a few of the other guests whom she'd met briefly the day before.

Settling in with her meager breakfast, she studied the scenery outside instead of making small talk. She really didn't want to get into a discussion with any of the guests about what happened yesterday. She wasn't in the mood to be laughed at.

But Colt didn't laugh.

Abigail shook her head, amazed at the things she'd told him. That was more than she'd told Nance after being friends for more than six months. But would he see her as Peter had if he knew it all?

She shoved the uncomfortable thought away, knowing she had absolutely no intention whatsoever of telling Colt anymore about her childhood.

"Are you riding today, Miss Abigail?" Jess asked, a piece of paper in his hand.

She considered it, and couldn't help but wonder if Colt would be on duty. *Stop it. It doesn't matter.*

"Yes, I believe I will. Thank you, Jess."

"That's fine. You know where to meet up and when." With a quick scratch to his paper, he shuffled off to the next table of guests.

Surprised and please to find Colt leading the group, Abigail smiled brightly at him, but was disappointed not to get a smile in return. Maybe she'd read a lot more into last night than there was.

Well, it didn't matter. She was here to ride horses and enjoy herself, not get mixed up with a man. Still, listening to him call out the names of the guests and assign them horses, she couldn't help remembering how sweet he'd been the night before.

"Miss Simmons, you'll ride Bell again today," he said.

Hers having been the last name on the list, she took her place beside the horse and prepared to mount.

"Just a minute," Colt said.

She stepped back so he could adjust the stirrups for her short legs. He finished quickly then lifted his head and gave her a saucy wink and a grin, before moving toward his own horse.

Abigail's heart hiccupped. Holding back a ridiculous giggle, she managed to climb on Miss Bell without any mishaps. She hadn't imagined anything last night. Jeremiah Coltrane was not only a very nice man and exceptionally attractive, he was lassoing her heart with his rare smiles, that delicious wink, and the most incredible kiss of her life.

He rode ahead of her this time, and she did exactly what she'd feared she would do—she strained to keep her eyes off of him, never quite succeeding. His strong straight back, his muscled thighs where they spread over the saddle, the mere turn of his head, put her under a heady spell.

She never wanted a man so much in her life. Lust wasn't new to her, everyone experienced it at some point, but this feeling had more to it than the average pheromone upheaval. There was something deep, something important at the center of it all.

The group stopped and everyone climbed down to stretch their legs and walk to a narrow ledge. It provided an exceptional view, or so she'd been told, one she'd missed the day before.

Abigail eyed the ground and the immediate vicinity from her perch atop Miss Bell. She could swear something moved out of the corner of her eye.

Marcia, the woman she'd chatted with a little along the trail, called out to her. "Come on, Abby. The view's fantastic."

Abigail waved to her and shook her head. "I'll just wait here. Thanks."

"Is there a problem, Miss Simmons?"

She jerked her head to the side to find Colt grinning up at her.

"No. No problem. I thought I'd just wait here for everybody."

He tipped his hat back and gave her a long warm stare, causing her to fidget in the saddle.

"I think—" he said, circling her waist with his large hands, successfully trapping her breath in her throat. "That you'll regret missing the view." He pulled her from her horse with one swift tug.

Half in panic, Abigail grabbed his arms for support as he placed her on her feet, but the travel to the ground seemed to last forever. For an instant, she considered sliding her hands up his strong biceps and wrapping them around his neck. Then maybe he'd kiss her again.

"There's nothing to be afraid of, Abby."

"Isn't there?" she asked softly.

His gaze dropped to her mouth, and she took a slow shuddering breath.

"Maybe so," he said, and lowered his lips to hers.

His touch was soft, barely a whisper. She moaned at the sweetness of his caress, then he slid his tongue into the recesses of her mouth and she was lost. With each passing second the kiss grew more fervent.

Miss Bell whickered, reminding them of where they were. Colt lifted his head and looked at her for the longest time then grinned. Oh, how she loved his smile.

Taking her by the hand, he led her to the overlook to join the others behind the small patch of shrubs. Her feet were on the ground, but her head remained in the clouds.

With a wink, he slipped his hand from hers, as they neared the others. It probably wouldn't look good to be seen fooling around with one of the guests. Abigail understood, but it hurt just a little.

Colt couldn't stay away from Abby, and visited her again that night. This time they shared several very heated kisses. Aroused almost to the point of exploding, he looked at the door to the cabin. "I want you, Abby."

"I-I can't."

He hadn't made love to a woman in over a year, and when he did it hadn't meant anything. But this meant something, something that terrified him. She was right. Things were best left as they were, although it was pure torture.

Pulling her in close, he kissed the top of her head and said, "Go to bed, Abby. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Colt, I—"

"It's okay, sweetheart. I understand."

She shook her head with a slight snuffle. "No, you don't."

He waited silently giving her time to explain. Although he had his own reasons, he wanted to hear hers.

"It's about my mother—and Peter. You see my father left my mother before I was born. They weren't married. He already had a wife. He'd taken care of her, bought her things, gave her a place to live, but when he found out she was going to have me, he stopped."

She clamped her hands between her knees, refusing to meet his gaze. "She—she did things to put a roof over our heads. When I was old enough to understand why there was always a new *boyfriend* around, I refused to ever be like her, or do what she did no matter how bad things were. Or just because I wanted to."

Her head bowed low. "Peter was the only man I ever made love to, but after I told him about my childhood, he called me all sorts of names and left. I never heard from him again. I-I'll understand if you don't want anything to do with me anymore."

“Oh, honey.” Colt pulled her into his arms and held her tight, his heart hurting for what she’d gone through as a kid, and wanting to put his fist through her old boyfriend’s face. “You aren’t your mother. Her faults and sins aren’t yours.”

He cupped her face and lifted her head from where she’d buried it against his chest. “I care about you, Abby. More than I’ve cared about a woman in a long time. But I won’t ask you to do anything you’re uncomfortable with.” He grinned at her glistening eyes. “As long as I can sit here and hold you, and kiss you, that is.”

She smiled brightly and threw her arms around his neck.

Chapter Five

“Finally! She’s learning to relax,” a familiar voice said.

Abigail lifted her head from the lounge chair by the pool and saw Nance striding toward her in an outrageous outfit. Probably a designer original. One from Nance’s own collection, no doubt.

“Nance!” She leapt to her feet and threw her arms around her friend. “Jess said you wouldn’t be here till Wednesday.”

“I put my foot down and told my assistant to tell everyone I’d disappeared. It was that or I would’ve never gotten out of there.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re here. Sit, tell me everything that’s been happening. Your last show, did it go as well as you’d hope?”

“Better than I’d hoped,” Nance said, taking a seat beside her. “The orders poured in, we could barely keep up.”

“That’s wonderful. And how’s Jean-Claude? You two still a hot item?”

“That was over before it began. The jerk.”

“I’m sorry. You were so crazy about him.”

“Huh-uh. Crazy about his buns. Lord, the man could fill out a pair of jeans.”

Abigail giggled, glad to see her friend bounced back so well, although she knew there was more than a nice body that had drawn Nance’s attention. She’d really cared for Jean-Claude.

“Speaking of filling out denim,” Nance said, lowering her sunglasses to peer over the edge. “That is one piece of Texas I wouldn’t mind sampling.”

Abigail looked over her shoulder toward the coral. Her gaze fell on Colt where he was giving his speech to the latest batch of

trail riders. She would've ridden today, but her backside was a little sore, and she had a feeling she'd make a ninny of herself staring at the man.

Her stomach suddenly dropped. If Nance wanted Colt, she'd have him.

But he said he cared about you.

"Who is he?" Nance asked.

"Jeremiah Coltrane. He owns the ranch and is a very nice man," she said clearly, but felt sick inside.

Colt turned and caught them staring. Normally, Abigail would've jerked around and blushed from tip to toe, but something held her in place. His half smile perhaps, or the slight nod of his head, whatever it was she found herself giving him a small wave.

He paused in mid-turn, granting her a real smile, and her heart skittered across her chest.

"And here I thought you wouldn't have any fun," Nance said.

Abigail turned to Nance as Colt mounted up and rode off. "What?"

"I want all the dirty details. What's going on between you and that delicious cowboy?"

"Oh, don't be ridiculous. I just told you he's a nice man. He taught me how to ride the other day."

"And?"

"And he helped me on the trail my first day."

"And?"

"And that's all."

"Abby, you've never been able to tell a lie your entire life. What else? Come on, tell me. You know you want to."

With a huff and a grin, she dropped onto the lounge and told Nance what had happened—all of it, because she knew Nance would never leave her alone if she didn't. And it helped to get it out in the open. Maybe together they could figure out what she was feeling, and perhaps, Nance would leave Colt alone.

“Come on, girlfriend. We’re going to our cabin and go through your suitcase.”

“Why? What—”

“I know you, Abby. You’ve got nothing but accountant clothes in there. I’m surprised you’re in a bikini, to be honest.”

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

Nance smiled softly. “Don’t you see? You’re falling in love with the man. And although it sounds like he’s got a thing for you, it doesn’t hurt to pull out all the stops to land the deal. Now come on.”

Stunned, Abigail let Nance drag her back to their cabin and give her a supersonic makeover.

Colt shifted and shifted again. The ride was agonizing. If he could just get the sight of Abby in a bikini out of his mind, he’d make it down the rest of the trail without maiming himself. Last night’s heavy necking session hadn’t helped either. How the hell was he going to make it to the end of her stay before he lost his mind from wanting her?

“You okay?” Mason asked.

“Yeah,” Colt said through partly clenched teeth.

The ranch hand chuckled and cleared his throat. “Noticed Miss Simmons’ friend checked in before we left.”

“Yeah.”

“Real pretty too.”

“Does your wife know you’ve got a rovin’ eye?”

“Hey, I’m only human. A beautiful woman is hard to miss.”

“Yeah.” Colt shifted and held back a wince. Miss Becket was beautiful all right, but she didn’t compare to the sight of Abby in that thing she called a bathing suit.

“You sure you’re okay?” Mason asked.

“I’m fine.”

The man nodded with a knowing grin on his face. "Sure, sure. Just thought if there was something on your mind, you can count on me to keep my mouth shut."

Colt shot his friend a look. Was his private life ever off limits around here? "You take over. They're all seasoned riders. You don't need me. I'm heading back." He spun around and made his way up the trail to the sound of Mason's deep chuckle.

Great. He was making a complete ass of himself, and all because he couldn't keep his mind or his eyes off a certain woman. If only he didn't have to keep his hands off.

Colt spurred his horse on, hoping to outrun his thoughts. He rode into the coral at full speed, then quickly reined in at the sight of his ex-mother-in-law standing in the office doorway talking to Jess.

She was almost as good, or bad, depending on how one looked at it, to seeing Stephanie. Women were a pain, a mess of trouble he didn't need. The image of Abby was wiped from his mind at the chilling reminder of his ex-wife. He never should've let things go as far as they had, anyway.

He slid down from his horse and tossed the reins to Jake as he appeared from the barn. Making his way toward Mabel, he knew something wasn't right. Although he'd always liked her, she never visited him, knowing he wanted no remembrance of his previous life with her daughter.

"What brings you out here, Mabel?"

She glanced at Jess, who nodded. Colt knew the two had known each other some ways back, but never thought much of it. Today that fact didn't sit well with him. They knew something, and he wasn't going to like it.

"It's about Stephanie," she said.

Bile rose in Colt's throat and he turned away. "Whatever it is, I'm not interested."

“She’s dead,” Mabel said with a choked breath. “It was a car accident outside of Houston.”

He stopped and looked back at her over his shoulder, not sure how to feel. He should hurt, he thought, feel sad at least, but strangely enough, he just felt sorry for Mabel.

Then he remembered Bobby. Although the boy wasn’t his son, according to the biting words of his wife as she walked out on him toting the infant, he felt something for the kid.

He scanned the parking area, the patch of grass near the office, but Bobby wasn’t there. Slowly, he moved toward Mabel where she stood shaking on the office porch.

“Was Bobby with her?” he said roughly.

Mabel closed her eyes and swallowed. “No, thank heavens.”

Colt nodded, thankful the kid was okay. “So, you just came out here to tell me. Is that it?”

She opened her eyes with a nod. “And...”

“Go on now, Mabel. He’s got a right to know,” Jess said.

Dread snaked down Colt’s spine. Anything to do with Stephanie was never good. “A right to know what?”

“Bobby’s why I’m here,” she said. “He’s—he’s your son, Jeremiah.”

Colt shook his head. “No. She told me a long time ago—”

“She lied. She wanted to hurt you. She blamed you for her own unhappiness. I wanted to tell you. I begged her to let me, but she refused.”

A strange stillness settled over him. He was numb inside and out. Stephanie had managed to strike out at him, hurt him one last time from the grave. She’d known how badly he wanted Bobby to be his. The day she’d taken him away, Colt had done his best to put them both from his mind. He had to, or else she would’ve used Bobby to hurt him. Seems she did after all.

The boy would be about six now. But his? It couldn’t be, he thought, shaking his head.

“He even looks like you,” Mabel’s voice cracked.

His eyes burned. After all this time, he was a father. “Does he know? About me, I mean.”

“No. I didn’t want to tell him until I talked to you first. He doesn’t know who his father is. I didn’t want to get his hopes up, not knowing if you would want him or not.”

Colt swallowed the lump in his throat. “I don’t know, Mabel. I honestly don’t know,” he muttered as he walked away.

Take in a kid who didn’t have a clue who his father was? Knowing that anything Stephanie had ever said about him had been a pack of lies to poison Bobby against him. And the ranch—he was lucky he still had a place to lay his head at night. How could he possibly think about taking on another mouth to feed, a kid he didn’t know the first thing about taking care of?

Abigail withstood Nance’s attempts to make her some sort of siren. She didn’t look bad, but just not herself.

“This isn’t going to do me any good, Nance.”

“Of course it is. You just can’t see yourself objectively. That cowboy is going to do back-flips just to get near you.”

With a long patient sigh, they made their way to the dining hall for dinner. If this was what it took to get a man, she didn’t want one, but for the life of her, she couldn’t figure out how to explain it to Nance. She was only trying to help, after all.

Several heads turned her way as they entered the dining hall.

“You see, it’s working already,” Nance said, taking a plate at the end of the buffet table.

Abigail let that comment pass and followed her down the line. It may be working, all right, but not for the man she wanted. He wasn’t even in the room.

Nance led the way to a table and they sat and ate in tense silence. She could see her friend’s eyes darting to the side, observing the men and them observing her.

“This is ridiculous. As soon as dinner’s over, I’m going back to the cabin and get out of these clothes,” Abigail said.

They were entirely too tight across the chest, exposing more of her cleavage than she liked, and they exposed her belly. She wasn’t a kid anymore! Low-riders and midriff snug tops were for teenagers. She felt ridiculous.

Nance smiled, more for their admirers than for Abigail. “You can’t just disappear. There’s a campfire later. The minute these guys get the word back to Colt about how fantastic you look, he’ll be there. Trust me.”

Abigail sighed and picked at her food. She’d go along with it for now, but first thing in the morning she was going back to her old clothes. They weren’t that bad. She’d brought jeans and blouses that seemed appropriate for her stay. They didn’t come from a posh store, but they were perfectly acceptable.

And they were not accountant’s clothes.

Colt watched the fire light from the porch of his house. Situated on the side of a hill, he could look out over most of the ranch and down on the office and dining hall. He’d grown up in this house, couldn’t think of living anywhere else, but tonight it seemed more empty than usual.

The sound of singing, low and steady, floated up the hill. The boys were entertaining the guests with some campfire songs. Jess was likely telling a few tall tales as well. Usually, Colt joined them, although he didn’t sing a lick. But tonight he didn’t want any company.

His gaze slid to a cabin sitting low on the far side of the dining hall. No light bobbed in the darkness. Abby was likely with her friend by the fire. His eyes strained to make out the figures seated around the blaze, but he was too far away. The sound of a woman laughing met his ears, but it wasn’t her.

He rubbed a hand down his face, struggling to wipe Abby and the sound of her voice from this mind. But the kisses they'd shared flared to life in his memory. Dropping his head back against the chair, he lifted the bottle and drained the last of his beer. Women, kids, a ranch on the edge of ruin—a man could go crazy trying to sort out his life. He made a decision as he strode through the silent house.

Miss Abigail Simmons was a lose-lose situation. At the end of the week, she would go back east where she belonged. Out of Texas and out of his life. There was no sense muddling up things with an affair, one that would be purely celibate.

Was there such a thing? He shook his head at the thought. There were more important things to concentrate on, like saving the ranch. He had to if he was going to leave it to his son one day.

He hoped Bobby wanted to live with him, would love this place as much as he did, but he would worry about that later. First he had some work to do, or there wouldn't be any place for any of them to live.

Colt picked up the phone and dialed. "Mr. Barker, this is Jeremiah Coltrane at the Rocking D. I'll take that offer, if you're still needing someone to bust broncs for you."

It took some doing, but Nance gave in and let Abigail return to her normal self. Of course, Colt not showing up the night before as Nance had predicted deflated her theory.

They dressed, ate, and made their way to the coral for a morning trail ride. Abigail hoped to see Colt again, but he was nowhere to be found. It was if he'd disappeared. Was he avoiding her?

The trail ride didn't hold quite the appeal it had before, and she did her best not to blame it on the fact that Colt wasn't there. It was ridiculous liking the man so much.

Too much.

The ride came to an end, but as they moved closer to the coral, Abigail heard men shouting and whopping, peaking her interest. The minute she was off her horse, she and Nance, as well as the rest of the guests, hurried to see what was going on.

“Whoa, can that hunk of cowboy ride,” Nance said.

Abigail’s mouth fell open as her heart leapt to her throat. Colt was being bounced and jarred by the meanest horse she’d ever seen. She cautiously moved closer to the commotion and stood by Jess.

She sucked in a sharp breath as Colt got slammed against the railing, but still held on.

“Don’t worry none,” Jess said. “He’ll be all right.”

She glanced at the worried frown belying Jess’s words. “He could be seriously injured, couldn’t he?”

Jess tightened his jaw and nodded, but never took his gaze from the tumultuous scene before them.

The horse slammed Colt against the railing once more and he lost his grip. As if in slow motion, Abigail watched him flip backward through the air and land in a heap on the ground. The ranch hands jumped in and distracted the horse before he could trample him. Jess dove between the railings faster than she thought she’d ever seen the old man move.

Although knowing she’d be of little use, she rushed after him to help in anyway she could. Colt moaned, and she took her first real breath as she fell to her knees beside his head.

He opened his eyes and looked up at her. His voice laden with pain, he asked, “Enjoy the show?”

“Not particularly,” she choked out.

“Get that stretcher over here,” Jess ordered. “Don’t move, son. We’ll getcha taken care of.”

“I’m fine,” Colt ground out. He tried to rise, but fell back to the ground with a sharp hiss.

Abigail caught his head before it hit the dirt, cradling it in her lap. Her vision blurred as she gently placed her palms to the side of his face.

“You have to lay still, Colt,” she said.

“I suppose I could, since I’ve got such a pretty view.”

She smiled as she swallowed a lump of tears filling her throat, but one managed to escape and ran down her cheek.

“Don’t cry, sweetheart,” he whispered.

“Kind of hard not to when my hero’s lying on his back in the dirt.”

He chuckled then winced. The ranch hands immobilized him as much as possible and moved him onto the stretcher. Then they carried him toward a waiting truck to take him to the hospital. Wrong as it was, Abigail missed the feel of his skin beneath her palms and his head resting in her lap.

“No crazy schemes of yours while I’m gone, Jess,” Colt said, although it obviously taxed him.

“Don’t you worry none about things here. We’ll be fine.”

“And you leave the books alone.”

“Ah, I can handle it. Been ranchin’ since afore you was born.”

“I mean it, Jess. Don’t touch the books.”

“Get him outta here boys.”

Abigail watched as the truck pulled out. Why did she feel as if she’d been the one to get thrown by that horse? She hurt, deep down inside, as if someone had crushed her ribs in around her heart. Could Nance be right? Had she fallen in love with Jeremiah Coltrane?

“He’ll be all right,” Jess said, patting her gently on the shoulder. “He wouldn’t put up such a fuss about them dang books if he was hurt too bad.” He chuckled roughly. “Thing is, I ain’t no good with figures. But there’s no telling how long he’ll be gone and the bills gotta get paid,” he added, talking more to himself than to her. “Can’t let that boy lose it all.”

That jerked her gaze from the steady stream of dust trailing down the road. “Lose what?”

“Huh? Oh, nothin’ you need worry about. I’m just talkin’ to myself. Bad habit. Comes with age, I reckon.”

He tottered off toward the office without a backward glance. But Abigail could tell a great deal of worry lay on the old man’s shoulders and not just from Colt’s injury.

She followed him inside the office, stunned to believe she was about to stick her nose in someone else’s business, but she couldn’t help herself. Colt had been more than kind to her. He’d become her friend at the very least.

“What are you afraid Colt will lose?” she asked, leaning on the desk.

He gave her a long level stare then rubbed the back of his neck. “The ranch. I aught not say nothin’.”

She reached across the desk and touched his arm. “Please, Jess. Tell me. I won’t say anything to anyone else, and I’d like to help, if I can.”

The old man’s mouth quirked up in a bright smile. “You’re sweet on him.”

“I’ve been telling her that since I got here,” Nance said, strolling through the door.

“I am not. Colt’s been very nice to me and I would like to return the favor. That’s all.”

With a gleeful cackle, Jess shook his head. “If that don’t beat all. You two are about as stubborn as Gert, an old mule I once had.”

Abigail straightened her spine.

“Oh, now, don’t go gettin’ all twisted up. See, it’s like this. Colt’s accountant run off with all his money a few months back. He’s been trying to make ends meet, and bustin’ that bronc was supposed to bring in some cash. He’s got some mighty hefty

payments that need catchin' up.” His face fell with his words. “Don't see how he's gonna make it now.”

“The books, are they in bad shape?”

Jess nodded. “Yep, that no-account shifted and twisted it so's Colt couldn't tell what he was doin'. And he can't afford another accountant to straighten the mess out. Don't want none, no how.”

Abigail's stomach lurched, but she wasn't the one who'd stolen his money.

She glanced at Nance. Her friend smiled and gave her a nod.

Taking a deep breath, Abigail said, “I can balance his books, Jess.”

His craggy brow furrowed.

“I'm an accountant, a bookkeeper, actually, but I've more than enough experience to handle it.”

“She's better than the best,” Nance said. “I'll vouch for her.”

“Well, I don't know, Miss Abigail. You're a right nice lady, and I know Colt likes you. I reckon he don't know about you being a bookkeeper and all.”

Abigail shook her head.

“He won't like it none.” Jess scratched his scruffy jaw, studying nothing in particular out the window. “You think you could clean it up, real quick like, so's I can tell what's what?”

Abigail smiled. “Yes, I'm certain of it.” A rancher's books couldn't be nearly as complicated as the corporate ones she'd managed for years.

“Well, now, you got yourself a job, little lady. But, uh, we won't say nothin' to Colt till he gets back. Agreed?”

“Agreed.” They shook hands.

Chapter Six

“You almost done?” Nance asked later that afternoon.

Abigail lifted her head and rubbed her temples. It was awful. Colt’s accountant had just about cleaned him out. She was amazed he’d managed this far without the bank foreclosing. This Ted person had encouraged Colt to take out a loan for improvements, and instead of paying on it, he’d pocketed the funds. But the bank wouldn’t wait forever.

Nance touched her arm. “That bad, huh?”

She opened her eyes and nodded.

“How much will it take to get him out of the hotseat?” she asked.

“Fifty thousand dollars,” Abigail said with a weighty sigh. “He won’t make it, Nance. The bronc money would’ve held the bank off, but now—” she shrugged, exhausted from pouring over the numbers, trying in vain to make ends meet for him.

“Well, you did the best you could,” Nance said.

“I suppose. Any word from the hospital?”

“A few busted ribs, a sprained wrist—and a mean temper,” she added with a soft chuckle.

Abigail let out the breath she’d been holding, thankful he was okay.

“He’ll be home Friday,” Nance said.

“That’s good. I’d like to see him. Before we leave, I mean.”

“Abby, you can’t just walk away from this.”

"I don't have a choice. You heard Jess. The minute he hears what I do for a living, he'll spit in my face." He'd been so understanding about her past, though. But this was his past she was up against.

"Sure, he'll be angry. Probably can't stand it when people help him, he seems the type. But he won't hate you."

"The little lady's right. I done told you he's sweet on you," Jess said, tottering up to the desk.

"He and I are friends, Jess."

"That why he told me to tell you he was all right when they finally let him use the phone? That he wanted to talk to you when he got back?"

Her mouth fell open and she dropped back into the chair.

"Yep. He wanted to make sure you weren't still upset. We all saw you cryin' Miss Abigail. Cryin' for that hard-headed cowpoke." He grinned wide. "Wonder what it is he wants to talk to you about?"

"I'm sure it's nothing. And as for my crying, I was concerned. That's all," she said firmly.

"Nope, won't wash, little gal. You two got somethin' going. I may be old, but I ain't blind. So, how's them books?"

Glad of the change of subject, she turned them so Jess could see. "It's not good, I'm afraid. Without an influx of at least fifteen thousand dollars, he won't make it for more than a few months."

"I thought you said it was fifty?" Nance asked.

"The total is, yes. With fifteen, he can hold the bank off through the summer, and use the income from the guests to save up for the off-season. It would be tight, but he could make it with the fifteen thousand."

"Which he ain't got now that he's laid up. None of the men are willin' to break that horse. But he'll probably try it again soon as he's healed."

“You can’t mean to say he’s going to try to ride that animal again?”

“Yep, if Barker still wants him to. And he’s got others he wants broke. I told that boy this was trouble. But he won’t listen to an old man.”

Abigail’s head swam. The thought of Colt on that horse again made her legs turn to water. She couldn’t let him do it, but what right did she have to tell him not to? “There has to be another way.”

“Nope, not if he wants to save this place and get that boy home.”

“Boy?” Nance asked.

“His son, Bobby.”

“Colt has a son? But he never said—he said he’d been married before, but he never mentioned having any children.”

“He told you about Stephanie?”

Abigail nodded, stunned that he hadn’t said a word about something as important as his son.

“Well, I’ll be. That proves it. He is sweet on you. That boy don’t talk about his past to no one, least of all about her.”

“But why hide the kid?” Nance asked.

“He ain’t hidin’ nothin’. He just found out about Bobby yesterday. That’s what got him up on that dang crazy horse. He’s trying to save this place for his boy.”

“You mean he didn’t know he had a son?”

“Nope. That gal kept him from him. Told him he was somebody else’s. But I always figured she was lying. Her mother knew, but Mabel couldn’t say nothin’.”

“Wow, soap opera city,” Nance murmured. “Then how did Colt find out?”

“Boy’s mother died. Mabel came out and told Colt the truth.” He shook his head sagely. “It hit him hard.” Jess’s eyes widened.

“Now don’t go saying I said nothin’. Colt’s a proud boy, he’d be a might upset that I told you about his personal business.”

Nance threw her arm around Jess and squeezed him. “No problem. It’ll be our little secret.”

“Dang purty faces do it to me every time,” he said, with a full-faced blush as he ambled out the door.

They giggled at the old man’s retreat, then sobered quickly.

“I see you thinking, my friend. Don’t do it,” Nance said.

“It’s just a loan.”

“He won’t accept it.”

Nance was right, Colt wouldn’t accept her nest egg. “Then he won’t know.”

“This is crazy. You’re going to just give him your entire savings and walk away?”

“I can’t let him lose the ranch, Nance.”

“This isn’t your problem.”

She sat down and began touching up the books so he would never know. She’d tell Jess that she’d added wrong, that he’d had the money all along. It wasn’t much but it would get him through.

“I don’t believe this. You’re not in love, you’re insane.”

Abigail paused. “You’re right.” She lifted her gaze. “I am in love, more than I thought I’d ever be again,” she said in awe.

Nance reached for her cell phone and started punching in numbers.

“What are you doing?”

“You don’t think I’m going to let you do this alone do you?”

“Nance, no. You’ve got all your savings tied up in your company. I can’t let you do this.”

She merely lifted her finger, silencing her. “Hey, it’s me,” Nance said into the phone. “Megan, I need you to do me a favor.”

Shaking her head, Abigail snatched the phone. “Never mind, Megan.”

“Hey!”

“I can’t let you do this.”

“And what am I supposed to do? I can’t just stand here and watch you throw away your life’s savings,” Nance said.

“You can put me on a plane Saturday. I won’t be able to do it without help. I’ll be a blubbering mess. And then you can follow up by sending me care packages while I search for a new job.”

“No,” Nance grinned. “You can come with me to LA. You can be on my team. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before. It’s perfect!”

Abigail forced a smile to her lips. She didn’t want to live in California, but Nance was used to orchestrating things, so she decided to let it go for now. “Thanks, Nance. We’ll work out the details later. Right now I’ve got some work to do.”

“See you later.” Her friend waved on her way out the door with a light step.

By Friday afternoon, Abigail had the books in order and the majority of her savings shifted to Colt’s bank account. Nance was right, it was crazy, but she couldn’t help it. She was in love. More than she’d ever been with Peter.

Jess appeared beside her on the office porch, their gazes on the trail of dust kicking up behind a truck, coming down the road.

“I know he’ll be mighty happy to see you, little lady.”

Abigail felt a flush to her cheeks. “You mean he’ll be happy to see his books in order and that he wasn’t as bad off as he thought.”

“Well, that might come after he sees you,” he said with a chuckle.

Several of the ranch hands gathered around the courtyard as the truck pulled up.

Colt climbed out with a shake of his head. “Don’t you have work to do?” he called to the hands, then broke into a crooked grin.

They all greeted him with a few handshakes before going back to work. Colt made his way to the office, his gait a bit unsteady. "Did you behave yourself, old man?"

"That depends on how you look at it."

The grin held as his gaze darted to Abigail. "Tell me he didn't do anything crazy while I was gone."

Abigail smiled, unable to hold it in. The crazy one was her. "Nothing too outrageous."

Her smile fell a bit, as she glanced at Jess. He was leaving the news telling up to her. "He found someone to take care of your books." She ventured a glance at Colt. "Me."

"Now don't go gettin' riled. She's a mighty fine bookkeeper," Jess said.

A muscle in Colt's jaw ticked in the long silence as his gaze bore into hers. Anger, shame, hurt—hatred, an array of emotions sped across his face.

"This was none of your business," he ground out.

"I made it my business," she said. "That's what friends do for one another."

"Nobody asked you." He shoved his way past her into the office.

"Now, don't mind him, Miss Abigail."

"I'll let you tell him the rest, Jess." She stepped off the porch and barely kept herself from running back to her cabin.

Jess stepped inside the office. "You had no right to treat her that-a-way. That little gal cleaned up them books and found you fifteen thousand dollars."

Colt paused in flipping through the pages, not seeing the numbers, only the betrayal of his godfather and the woman he'd come to think of as more than a friend.

He slowly lifted his head. "Fifteen thousand?" The exact sum he knew he needed.

Jess nodded. “She’s a fine gal. More than just sweet on you, I’m bettin’.” He scratched his ever-present whiskers. “Course I don’t know what she sees in an ole stubborn headed mule,” he grumbled as he shuffled out the door.

Colt sat down and studied the books long and hard. Several of his men came in and tried to get him to go to bed and rest, but he ignored them. He had to see where she’d found the money.

Hours later, he lifted his head, his vision blurred with fatigue. He couldn’t believe it, he couldn’t understand how or why she’d done it, but somehow she’d managed to deposit the money into his account. She’d hidden it well, but not nearly as well as Ted had hidden his deceit.

Where did she get the cash? She hadn’t struck him as the moneybags type, he thought, making his way to bed. Especially after that remark at the mercantile. She’d said she couldn’t afford the fancy shirt.

It didn’t matter. In the morning he would make her take the money back. He could stand on his own two feet. He didn’t need or want her help.

“No, I just want her,” he muttered as he laid his aching head on his pillow.

Images of Abby hovering over him in the coral swirled in his mind. He’d vowed to stay away from her, and he’d managed it for a few hours, but lying in the dirt looking up at her tear stained face, he’d known it was a wasted effort. He’d decided then and there that they had to talk. He couldn’t bear the thought of never seeing her again.

But she betrayed me.

“No. She tried to help me, and I treated her like dirt.” He punched the pillow and winced, forgetting for a moment that he had two cracked ribs.

“Tomorrow, I’ll straighten it all out—somehow.”

Chapter Seven

The sun rose, much too early, as far as Abigail was concerned.

"You look like hell," Nance said.

"Gee thanks."

"Sorry. I guess this is where I get to carry the blubbering Abby to the airport, huh?"

"Not till we get off the ranch. I can hold up till then." She didn't want Colt or anyone else to see her crying.

Nance dropped onto the edge of the bed and took her hand. "You know, after Peter, I never thought I'd see you love so hard, so much again. I was sure you'd locked your heart up for good after that."

"I thought I had too. Guess we were both wrong."

"Yeah. But like before, you'll get over this."

Abigail climbed out of bed. "Not over, just past it a bit."

"So, it's worse than Peter?"

"Much worse," her voice broke and she fled to the bathroom.

Skipping breakfast, Abigail took the time to pack and soak in the air and the view from the porch. She would never see this place or these people again. Tears threatened, but she pushed them back.

"You ready?" Nance asked, walking up the path.

Abigail nodded and grabbed her bag. One of the hands was going to drive them into town.

A car pulled up just as they came around the dining hall. An elderly woman and a little boy got out and stood staring across the

courtyard. Abigail followed their gaze and held her breath at the sight of Colt standing on the office porch.

This had to be Bobby. Nance had managed to squeeze the rest of the tale from Jess while waiting for Colt to come home from the hospital.

Abigail prayed the little boy would accept his father. He was a fine man.

Colt took a few steps forward and stopped. His feet felt like lead. Looking at Bobby's face, he saw himself.

All this time, wasted.

What if the kid hated him? What if Stephanie had filled his head with so many lies, he'd never be able to convince the boy of the truth?

Mabel nudged Bobby forward. His eyes wide, he took a few hesitant steps then glanced back over his shoulder. Mabel nodded with a soft smile.

Colt moved a few steps closer. Bobby did the same—then broke into a run and damn near knocked Colt to the ground.

He fell to his knees and wrapped his arms around the boy he'd thought of as his so long ago.

"Welcome home, son," he said with a strangled voice.

Bobby's body shook with silent tears.

He cradled the boy's head against his shoulder, and though it nearly killed him, he picked his son up and walked toward Mabel.

"Thank you, Mabel," Colt said.

She nodded, her cheeks wet with tears.

"Pa?"

The word, though it couldn't be more simple, filled Colt's heart to overflowing. He blinked away his tears as best he could and looked down at the angelic face. "What is it?"

"Can—can—"

He lowered Bobby to the ground and placed his hands on his tiny shoulders. "It's okay, Bobby. You can ask me anything you want. I'll never lie to you, and I'll never get angry for the asking."

The boy looked at his grandmother then back to him. "Can Gram come live with us too?"

It struck him that Mabel was all the boy knew. She'd raised Bobby, for the most part, not Stephanie.

Colt grinned. "Of course she can, son. You're more than welcome, Mabel. I've got a big house, and I reckon I'll need some help raising this rascal," he said, ruffling Bobby's hair.

His son's bright giggle warmed his soul. Although he should harbor a load of ill will toward Stephanie for depriving him of his son all these years, he couldn't. She helped to bring the child into this world, and for that he would be forever grateful.

"I'd like that, Jeremiah," Mabel said. "I'd like that very much. And I promise, I won't get in the way—I won't be any bother."

"That's cause you and me's gonna spend some time gettin' to know one another again," Jess said, slipping her arm through his with a broad wink.

Mabel blushed. "Like I want to have anything to do with an old coot like you."

Jess cackled. "That's my Mabel."

They say laughter is good for the soul—if one doesn't have a couple of cracked ribs—but still it felt awfully good, Colt thought.

The only thing missing was a certain woman who'd managed to make it so he could take care of his family. A debt he owed her and was determined to pay back, but not as he'd thought when he went to sleep last night.

"You ready, ladies?"

Colt spun around at the sound of Jake's voice. He hadn't realized she'd been there the whole time. Her gaze darted away as he drank in the sight of her.

“Bobby, you and your grandmother wait here with Jess a moment. I’ve got something I need to do, then I’ll take you all up to the house.”

“Okay.”

His son let go of his hand, and Colt looked down, amazed at how natural it had felt in his. It was the other hand that was empty now, but he was about to remedy that.

“Just a minute, Jake,” he called.

Abby and her friend paused beside the truck. “I need to speak with you a minute,” he said, taking Abby’s arm and leading her away.

“I think you said enough yesterday,” she said.

“No. Yesterday, I was an idiot.”

She lifted her gaze to his, and he saw the red rings. He’d done this, he’d made her cry. “I’m sorry, Abby. I never meant to hurt you.”

She swallowed with a faint nod.

“You did wonders with my books. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Would you consider—I know it’s a lot to ask—but would you consider taking them on full time?”

She blinked several times, confusion bright in her eyes. “You want to hire me?”

He grinned, realizing he was bungling this whole thing. “That would be one of your duties, yes.”

She shook her head, her beautiful hair falling over her shoulder. “No, I—I can’t stay.”

“Can’t or won’t?”

“I promised myself I would never—I can’t stay, Colt,” she said roughly.

He clenched his jaw as if he’d been hit, but the pain was lower and deeper than anything he’d ever felt before. “I understand. Goodbye, Abby.”

Turning, he started back toward his son. He'd get the money transferred back into her account as he'd planned last night and then it would be over. He'd taken only a few steps when what she'd said hit him smack between his cracked ribs.

She was in love with him.

She'd told him about Peter and how she had promised herself she would never let herself love another man so deeply ever again.

He turned to see Jake pulling around the drive. With a sharp jab in his side, Colt jogged out into the road, right in front of the moving truck.

"Have you lost your mind?" Jake yelled, slamming on the breaks.

"Yeah," Colt panted with short painful breaths, and moved to the side of the truck. He leaned on the window, his gaze focused on Abby's quivering lips. "Say it again."

"I can't stay," she said shakily.

"Why, Abby? Say it."

"Colt, please—"

"No. Not until you say it." He leaned closer and whispered, "You won't stay because you love me. Is that it?"

She closed her eyes and nodded. "I can't be your bookkeeper and see you everyday and—"

"I love you too, Abby."

Her gaze shot to his. "You what?"

"I want you to be my bookkeeper and a hell of a lot more."

She gave a quick glance to her friend, then to Jake, even his son, everyone in the darn courtyard was leaning as close as they could to hear this supposedly personal conversation.

Colt opened the door and pulled her out of the car and into his arms. "I made an ass of myself yesterday, and I'm probably making an ass of myself today, but I love you, Abby. Stay and marry me—please?"

She smiled, his heart lifted, then her brow furrowed.

“You know, don’t you?” she asked.

He cupped her face in his hands. “It’s not about the money, sweetheart. We can give it to charity if you want. We’ll manage without it.”

“No. I want you to keep it. For Bobby’s sake, at least.”

“I won’t keep it without you, Abby. Sweetheart, I was a goner the minute you fell into my arms at the airport. Say yes. Stay with me.”

Blinking back tears, she asked, “Do you promise to keep those crawly things from me?”

“I promise to slay all your dragons.” He meant that in all seriousness, although he said it with a grin. Her ex had done a number on her, and he silently swore he would do everything in his power to make sure she never felt bad about herself again.

“A girl can’t ask for more than that,” she said with a smile.

“I’m taking that as a yes.”

“It was meant as one.”

With a laugh, he pulled her into his arms. “I’d pick you up and twirl you around if I thought my ribs could handle it.”

She giggled. “It’s the thought that counts.”

“I’m doing an awful lot of thinking, darlin’,” he whispered.

“So am I, Colt. So am I,” she said with a sexy as hell wink.

His lips met hers to the sound of a dozen whoops and yells. He’d known she was dangerous, and he couldn’t be happier about it.

“Well, Jake, I guess you’d better take our stuff back to the cabin,” Nance said with a laugh. “Looks like I’m sticking around for a wedding, and by the looks of things it better be a quick one.”