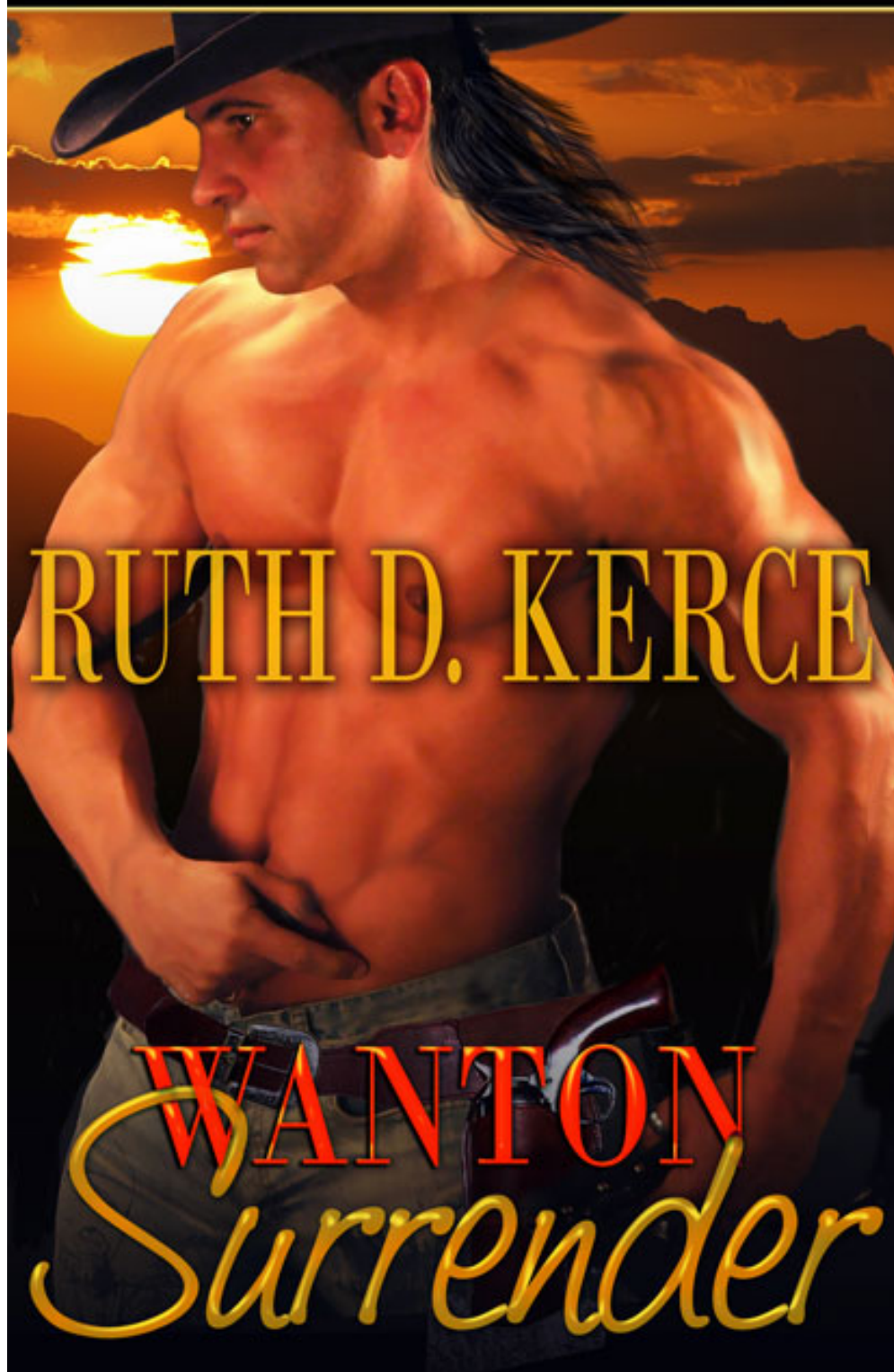


ELLORA'S CAVE PRESENTS



RUTH D. KERCE

WANTON  
*Surrender*

An Ellora's Cave Romantica Publication



[www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com)

Wanton Surrender

ISBN 9781419913594

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Edited by Pamela Campbell.

Cover art by Syneca

Electronic book Publication December 2007

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# ***WANTON SURRENDER***

**Ruth D. Kerce**

## Prologue

*Elk Valley, New Mexico Territory, May 1870*

The pond water felt cool and refreshing against Elizabeth Davenport's bare body. She smiled widely. Swimming naked made her normally tame life seem so deliciously decadent.

The water lapped at her sensitive breasts, making her nipples pebble as the coolness swirled between her thighs, teasing her sex. She had quickly grown addicted to the almost nightly ritual, even this early in the year when the water and late night air still held a definite chill.

She leisurely swam toward the middle of the pond, keeping her back turned until Cal Roberts, the man to whom she'd sworn her undying love, emerged from behind the fir trees and entered the water. Usually, he arrived and waded in before she did, but he said he'd almost gotten caught sneaking out of the cabin tonight and had to wait until his brother went to bed. Luckily, she'd gotten away without notice.

Rustling drew her attention to where he stood, mostly concealed from her view. She seriously considered peeking as he undressed, but decided against it, even though every contour of his naked chest intrigued her and she'd caught tantalizing views of his bare backside more than once.

Her curiosity about the rest of his body was reaching fever pitch. Unsure how much longer she could contain herself from looking and touching where she shouldn't, a giggle escaped her lips.

The unexpected titter surprised her. She clamped a hand over her mouth, then grinned behind her fingers at her naughty thoughts.

Far from naïve, she felt more than ready to experience everything life had to offer, including physical intimacy. The whole thing—far from being a child, but her family not yet treating her as a woman—frustrated the hell out of her. Except when it came to Cal. He always treated her like a woman, though he'd never tried to touch her intimately. Too bad, for she craved his touch so much and felt only his touch would ever be enough to satisfy her.

Despite her heated thoughts, a shiver passed through her and she rubbed her arms. The night air wafted over her exposed skin. Definitely too cool for them to swim, but she didn't care. She looked forward to her time alone here with Cal. The pond was their place.

At this time of year, the water remained a bit shallow. Her feet too easily touched the bottom and the middle sank barely deep enough to cover her feminine assets when she stood. Even so, they refused to find another spot. The seclusion of this particular pond made it the perfect meeting place.

The sound of an owl drew her gaze upward. She sighed. The night sky, clear with a million stars overhead, sparkled brightly. A sliver of the moon showed through the trees in the east. So romantic.

The first time they'd come here and he'd teased her into swimming naked, she hadn't wanted to look like a scared little girl in his eyes, so she'd done it. After that first time, she'd no longer felt self-conscious, or embarrassed, or even felt their actions wrong. He made her feel special and had never taken advantage of their unclothed condition. She loved him so much. They belonged together. How could it be wrong?

Her sister would have a fit if she ever found out about their nightly meetings. Skylar was always saying, "You're only seventeen" — as if that meant anything. And Cal's brother would probably horsewhip him, figuratively speaking, of course.

Older people, even by only a few years, especially once married awhile, seemed to forget about true love and the kinds of desires that ruled the heart, so she and Cal needed to be careful. She swore *she'd* never forget those feelings, no matter what.

Getting caught together like this did hold a certain appeal though, she had to admit. Maybe then they'd be forced to marry to protect her reputation. A small smile played on her lips. They would wed sooner or later anyhow. Sooner sounded good to her.

Her best friend, Emma Bray, still hadn't found love, but most of her other friends their age had married and started families of their own long ago. She wanted to be married too, before everyone labeled her an old maid.

At twenty years old, Cal had been given a portion of land from his brother to build on and she had definite ideas for their own little home, with lots of children. They'd have a good start at a happy future together.

Only one thing bothered her—Cal had never actually professed his love for her directly, saying those special three words she longed to hear from him. Still, it was understood. Everyone knew how they felt about each other. She dashed away her concerns, knowing them silly. Nothing could ever tear them apart.

A ripple in the water told her that he had waded in. "It's safe to look." His deep, sexy voice carried across the pond to her, seeming to heat the very water around her.

She turned and watched him approach, a wicked grin on his face. His dark brown hair looked slightly damp at the ends and a curl hung over his forehead. She itched to push it away, just to feel the silky strands against her fingers.

"I love the way you look wet. So enticing," his voice rumbled in his throat. "It makes me want..."

The closer he got, the more his husky tone warmed her body. "Want what?" she whispered.

"It makes me want," he repeated, not letting the sentence hang this time.

They'd always stayed covered by the water while naked, but she knew he'd caught glimpses of her skin when they swam. That knowledge and his sensual-sounding words excited her. She bobbed a little higher in the water.

"How about a picnic this Sunday after church?" he asked, swimming up next to her. His gaze flickered down to her barely concealed breasts and passion filled his green eyes. "We could head out to Night Water Canyon. Make a day of it."

For a moment, she couldn't speak, wondering if he'd reach out and touch her this time. When he didn't, disappointment and frustration warred within her. She *wanted* too. In fact, she ached for him to touch her in all those private places nice girls weren't supposed to think about. But she did—often. "I'd like that. Let's go alone this time, all right?"

Last week after church, they'd gone fishing at the stream on the other side of Three Prong Pass with Kid Joe and Emma. Beth loved their friends, but she and Cal wouldn't need to censor their conversation or their touches if alone. Besides, the canyon was a goodly distance and Emma's pa probably wouldn't want her away all day. As town doctor, he often relied on her help.

"Wade and Skylar won't like us going that far alone," Cal reminded her.

"Your brother and my sister are too protective."

He traced a finger down her cheek. "I think they have good reason."

"Do you?" She hadn't believed she could feel desire any stronger, but his touch ignited a passion inside her tonight that she had never thought possible. Scary, but exciting at the same time. She reached out and caressed his chest, loving the muscular feel of him and the heat that always came off his body whenever she was near.

He grasped her hand and held it over his heart. "Don't tempt me more than I already am."

She felt the heavy thumping beneath her fingers. "You like being alone with me. You like me tempting you. I know it. Admit to me that you do." When he didn't immediately reply, she pulled her hand away and swam around behind him. Sometimes it was easier to say something to a person if not facing them. He still didn't speak, so she moved closer in the water until their bodies brushed, hoping to push him into an answer.

"All right." He groaned. "I admit it."

Triumph surged through her. But then began to fade. "Do I really tempt you, Cal? Truly?" He didn't talk about his feelings often, though he continually showed her that he cared by his actions. Even so, a woman needed to hear the words from time to time.

"You know you do."

She moved her mouth close to his ear. "You've tempted me too."

Cal cleared his throat. "I've never made an improper move. Well, not too improper." His voice lowered to a barely audible whisper. "The more time we spend alone together, the harder it's getting, though, to stay...proper."

His words caused the blood to rush through her veins. "What do you call convincing me to swim with you, without any clothes on?"

"Completely proper swimming etiquette."

She could hear the laughter in his voice and smiled. "What if I'm tired of us being proper?" She held her breath, wondering how he'd take her question. She was pushing him again, but a need raged inside her tonight that she couldn't deny.

Cal visibly stiffened in the water. "What do you mean?"

"Is it that hard to figure out?" In a move she knew would drive him wild, she leaned her upper body fully against his. Her soft bare breasts, pressing firmly against his strong back, caused them both to moan. The effect of their touching went far deeper than she could have imagined. Pure, decadent ecstasy was the only way she could describe the feeling.

Boldly, she curled her fingers around his arms and rubbed her hardened nipples against his back. She felt him suck in a breath at the same time she did.

Since she'd met Cal about a year ago, he'd turned her whole world upside down and made her think about things not one bit proper. Did that make her wanton?

"This is not a good idea," he choked out and turned in the water, dislodging her hold on him. When he tried to move past her, she flung her arms around his neck, bringing him close again.

Her lips teased his, brushing back and forth across his mouth. She eased one hand up into his hair, lacing her fingers through the soft strands. "This is the best idea I've ever had."

\* \* \* \* \*

### *Morning*

The sun streamed through the yellow and white-striped curtains, bathing the kitchen in soft light. Skylar chatted easily with Beth, biding her time. A serious matter troubled her mind and she needed to confront her sister about it. But she needed to wait for the right moment.

Her husband entered through the back door and Skylar's heart filled with love, as always, at the sight of him. His muscular build and sexy smile made her ache just to be near him. He'd already been out for a couple of hours, doing chores. She missed waking up with him beside her, but she hadn't been able to rouse herself as early as usual.

"You're looking very fetching today, Beth," he complimented, skimming her new, cream-colored dress with little white flowers in the pattern.

"Thanks, Wade." Beth's eyes lit up in pleasure.

Skylar watched him sniff in the aroma of the frying bacon. She'd have to leave more than a couple of strips for him today. Lately, she'd been ravenous and couldn't seem to get enough food. The last few weeks she'd practically eaten the cupboard bare.

He set his hat and gun belt on the counter, then strolled over to her and caressed her large belly. "Morning, wife. How do you feel?" He kissed her cheek.

"Fat." She rubbed her back. This baby was never going to be born. By the time he or she came out, the child would be old enough for school. She was almost two weeks overdue and she'd experienced false labor three times.

"You're gorgeous. The baby will be here soon enough, so stop fretting over it. When's breakfast? I'm starved."

"In about ten minutes. Maybe less. Can you wake Cal? He's not up yet."

Wade's brow furrowed, his eyes looking troubled. "He was supposed to clean out the barn loft this morning. It's not like him to sleep in."

"I'll get him." Beth clattered the plates down onto the table.

"No." Skylar gave her sister a stern look then nodded at her husband. "Wade will get him. You finish setting the table."

Wade cocked an eyebrow. His narrowed gaze revealed his curiosity at her tone, but he didn't question her words.

She waited until he left before she said anything more. Now was the time to confront Beth, with Wade and Cal out of earshot. If Beth thought they'd be back any second, she wouldn't cause a scene. Her sister's long blonde hair and big blue eyes gave her a sweetly angelic look, but she possessed a stubborn streak Skylar was well acquainted with. "I need to talk to you about something."

"What?" Beth set out glasses for milk.

"You and Cal sneaked out last night. I heard you. It wasn't the first time either. Wade's even beginning to notice Cal leaving after dark. I don't think he's noticed your absence yet. This has to stop, Beth." That's probably why Cal had slept in. Normally, he rose before the sun, but staying up half the night, night after night, exhausted a body.

The girl's face reddened. "Um...we couldn't sleep, that's all." She avoided eye contact. "We went for a walk."

"You both couldn't sleep? Almost every night this week?" Who knew how long these secret meetings of theirs had been going on, probably a lot longer than she was even aware.

Beth shrugged, continuing to set the table for breakfast. Forks, spoons, two tin cups for coffee, cloth napkins. "We've had such nice nights. The air has been wonderful. Invigorating."

"Stop avoiding the issue." Skylar knew her sister wasn't telling the truth. She and Cal would get themselves into trouble yet. Having them both in such close quarters, knowing they were attracted to each other, boded disaster. When she and Wade married, she should have somehow taken precautions against this. She knew Wade had talked to Cal, but apparently that hadn't been sufficient to prevent their relationship from progressing. Maybe it was time Cal moved out.

"I'm not avoiding anything," Beth argued, finally meeting her gaze.

"I want to know where you've been going and what you've been doing."

"I'm not a child anymore. I don't have to tell you that!"



Her sister's heated response pretty much confirmed her suspicions. Skylar was about to say more, to make sure Beth understood what was expected of her as long as she lived in this house, but Wade stepped back into the kitchen before she could get the words out.

His face looked ashen. A piece of paper hung loosely from his hand.

"What's wrong?" she asked, the tone of her voice wary.

"Cal's gone." His eyes looked bright, moist and full of pain.

"Gone?" Beth slowly approached him. "What do you mean gone?"

Dread gripped Skylar, practically choking off her air. By the look on her husband's face, he didn't mean Cal had gone out for supplies or to check fences. She immediately regretted her previous thoughts about asking the young man to move out.

Wade lifted the paper. "He left this note, saying he's gone back to Chicago to live with our grandfather. He said not to follow him because he won't change his mind."

Beth's face paled and she shook her head. "That can't be. It doesn't make sense." She grabbed the note and read it for herself.

Full of emotional turmoil, Skylar moved beside Wade and slipped her arm around his waist. "Oh, Wade." She rested her cheek against his chest. "Does he say why he left?"

Cal wouldn't leave without a good reason. He was a fine young man. She loved him like a brother and would miss him terribly. Chicago. So far away.

She had a feeling his sudden absence had something to do with Beth and their relationship, but since she had no proof of that, she didn't voice her suspicions. No need to cause more tension and heartache for everyone.

A few nights ago, she'd "seen" the possibility of him leaving in a dream vision but had dismissed it as impossible. Now she knew the vision had been correct. If the rest of the dream proved correct, more heartache was to come.

"The note doesn't say why." Wade's scratchy voice reflected his own heartache as his arms circled her lovingly.

Beth kept shaking her head. Tears streamed down her cheeks and her breathing sounded labored. "How could he do this? Why would he leave me?"

Skylar felt her sister's agony. And her husband's. A part of all their hearts had just been ripped away.

At that moment, a hard contraction squeezed her stomach and she doubled over, breaking Wade's hold on her. "Wade! It's time."

## Chapter One

### *Four Years Later*

Nathan Carlyle sat atop his large, dark steed. His shift of patrolling fence lines would be over soon. Thank goodness. He was as bored as a ruttin' bull wandering through an empty pasture.

Restlessly, his gelding pawed at the hard-packed ground and puffed air from its nostrils. The horse's warm breath, visible in the cool and damp-feeling air, reminded Nathan of the impending weather.

"Storm's definitely a-comin'." He pulled his slicker from a saddlebag and slipped it on as he looked out over the vast Sinclair land. *Amazing*. Even under turbulent gray skies, the acreage remained a beautiful sight to behold.

One day soon all this magnificence would belong to him.

The owners, Skylar and Wade Sinclair, had put a glitch in his original plans by their unexpected trip to Europe. On the bright side, that made three less people underfoot to trip him up. They'd taken their little brat of a son along with them.

The boy was too curious for his own good and always got into everyone's business. Cute little guy actually, if he admitted the truth. The spittin' image of his pa. But still... He didn't need the hassle.

Better that they'd all left Elk Valley, he decided, after having time to think on it a bit. While they were away, he would change tactics and use their absence to his advantage.

After all his preparations took hold, people would no longer look down on him like some piece of dirt as they'd tended to in the past and even now, because he was only a lowly hired hand. Others had told him that wasn't the reason, but he knew. No other reason made sense.

Besides, whatever the truth, he'd be giving all of them orders soon and he fully intended to enjoy every moment of his change in status. He'd already bettered his standing in the community by some fancy social and work-related maneuvering and this was only the beginning.

Money, power and respect. He intended to have them all. Even if he had to achieve those things by less than honest means.

Honesty and hard work were for stupid hound dogs anyhow. Better ways existed to attain an easy life, for a man smart enough to come up with an idea. And above all else, he prided himself on his cunning.

He turned the horse's head and kicked the animal into a trot, all the while going over the next phase of the plan in his head. By late this afternoon, he'd be one step closer to his goal.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth hurried the children into the old schoolhouse, which doubled as the town's church on Sundays. The building needed some major repairs but served its purpose well enough. When it rained, they had to place buckets in the corners to catch the drips. And high winds made the building quite drafty. Yet it gave the children a communal place to learn and parishioners a place to worship. "Get inside, everyone."

A spring storm was quickly approaching. The wind whipped through the nearby trees and the temperature dropped as gray clouds rolled across the sky. Loose papers, twigs and leaves flew through the air.

She tried to hold her scarf in place over her head, but her efforts proved useless. The cottony material slipped and came off in her hand. A violent gust swept strands of long hair across her face in a tangled mess.

Frustrated, she started toward the schoolhouse, when out of nowhere an eerie shiver rushed down her spine. Not because of the coming storm, but something much deeper.

She felt watched.

Her heart accelerated and a strange awareness shot through her. *Behind you*, something whispered in her mind. Slowly, she turned toward the distant hill opposite the school.

A man sat on a horse, peering down at her.

Even though commanding in presence, he sat the horse like a man not used to being in a saddle. His broad shoulders held her attention and something long buried tugged at her heart.

She couldn't make out his features. He was too far away. But he seemed oddly familiar. Another chill rushed through her body and she rubbed her arms.

The man didn't raise his hand or gesture in any way to indicate he knew her. Nor did he do anything threatening.

Still, something about him frightened her, as if life were about to change because of him. Somehow, she felt this impending storm was a prelude to a far greater storm brewing on the horizon.

"Miss Beth! Hurry! It's fixin' to rain."

She glanced after the young boy, no more than seven years old, who ran up the steps of the schoolhouse. "Coming, Peter."

Before following, Beth raised her eyes to the clouds overhead. A large drop of rain landed on her nose, before a gust of wind took the drop away, only to be followed by a

heavy splattering of sprinkles. Unmindful of getting wet, she turned back toward the hill for another glance at the mysterious stranger.

The mysterious stranger was gone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rain dripped off the brim of his hat and cold seeped into his bones. He rode cautiously across the valley, trying to avoid rabbit holes and other obstacles. The storm had reduced visibility and he didn't want his horse to stumble or spook.

Shifting in the saddle, he groaned. His butt hurt like hell. He wasn't used to riding for so long, but his destination loomed close, so he trudged onward.

His thoughts turned to the woman in the schoolyard. *Woman*. She was no longer the girl he remembered, but she was still the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen. Her blonde hair hung longer. Her body appeared fuller, more desirable. His own body tightened and his cock stirred with his memories of then...and his hopes for the future, now that he'd seen her again.

The cold eased and a sexual heat slowly spread through him. Oh yes. She would warm his bed and his body quite well.

If he wasn't too late. If he could step back into her life and they could continue where they'd left off. "Somehow I'll convince her." So much time had passed, so much pain. Still, he held out hope.

He maneuvered his horse around the bend at Rock Junction and rode until he came upon a closed iron gate, positioned between two pillars of stone. Wire, strung along wooden posts, stretched down both sides of the land for as far as he could see.

Memories washed over him and a lump stuck in his throat. Strange how a place where he'd actually spent such little time could affect him so deeply.

Even after four years away, he remembered every corner of the land. Filled with uncertainty, he dismounted and approached the entry. If he decided to go through with this, there'd be no turning back.

After a moment of hesitation, he grabbed the bars and pushed open the gate with determination. He'd come back to claim what was his—Miss Elizabeth Davenport. He wanted her and wasn't riding away without her at his side.

As he stepped within the Sinclair property line, familiarity tugged at him, bringing back more valued memories. Love and laughter. Things he'd never forget. Yes, he'd made the right decision.

The gate squeaked, audible even over the wind and rain. The smell of fir trees filled his nostrils. It was good to know some things hadn't changed. *Home*.

"Hold up!" a deep voice shouted unexpectedly from the side.

Stiffening immediately at the warning, he turned. He should have grabbed his rifle before dismounting. Stupid! He'd been too distracted by his thoughts of *her* and the life he'd turned his back on years ago.

Several men quickly surrounded him, each with a gun in hand. "Back right on out of here, stranger," one of them ordered.

Not quite the reception he'd expected. He didn't recognize any of the men. That could mean trouble. The ranch hands should have been informed of his pending arrival though. "I'm—"

"Mount up and ride out," the same man ordered, apparently in charge of the others. "Unless you want a bullet in your gut."

His frustration bubbled to the surface. What the hell was going on around here? Where was his brother? "Don't you even care who I am or why I'm here?"

"I don't recognize you. That's enough for me. Move out."

"Back off, Carlyle," another deep voice boomed from nearby.

A man walked out of the shadows, a stern look on his face. He approached with an easy gait, pushing his way past the others. The rain and wind eased, as if even the weather was allowing this man his head. One hand hovered near the revolver strapped low to his hip. He eyed the horse just inside the entry and the rifle in the saddle sheath, but didn't break stride until he reached the gate. "Where the hell have you been? About damn time you got here."

"Time? I'm early."

"The hell you are."

"I wasn't even due until—"

"Who is this cowpoke, Joe?" the man whom the other had addressed as Carlyle bellowed. With a scowl on his face, he stepped away from the group.

After a brief huff of frustration in his direction, a wide smile split Joe's face. "This is Cal Roberts, Carlyle. The boss's little brother."

"Not so little," Cal protested, returning Joe's smile. He was happy to see a familiar face.

Carlyle visibly tensed and his eyes narrowed to slits.

Cal noticed and wondered at the man's reaction. If he didn't know any better, he'd swear that look was pure hatred, which didn't make a lick of sense. They'd never even met.

Discounting the stranger for now, he turned toward the one man in the crowd he did know. "Good to see you again, Joe," he greeted.

A former gunslinger, Joe Jackson had helped Skylar and Beth years ago when they'd needed it the most. He'd left town for a while, but returned shortly after Skylar and Wade married. Despite his past, he'd proven a good friend and overall a good man.

Joe gave him a quick half hug. "Welcome home." He stepped back and faced the group of men, who had re-holstered their guns. "Someone get his horse and put it in the barn." Joe turned back to Cal. "Come on up to the house. There have been a lot of changes around here I need to tell you about."

"So I see." As they headed off, Cal glanced over his shoulder. Carlyle was still shooting bullets at him with his eyes. He'd pushed his slicker aside and his right hand fingered his holstered pistol. "Who is that guy? What's going on around here? They about jumped me when I opened the gate."

"I know. Carlyle's the foreman here. He gets a little power happy sometimes. Don't worry about it. We've had problems with rustlers, so Wade ordered extra men along the fences. Nothing new. There always seems to be trouble of some sort brewing around here."

"Foreman? Aren't you foreman?" Cal had been foreman before he'd left for Chicago, even though they'd only employed two part-time hands at the time and they hadn't really needed a foreman. Now, with a larger crew, Joe would have been his logical replacement.

"Me, foreman? What the hell do I know about ranching?"

"Rustlers, you said? Is it bad?" He should have been here to help. Though certain his brother had hired good men to help him run the ranch, it wasn't the same as having family near to watch over the property and each other's back.

"I'll tell you about everything inside. I know you haven't been kept informed about all the goings-on."

"Wade's not much for letter writing...apparently. Mostly I hear from Skylar. You should have written me and let me know about what was happening."

"Didn't feel it was my place, but now that you're here, I'll fill you in."

\* \* \* \* \*

Carlyle stalked off to the foreman's quarters. He slammed the door closed behind him, rattling the two windows on either side of the entry.

The small cabin, built for his use, was little comfort, especially when he knew Cal Roberts would be staying in the big house. "Damn! Why wasn't I told that Roberts was comin'? Why didn't *she* mention it? This could ruin everything."

He tossed aside his wet slicker and picked up a framed picture of Elizabeth Davenport. She belonged to *him* now and he wasn't letting her go.

He'd worked hard to get into the good graces of the owner of the ranch, Wade Sinclair. He'd worked even harder to get Elizabeth Davenport, Wade's sister-in-law, to accept him and his advances.

Wade's wife and Elizabeth's older sister, Skylar, still stood in his way. She didn't like him and was probably the one responsible for Cal Roberts being here. Joe didn't exactly like him either, but the man was a minor worry. Well, maybe not so minor, actually. But he could handle Joe.

He didn't understand why the ex-gunfighter, not even a blood relation, was treated like a member of the family, or why the hands took orders from Joe faster than they

ever did from him. Joe even slept in the main house, right with the family. It didn't add up in his head.

He'd bet the gunfighter was fuckin' Skylar right under Wade's nose. In town, he'd heard old rumors about something between the two of them. Maybe she even took both men into her bed and body at the same time. Though he'd never actually seen anything tawdry between them himself, he could picture that salacious scene. His cock throbbed at the thought.

Well, he'd win over Joe and Skylar, no matter what. He had himself a plan. And it had been working. Or so he'd thought. Until now.

Now Wade's brother had come back to ruin it all. He knew Elizabeth once loved the man. Maybe she even still did, though she swore otherwise. He set down the picture and began to pace.

Slowly, a smile crossed his face as various ideas flickered through his head. His fingers danced over the grip of his pistol.

Accidents happened on a ranch. Considering the problems with rustlers they'd been having, someone could very easily get hurt or even killed. He'd make certain that Cal Roberts wouldn't be around long enough to destroy the scheme he'd spent over a year concocting and setting into motion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal looked in awe at the new ranch house. Joe led him through the double front doors and into the entry hall, then farther inside to Wade's study. Mexican-style tile covered the floor. Dark wooden furniture filled the room. Paintings of lush landscapes hung on the walls.

His eyes were immediately drawn to the portrait of Hawk's Feather. Wade's first wife, a full-blooded Apache, who had been brutally murdered by a trapper. Her eyes always seemed so wise and accepting to him.

Impressed by what he'd seen so far, he looked forward to seeing the rest of the ranch, inside and out. "Looks at least twice as big as the original cabin. I noticed another barn outside too. And a smokehouse?"

"That's right. Actually, the house is almost three times bigger now. Wade and Skylar did a good job with the design. Took over a year to get built. It's a full two stories. Not just a loft upstairs, like before. All the bedrooms are up there, except for Skylar and Wade's. Theirs is tucked away at the far end down here, with an attached nursery."

"Nursery?" His pulse jumped at what sounded like exciting news. "Are Wade and Skylar expecting again?"

"Not yet. But they've been trying." Joe laughed. "You know how they are."

"More in love than any two people I've ever known." Cal imagined his brother and wife working on the design for this place, planning to expand their family. A pang of sadness tugged at his heart that he hadn't been here to join in their happiness.

"Lots of improvements and new structures outside too," Joe confirmed. "I'll show you around later."

"So where are Wade and Skylar and that nephew I've yet to meet?" Another pang of anguish hit. He hadn't even been here for the birth of Cal Colton Sinclair—his namesake.

From what Skylar had written him, the boy came into the world less than twenty-four hours after he'd left Elk Valley four years ago. He'd missed little Cal learning to walk, missed the boy's first word, missed so much.

When he'd left the family that night, he had known he was leaving behind everything. The knowledge that the decision to do so had been his own didn't make the loss any easier to handle.

"Sorry, Cal. They've already gone."

*Hellfire.* All his expectations disappeared. A deep depression gripped him and he suddenly felt very tired and alone.

Somehow, he wasn't surprised by Joe's words. For quite a while now, his life hadn't been going well. For the last four years, he'd questioned his decision about leaving Elk Valley, sneaking out in the night, abandoning his family. And Beth. But at the time, he'd felt he was doing the right thing.

"They couldn't wait any longer. They needed to make the stage or they'd miss their connections to the coast."

Cal sank down in a nearby leather chair. They'd obviously had a change in plans and left earlier than originally scheduled. "Damn."

"You'll see them when they get back."

"In three months...or longer."

Joe sat across from him in another chair. "So? You planning on going anywhere?"

"I don't know. Depends."

Joe eyed him a moment, his gaze serious. He glanced toward the study door and then back again. "You've just arrived and are probably exhausted, but since we're alone in the house, except for the housekeeper, now's a good time for us to talk privately about a few things."

"About what things?" Somehow, Joe's words sounded ominous.

"You haven't asked about Beth. I thought that would have been the first question out of your mouth when you saw me. If you still care about her, that is." His eyes narrowed and seemed to bore right through him.

Cal had wondered if Joe would broach the subject. He'd always been very protective of both Skylar and Beth. The man certainly hadn't wasted any time confronting him. Just as well. "I care. I've already seen her."



Joe cocked an eyebrow. "You have?"

"From up on the hill outside of town. I saw her by the schoolhouse. I didn't go down though. She saw me, but I don't think she recognized me. Is she teaching now?"

"No, she just helps out with the younger children a few days a week."

Cal dreaded to ask his next question. "How badly does she hate me for leaving? Skylar was fairly vague in her letters, even though I often asked." His gaze scanned the numerous large bookcases against the walls. Through a windowed doorway, he could see a garden. Definitely not the same home he remembered. "Apparently, she left out a lot of details about a lot of things."

Looking uncomfortable, Joe avoided eye contact, as if trying to pick the right words or deciding how much to tell him. He finally looked back and expelled a heavy breath. "You hurt Beth badly. Especially after you married that whore."

At the mention of Missy, Cal stiffened, but he didn't take offense. Whore fit, in more ways than one. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back, trying to erase the memories—the pain. Another mistake in his life.

Almost a year before he'd left Elk Valley his brother had taken Melissa Bailey out of Delia's whorehouse and sent her to live with their grandfather to build a better life. She'd looked a lot like Beth and was about the same age, which probably was what had attracted him to her. She hadn't acted like Beth though. He'd found that out too late.

She'd lied over and over again to get everything she wanted. Before he discovered her true nature, she'd worked her way into his bed and tricked him into marrying her. Sex and love. Two very different animals, he'd discovered.

Somehow, he had hoped that particular part of his life would remain a secret. He'd never mentioned any of it specifically in his letters. But apparently his grandfather had filled in the family. Even when he'd convinced himself that he cared about Missy enough to make a life with her, he'd felt guilty deep down for betraying Beth. So he had never discussed the marriage with anyone outside of Chicago.

Cal raised his head. "So I guess Beth wasn't too thrilled to hear I was coming." Certainly an understatement. He knew she'd harbor a certain level of hatred toward him for leaving Elk Valley like he had. For marrying Missy, he couldn't imagine how much she must despise him.

Once Skylar and Wade had finalized their plans to tour Europe, Skylar had written him with the news. The excursion was to be a business-pleasure trip. Wade was looking for finer breeding stock for the horse ranch and Skylar had never been abroad. She'd written, saying they wanted him here to handle things while they were away. She'd said they would feel better with family in charge.

The timing had been right. Just prior to getting her letter, his life with Missy in Chicago had ended. Or rather, he'd ended it. So he'd agreed to come. He assumed the family had been filled in on the failure of his marriage too, probably by telegram the very next day if he knew his grandfather. Otherwise, Joe would have asked a lot more questions.

"Beth didn't know you were coming," Joe answered, his tone flat.

Cal leaned forward in the chair, his heart picking up its rhythm. "Nobody told her?" That didn't bode well. They should have given her some warning.

"We thought it best. Skylar figured if Beth knew, she might do something rash." Joe hesitated. "Cal, um," after another hesitation, he continued, "there's something important that nobody's told you."

A cold fist wrapped around his heart. "What?" he croaked, dreading to hear this piece of news by the serious look on Joe's face.

"Nate Carlyle?"

The fist tightened painfully. "The trigger-happy foreman?"

Joe nodded and his eyes reflected worry. "Beth's planning to marry him in five months. It would have been sooner, but Wade and Skylar's trip to Europe delayed the ceremony. Before the end of the year, she'll be Mrs. Nathan Carlyle."

## **Chapter Two**

Carlyle strolled around the spacious garden, trying to appear casual, while he made certain nobody was working in the area or passing through the immediate vicinity. Satisfied all was clear, he wedged himself between the shoulder-high bushes outside the ranch house's study doors.

"Ouch," he grumbled under his breath. Damn prickly shrubs!

Suddenly, he slipped and slid forward but grabbed the wall and managed to keep to his feet. Barely. Shit! He lifted one leg. The stray dog that had been hanging around the ranch the last couple of months must have been back here. He scraped the bottom of his boot in the dirt.

He'd shoot that damn mangy bitch the next time he saw the good-for-nothin' animal. The dog was half wild anyhow. She probably had some wolf in her. She was a danger to the livestock, in his opinion. Elizabeth had taken a shine to the mutt, so he'd held himself and his actions back. Up to now.

Trying to keep as quiet as possible, he crouched down so nobody could see him if they wandered into the courtyard. He pressed his back against the wall and turned his head to angle his ear properly.

Yep, Joe and Cal Roberts were in there, all right. The drone of their voices reached him.

The interior double doors led from the study to the private desert garden that ran along the side of the house. The doors were paned with thin glass and covered by protective shutters at night, so if he stayed completely still and quiet, he could pick up bits of conversation going on inside the room.

This wasn't the first time he'd hidden outside the study to listen and it wouldn't be the last. He knew how to gather information when he needed it. He'd even listened more than once outside Wade and Skylar's bedroom window, so conveniently located on the bottom floor. He had a more difficult time hearing into that room though, since their bed sat on the opposite side. He'd peeked in sometimes, between the slit in the drapes, and certainly gotten an eyeful.

A grin tugged at his lips. Maybe he was loco, but a smart man learned everything he could about his adversaries...not to mention his friends and his crew.

"Like hell!" Cal burst out, unable to contain himself. Near panic filled his insides, more than he'd been prepared to handle. "She can't marry – him." A pain so deep it defied description knifed through his heart. Why hadn't Skylar told him?

He'd always feared Beth would marry someday, but having it hit him in the face like this was too much. Especially when it involved a man who'd taken an instant dislike to him, before they'd even been introduced.

If they married, not only would he lose the one woman he truly loved, he probably wouldn't even be allowed around her. Carlyle must be well aware of his and Beth's past. He wouldn't be surprised if, after they married, the man took her far away from here. Unable to stomach even the possibility, he rejected the disturbing thought.

"Why can't she marry him?" Joe asked, an exaggerated scowl crossing his face.

Even as upset as he felt, Cal remained aware enough not to be fooled by Joe's reaction. He'd seen the man's worry, heard the frustration in his voice. Joe wasn't any happier about the upcoming nuptials than he was. The question now was why?

"No one else has courted her seriously since you left, except Nathan," Joe admitted. "She wants to get married, have her own family, a normal life—as she once put it. She deserves that. Don't you think?"

Cal didn't know how to answer. Sure, she deserved it. But he wanted Beth back with *him*. He felt like punching the wall, shouting the roof down, doing something in protest.

Had this been the way Beth felt when she'd heard about him marrying Missy? This deep-down throbbing pain that wouldn't let up?

"I know you don't approve of her marrying Carlyle. I can see it in your eyes, Joe. So let's just be honest with each other from here on out." He took a breath, trying to calm his out-of-control emotions. "What does the family think?" he asked, fighting to keep his voice steady.

Joe scrubbed a hand over the stubble on his face. "Skylar and I don't much care for the man. He's a real snake in our opinion. But you disappeared on Beth. On all of us. You married. It's been four years, Cal. Beth moved on. She's a grown woman now. We couldn't dictate who she keeps company with. And, unfortunately, he's the one she chose to be by her side, instead of waiting for you to come to your senses and make your way back home."

Carlyle's fist tightened.

For two bits, he'd slash Joe's throat for spreading his poisonous opinion with such ease. Snake! No wonder the ranch hands had little to no respect for him most of the time. Joe had probably poisoned them against him and for no cause at all. He'd never done nothin' to that man.

Skylar was no better. Damn, if he had the opportunity, he'd show her just how much of a man he really was, the smart-assed bitch. He'd shove his cock right down her throat and make her suck him dry. Give her something useful to do with that mouth of hers for a change, instead of bad-mouthin' him.

Knowing her though, she'd love it. He'd seen Wade do to her about everything a man could do to a woman sexually. She'd always responded more than eagerly and begged for more, from what he'd witnessed. Some might label him a pervert for watching, but he didn't care. Knowledge was the way to power and control.

Besides, he liked looking and stroking his cock until he exploded. *Oh yes.* He'd often fantasized about taking Wade's place or being right there in the room with them, telling Wade exactly what nasty things to do to her delectable body.

He shook his head. "Stay on track," he murmured, switching his thoughts back to the matter at hand. Regardless of anything that had already happened or anyone's opinions, he had to take care of Roberts before it was too late.

A ray of sunshine, slicing through the clouds, caught his attention. He glanced at the sky then checked his pocket watch. Nearly time. He wished he could stay longer, listen to more, but he had something to do. He intended to outsmart all of the Sinclairs and Davenports in the end.

And the final laugh would be so sweet, because it would be his.

*Come to your senses.* Joe's words echoed in his head. Once he'd decided to return to Elk Valley, Cal had known he'd have to face everyone's disappointment and questions about what he'd done.

He'd been too hasty about leaving in the first place, thinking he was being noble, or so he'd tried to convince himself at the time. The truth was he'd gotten nervous about his and Beth's relationship. Everything had started moving too fast for him.

So he'd run like a scared polecat, stayed away much longer than intended, made life-altering mistakes while he was gone and hurt everyone he loved in the process. "I had my reasons for leaving, Joe."

"Which you've never explained, as far as I know."

"I thought they were valid at the time." Now he knew how wrong he'd been. He'd grown up a lot in the last few years. Mistakes either destroyed or matured a person, he'd learned. Luckily for him, he *had* learned instead of perishing in his own misery.

Cal leaned back and sighed. He wasn't going to talk about what happened, not with Joe. This was between him and Beth. He hadn't even told his grandfather the real truth, after arriving in Chicago. He'd only said that he needed a change of scenery.

He and Beth would discuss things as soon as possible. Definitely before too much time passed for her to back out of this farce of a wedding. He prayed it was a farce and not true love.

If she really did love Carlyle, would he be able to accept it and simply walk away? The awful thought made his gut tighten into a painful knot. "What does Wade say about the marriage?"

"You know Beth's always been able to wrap Wade around her little finger. Whatever she wants, he supports. Besides, Carlyle saved Wade from getting shot, so

Wade feels beholden to him. He's not going to think bad of the man unless he has proof Carlyle's up to no good."

At the thought of his brother in danger, Cal's heart pounded. He remembered too well what they'd all gone through when Skylar had gotten shot and almost died. Eager for details, he leaned forward in the chair. "What happened?"

"Some men robbed us during a round-up last spring. Carlyle had just signed on and he took a bullet in the hip for Wade when one of robbers got a little antsy. He jumped right in front of the gunman."

"Really?" Joe's story about Carlyle sounded off somehow. Why would a stranger offer what could have been his life for a man he didn't even know? Carlyle didn't seem the type.

Cal's mind raced, trying to figure out if his suspicions were valid. He was judging Carlyle without really knowing him. Probably looking too hard for reasons to hate the man. Still, something didn't feel right to him. "I suppose I should be grateful to the man." He didn't feel grateful though. He felt jealous as hell.

The fingers of his right hand curled into a fist. The idea of another man touching Beth—kissing her lips, sampling her tongue, caressing her beautiful body—was unbearable. Even if that man had saved his brother from a bullet.

He needed to know more. "Why don't you and Skylar like him? Anything specific?" Skylar's opinions were almost always right on target. Eerily so, in fact. Damn, he wished she and Wade were here.

"We haven't figured it out yet. He's just somehow...wily. He's always watching things. Studying them too closely. Like he's planning something out in his head, looking for an advantage or waiting to strike if he sees a weakness or an opening."

"So I guess because of what I did, Wade's going to take Carlyle's side over mine where Beth is concerned."

"There's no side. You weren't even here. You hurt Beth, Cal. You have no claim to her anymore, unless you can convince her otherwise, now that you're back. As far as Wade is concerned... He loves you, but you did let him and everyone else down. You didn't really think you could just come back and nothing would have changed and you'd be able to pick up life as if the last four years never happened, did you?"

"I suppose not," he grumbled.

A small sculpture of a hawk sitting on the corner of his brother's desk caught his eye. Memories of the wild hawk that had played such an important part in their pasts came back to him. If not for that hawk, he doubted any of them would even be here right now.

And he'd gone and messed everything up. With his actions, he'd ruined everything they'd built together. They'd all moved on without him. So many conflicting emotions rushed through his head that he couldn't separate the good from the bad.

If Joe's tone, regardless of his words, was any indication of how Wade actually felt, Cal wondered why his brother had wanted him here at all. Why he'd named his firstborn after him. Thinking about it, the fact that Skylar had done most all the letter writing pretty much should have clued him in to some facts.

Sure Wade loved him, but how could he ever trust or respect him again after what he'd done? Maybe they'd even left before he got here on purpose, so Wade wouldn't have to face him. That thought hurt too much, so he refused to believe it.

"Does Beth love Carlyle?" At this point, Cal's heart was ready to break. No way would he ever accept this pending marriage. He might try to fool himself that he *could* accept it, but what was the point when deep down he knew the truth.

"She says she does."

For the first time since Joe had broken the news, hope leapt inside him. "You don't sound like you believe her."

"I think she's settling because she couldn't have you. Carlyle's your age, your height, has your hair color, your eye color. Hell, his last name and your first name even sound similar. It's like she tried her best to find a substitute or a duplicate. If that's the case, she failed miserably."

Cal supposed that was a compliment of sorts. If true, he could understand Beth doing that. He'd used Missy as a poor substitute for the woman he truly loved. Because of their unresolved feelings for each other, they'd both ended up hurting others, along with themselves.

He'd started this whole damn chain of events. He would have to make it right.

"I remember how Beth used to look at you—the way her face always lit up when you entered the room. She doesn't look at Carlyle the same way."

His heart ripped a little more for causing her such emotional agony, for bringing about her need to turn to another man. But at the same time, he felt lighter, as if some of the weight had been lifted from his chest. The sensation was an odd combination of pleasure and pain. "I'll talk to her. Make it right."

"You're going to convince her not to marry Carlyle?" Joe sounded hopeful.

"Damn right I am."

"How?" He stood, walked over to the desk and rang a small silver bell.

"Somehow...is the best answer I have right now. Unless she really does love the man," he forced out, because he felt it the right thing to say and for no other reason. She didn't love Carlyle. He knew it down deep in his soul, or so he kept telling himself.

If by some strange turn, she could convince him otherwise, well, he wouldn't stand in the way of her happiness. As much as it would hurt, he'd leave Elk Valley and never return. Maybe. *Damn*. Being altruistic didn't feel as good as he thought it should. "I'll know what to do after I talk to her."

"Don't expect a simple talk to work. She's different, Cal. She's not the girl you remember. She's...harder now."

Before Cal could question him about that odd statement, a slightly older woman he didn't recognize appeared. As she stepped inside the room, he rose to his feet. She must be the housekeeper Joe had mentioned.

Joe smiled warmly at her. "Agatha, this is Mister Roberts. Please show him to his room. I'm sure he's tired from his trip and would like to rest up before dinner."

"Yes, sir."

Joe turned back to him. "We'll talk more later. Beth will be home soon. I think it's best if you stay out of sight until I tell her you're here. The way she feels about you, she might shoot first and ask questions later."

Cal almost laughed, until he saw how serious Joe was. Beth used to be sweet and understanding. She was also a little spoiled at times, but that never bothered him. He'd always thought her pouts adorable. She could be a bit willful too, but she certainly wouldn't shoot him in a fit of anger. Or would she? He knew her to be quite skilled with a pistol. Wade had taught her years ago.

Their last night together played through his mind. She hadn't been sweet or willful that night. She'd been...seductive and much too tempting. That night was burned into his memory. He shifted uncomfortably.

Agatha turned and he followed her from the room. He grabbed his hat on the way out, from where he'd set it earlier to dry. On the wall opposite the hat shelf, he noticed two portraits, one of Skylar and one of Beth. The portraits looked recent and both women glowed with vitality.

He didn't expect Beth to forgive him for leaving without even saying goodbye, for marrying another woman. But had what he'd done really changed her? Hardened her? He studied her eyes in the portrait. Guilt ravaged his insides. Time would tell.

\* \* \* \* \*

With the children now gone for the day, Beth stepped out of the schoolhouse. She breathed in the fresh after-rain air, looking forward to a quiet walk home. Her time alone had become precious to her lately. She started down the steps, but her foot faltered when she realized she wasn't alone.

"Hello, darlin'."

"Nate, what are you doing here?" she asked more harshly than she'd intended. With a forced half-smile, she continued down the schoolhouse steps, her gut tightening.

Every time she saw Nathan, she realized her life was moving too fast, sweeping her along like a hollow log caught in the rapids of a turbulent river. She needed to catch a handhold before she got washed away by everyone else's wants and desires.

"I didn't want you to have to walk home in the rain." He helped her into a covered buggy.



Another smile tugged at her lips, but she didn't feel it in her heart. The action was simply a practiced response on her part. "That's so sweet. Thank you. But it's hardly more than a sprinkle now."

"I know. Still, it's muddy out. You might ruin your dress." He climbed up beside her and clicked the reins. The horse started at a walk, moving slowly through town.

Considerate of him, though she would have preferred to spend the time walking home alone. Beth glanced at him, knowing something was on his mind by the crinkles marring his forehead. "What is it?"

"I've been a-thinkin' here lately... Why don't we get married now, next Sunday, like we'd originally planned?"

"Now?" Beth turned fully toward him and her heart slammed against her ribs. She searched for an excuse to delay. Luckily, an easy one was at hand. "We can't do that. Wade and Skylar won't be back yet. I want them at the wedding. I promised Colton that he could be ring-bearer. They're my only family. They'll be devastated if we marry before they return."

At the sound of Cal Colton's name, she saw him tense. What was going on with him? He'd been secretive and growing more and more impatient lately.

He grasped her hand and brought it to his lips. "I don't want to wait."

The closer the wedding got, the greater her fear became. She'd actually been relieved when the trip to Europe came up and she'd had a good excuse to delay the ceremony. But then, all brides-to-be got nervous, right? She pulled her hand away. "I haven't even picked out my dress yet."

"What happened to the one you bought last month?"

She shrugged. "I changed my mind. It's just not right."

"You have a closet full of dresses, Elizabeth. I'm sure you could find something appropriate to wear. You love me, don't you? You still want to marry me?"

She looked away. "Of course I do. You know that. But we're going to need to wait until Skylar, Wade and Colton return home. It's not that far off anyhow."

She'd thought she loved Nate. *I do love him!* Sort of. He'd seemed so hero-ish after saving Wade and he was always so sweet with Colton. That meant he was a good man, right? She was more mature now and couldn't expect to feel the giddiness and excitement about love that she'd felt when younger.

A good man was all a woman really needed. Still...

The memory of the man on the hill plagued her mind. Why had his image haunted her all day? Her life and emotions were falling into one big jumbled heap and she couldn't control any of it.

Nathan didn't pressure Elizabeth any further on the way home. He didn't want to scare her off. But he needed them to marry now, before Cal Roberts worked his way

back into her heart. If she returned to Cal, he'd be totally cut off. No way would he allow that to occur.

His frustration grew and his fingers tightened around the reins.

The thought of losing Elizabeth wasn't the thing that actually pained him in all this. He didn't love her and he knew she didn't really love him — not deep down in her heart. She simply hadn't come to the realization yet. That was all right, though things would have been a lot easier in the long run if she had fallen for him so completely that no other man could break them apart.

To him, she was only a part of the bigger whole. The Sinclair fortune was what he really wanted. The way to acquire it was to first become a member of the family. Then to become the only member.

His thoughts turned to Cal Colton. Colton, the little boy whom he hadn't quite decided what to do with yet. Even he had to admit the child was a ray of light in a world that held mostly dark moments and heartache.

Sure, he called the boy a brat from time to time, but even he couldn't fully convince himself of that. Besides, Wade used brat as an endearment, which Nathan actually found brilliant, since the meaning could lean either direction.

He glanced at Elizabeth, sitting beside him with her hands primly clasped on her lap. If he could seduce her, get a brat of their own growing inside her, he'd have a better chance of moving up the wedding. Not by this Sunday, but sooner than the five months now set.

So far though, she hadn't been open to anything but a few mostly chaste kisses, even though she'd accepted his marriage proposal months ago. Most women had some desires. But she was one cold bitch. What a waste of a great body.

He had hoped she'd take after her sister. He hated Skylar with a vengeance, but she was one hot little whore. Skylar and Wade always had their hands on each other. You could feel their passion. He'd even stumbled upon them goin' at it in a pasture once. They hadn't noticed him, so he'd stayed and watched. Skylar hadn't balked at anything Wade wanted to do to her. In fact, she was so eager to please him sexually that she'd have put any of Elk Valley's whores to shame. He'd certainly gotten an eyeful that day.

That's when he'd started skulkin' around outside their bedroom whenever he had the chance. He wouldn't mind sampling Skylar a time or two. He'd often imagined pumping his cock inside her cunt until she was so sore between the legs that she couldn't walk. Oh that would be sweet.

Beth never allowed his hands to stray over her body, nor would she touch him in any intimate way. If it wasn't for Lanelle and the other whores over at Delia's, he wouldn't have any comfort at all. He'd keep trying though. Force wasn't an option, but strong persuasion might work.

His mind raced with possibilities.

If Cal Roberts caught them in a compromising position, that would solve all his problems in one swoop. Well, almost. He'd still have to get rid of the man to acquire his part of the inheritance.

One thing at a time. But it would be a start. The thought was so delicious, so perfect, that he couldn't help but smile.

## Chapter Three

Grateful a ranch hand had called Nate away on business as soon as they rode through the gate, Beth entered the house and immediately headed for Wade's office. Joe had been studying the land maps lately, trying to figure out the best schedule for rotating the herds. He always claimed to know nothing about ranching, but he knew plenty. She intended to know plenty too.

Most of the watering holes were still fine, but some tended to dry when the weather warmed up. Elk Valley hadn't experienced a severe drought in almost three years, but this year not much rain had fallen yet. The hotter days wouldn't be long off, so they needed to plan.

Though Nate thought her interest silly, she liked to keep up with what was happening on the ranch. It made her feel more secure and a part of the family enterprise. She believed it important for her future to understand the way things worked in the ranching business, instead of just assuming she'd always be taken care of by someone else. She didn't want to be dependent on some man for her survival the rest of her life.

Not that she ever told anyone so in just those words. They might think her loony. Women had their place, according to most. *Bleh*. She intended to carve out her own place in life.

She pushed open the double doors of the office and was greeted by an empty room. "Not home." Joe had probably ridden to town or maybe gone out to help with the fence repair. A lot of their lines had recently been cut by rustlers.

Sighing, she pulled the pins from her hair. At the schoolhouse, after coming in from the wind, she'd tried to tame the tangled mass by putting it up, but her hair hadn't cooperated very well. She finger-combed the messy tresses as she studied the map of the south pasture spread out on Wade's desk. That's where they'd been grazing the horses the last few days.

"I always did love your hair down," a voice rumbled from behind her. "It's so beautiful. Almost as beautiful as you are."

Beth stiffened at the familiar tone. *Impossible*. Her heart began to pound and her breath caught. It couldn't be him. More likely one of the ranch hands being fresh, combined with her own riotous emotions of late, made her think she'd heard a voice not a part of her life in four years.

She turned to confront the man, wondering who would be so forward. She was an engaged woman, after all. Everyone knew it.

When her gaze landed on him, a small gasp escaped her lips and every muscle in her body clenched. Not a ranch hand.

"Hello, brat."

Shock paralyzed her. Her mind and resolve weakened so much that her legs wobbled and she reached for the desk to steady herself. She couldn't believe that, after all this time, Cal, the man she once thought she'd spend the rest of her life with, had actually returned home.

Brat, he'd called her. The endearment that Wade always used irritated her coming from Cal's mouth. He had no right to address her in such a manner after what he'd put her through.

"You were the one on the hill," she realized, speaking the thought aloud. No wonder she'd been haunted by his shadowed image all day. Her heart must have known.

"Yes."

Slowly, she approached him. Her legs moved like wooden logs in a muddy pond and a chill shimmied down her spine. She felt caught in a dream, or more appropriately, a nightmare. Why was he back? Why now? And worst of all—he looked fantastic.

His body had filled out better than she ever would have imagined—broad-shouldered and more muscular than she remembered. Swimming naked with him came to mind and she felt her sex throb with need.

His green eyes sparkled, making it hard to look away. The stubble on his cheeks and chin gave him a dangerous aura that appealed to her secret, naughtier side. He looked so strong, so handsome. Definitely too attractive for his and her own good.

One side of his mouth quirked up into a lopsided grin. "How are you, Beth?"

Now close enough, she slapped him hard. "That's how I am!" The sound of skin against skin echoed in the room and in her ears. Her hand shook and she lowered it to her side, hoping he hadn't noticed. "How dare you come back here?"

"Dang!" He winced and rubbed his cheek. "Well..." He backed up a couple of steps, out of her reach. "I suppose I deserved that."

Good planning on his part, since she felt like scratching out his eyes. She waited for him to stalk away, but he remained motionless. Apparently, he wasn't going to make this easy on her.

Even though she'd often fantasized about his return, now that he was actually here, she didn't know what to do, what to say, how to feel. His presence was too intense, her memories too strong, especially now that she'd started having doubts about her feelings for Nathan.

She tried to scoot past him. If he wasn't leaving, she was.

He grabbed her arm and turned her around. "I was asked to come," he responded, his voice low but completely steady.

Beth worked hard to control her breathing, her emotions. "Skylar," she whispered, knowing her sister was responsible for Cal's return.

How convenient. The timing certainly wasn't a coincidence by any means. Skylar had been harping on her for months, trying to get her to break up with Nathan. Her sister probably figured if Cal came back, he could convince her to call off the wedding. She wouldn't be able to run to Wade to stop Cal's pursuit if Wade was gone, so the planning of their trip had turned out perfectly.

She huffed out a frustrated breath. No matter her own convictions, her sister remained determined to interfere in her life. She was beginning to resent it. She did have a mind of her own, after all.

With Skylar gone for months, Beth couldn't even confront her sister about her meddling. She felt so frustrated she could spit!

"We don't need you here. I don't need you here," she amended. "Nor do I want you around. We've been managing—I've been managing—just fine without you. Head back to Chicago and the life you obviously prefer over this one, or you wouldn't have left here to begin with." She wrenched her arm free.

Cal's jaw hardened, as did his tone. "I'm not going anywhere. Not for a while anyhow."

She opened her mouth to snap back a response, but no words came out. What could she say? As stubborn as he could be, it wouldn't make a difference anyhow. She might as well argue with a mule. She eased her mouth closed and smoothed her skirt, trying to appear unaffected.

Fine. He wanted to stay. She certainly couldn't force him to leave. Joe would never allow her to order the ranch hands to throw Cal off the property. The hands did everything Joe said, even though Nathan was foreman and she was part owner.

She loved Joe like a brother, but he had more power around here than was proper in her opinion. Her own lack of authority on the ranch was worthy of a good foot stomp at times. Frustrating as hell.

For some reason, Joe always stuck up for Cal, as did Skylar. Wade was the only one who seemed to understand how she felt. Maybe because the two of them loved Cal the most. And had been hurt the most when he left.

Well, if he was determined to stay, so be it. She wasn't going to make it pleasant for him though, or let him forget what he'd done to her and everyone else when he'd left.

"How is your wife?" She practically spat the last word. "Did she come with you? Last I heard she was expecting." Her voice shook and she cleared her throat to cover the sound.

She thought she'd felt all the pain she could feel over Cal, but she was wrong. The hurt welled up inside her, as raw as the day he left her, as sharp as the day she found out he'd married and as devastating as when she found out Missy was carrying his baby.

If Missy had accompanied him, she didn't know how she'd handle being in the same room with the woman and their child. Maybe she could stay with Emma and her pa until Cal and family left.

A shocked look crossed his face. "She's not my wife anymore. Didn't anyone tell you?"

Not... *Oh*. Beth's heart began a dull throb. "Um, no. After you married and I heard about the baby, whenever someone brought up your name, I told them I wasn't interested in hearing anything they had to say."

"I see." His eyes narrowed.

At the news of his failed marriage, her thoughts raced and her feelings jumbled inside her. She wondered if everyone had known except her. Well, married or no, it didn't matter. He didn't matter. She wouldn't soften her heart to Cal. He'd hurt her too badly for a second chance.

Even as the thought tumbled through her head though, she felt her resolve slowly starting to slip. *Damn it!*

"I found out the baby wasn't mine. Just in case I piqued your interest at what happened."

*What?* That was the last thing she'd expected to hear. For a moment, she was struck speechless. She could see the pain in his eyes, thinking the child had been his, then finding out otherwise. "You sound certain about it." That meant his marriage hadn't ended until just recently, probably in the last two or three months from what she remembered about Missy's pregnancy.

"It wasn't hard to figure out. When the child was born, she had milky skin, red hair and blue eyes. I confronted Missy about it and she broke down and confessed to an affair. Several actually. She's not even sure who the real father is, though we suspect it's a local newspaper reporter. He believes he's the father anyhow."

A girl. Beth had often dreamed of having a little girl...with Cal. "Once a whore," she muttered, then immediately regretted her harsh words when she saw the shocked look on Cal's face. But what did he expect? She wasn't some innocent any longer. He'd taken care of that with his betrayal.

She hoped the girl ended up with her father. The child would be better off. She sent out a sincere prayer that the baby wouldn't end up like her mother.

"You have no other comment?" he questioned.

"What would you have me say?" She supposed she should feel some sort of sympathy for him over what had happened. But she couldn't afford to. She'd used up all her compassion where he was concerned years ago.

"I don't know. Maybe, 'I'm sorry, Cal, for what you must have gone through', for starters."

If the situation weren't so tragic, she'd have laughed at his ability to see into her thoughts. As if he'd heard the voice inside her head, knew she wasn't going to

sympathize and was determined to taunt her about it. Too bad he couldn't see into her feelings too. The black hole in her heart was an ugly thing and she shouldn't have to be the only one to live with it, especially since he was the one who'd put it there. "What you went through?"

"Yes, what I went through."

"You are one selfish bastard. You leave me, sneak out in the middle of the night, go marry some prostitute, then expect me to feel sorry for you because she cheated on you and had another man's child. Go to hell!"

Cal sputtered and coughed.

This time, satisfaction flowed through her at shocking him. But she hurt too. He had to understand that.

His face darkened and he started to say something but stopped and shook his head instead, as if not thinking it worth the effort. He moved toward the door, then suddenly cursed and whipped back around. "Apparently, you haven't been idle since I last saw you either. I hear you're getting married."

She bristled at his attitude. After what he'd done to her, he had no right to have an attitude! Did he expect her to shrivel up, pine after him forever, live life as a spinster? She raised her chin. "That's right. To a wonderful man. He's the foreman here. Smart and handsome. His name's Nathan Carlyle." She itched to ask him how he'd found out but held her tongue, figuring that was probably Skylar's doing too.

"I know." Cal snorted. "I've met the man. Do you love him?"

*They met?* "I'm marrying him, aren't I?" Why hadn't Nathan mentioned their meeting? He knew her past with Cal. Not everything, of course, but enough. Maybe that's why he'd pushed for the wedding to take place now. She always felt Nathan's displeasure whenever someone in the family mentioned Cal's name, as if he perceived the man a threat, even after so much time.

"I asked if you love him," Cal repeated.

"I heard you. I don't see how it's any of your business."

He strode over to stand in front of her. "It's my business."

The intense look in his eyes made her shudder, but she didn't weaken. Not so he'd notice anyhow. "Why?"

With no hesitation, he yanked her into his arms.

A gasp fell from her lips and she stumbled against his chest. "What are you doing?" She pushed at his shoulders. "Let go."

"No." He lowered his voice. "I care about you, Beth." He leaned close and whispered in her ear, "I still want you."

Her heart beat so hard she was certain everyone on the ranch could hear it. Her feelings switched from anger to despair to frustration and finally settled on sorrow as tears threatened to overflow her eyes. She felt her entire world was being torn apart.



The hurt that rose up inside her practically choked off her air. This wasn't supposed to happen. He wasn't supposed to come back. Ever. Even more distressing, she felt her body responding to his – his heat, his strength, his masculine smell.

She twisted out of his hold and stepped back from his reach. "You're too late." Her voice sounded surprisingly strong, considering her heart was breaking all over again.

"Am I?" He moved forward, backing her up, stalking her across the room, until she had no place else to go and stood trapped in the corner against the wall.

"Why are you doing this to me?" She looked toward the door, not really sure if she hoped for rescue or if she yearned to be ravaged by him while they were alone and she had the chance to taste his hot desire.

With easy movements, he lifted his hand and caressed her cheek, using a featherlight touch, as he might if trying to tame a wild filly. *Oh Cal.*

When she trembled, he smiled. "My touch affects you like it always has."

She'd never admit to that. "It only seems so because you're scaring me," she answered instead, with a slight hesitation. Her voice came out rough with emotion and she swallowed hard.

"It's not fear I see in your eyes, Beth." He leaned closer and his lips hovered just above hers. "Through all these years, I've never stopped wanting you. I thought of you every day."

"Even while you were fucking Missy?" she ground out, surprising herself at the vehement tone in her voice and her explicit language.

In a snap, he grabbed her upper arms and his eyes darkened. "Tell me you want me. I need to hear it."

"No!" Waves of long-pent-up desire crashed through her, as if the past four years had never happened. Oh, how she wanted to say the words, despite what he'd done! What was wrong with her?

She remembered their last night together, how their naked flesh felt pressed up against each other. She remembered her love for this man. Everything they had gone through together – the good and the bad – rushed back.

But he'd said want, not love. The difference was as vast as the distance between the ranch house and Night Water Canyon. She had to remember that. She wasn't about to make the same mistake twice with him. Even if he did declare love, how could she ever trust him again?

"I'm not some convenient diversion, Cal. Why don't you try Delia's place? Find another whore to replace the one you left. I hear Lanelle is still popular." Harsh, but the words just kind of spilled out of her mouth.

Cal's eyes hardened. Slowly, he released her. With turbulent emotions visible in his eyes, he raked his fingers through his hair. "You've turned into a bit of a bitch since I left, haven't you? One with a foul mouth too."

“A bitch—” The sound of the front door opening and voices in the hall silenced her, breaking the tension between them.

Cal hung his head and stepped back. “Hell,” he muttered.

Beth sighed in relief, so grateful for the reprieve that she didn’t even really care what he’d called her. For now. She’d said just as bad earlier when she’d called him a selfish bastard. Somehow, she had a hard time censoring herself around him.

Her family and friends, except Emma, would faint if they knew those words and more had come out of her mouth. They continued to view her as the sweet one who needed to be protected.

Well, Joe had acknowledged that she’d grown up. But Wade and Skylar treated her like she was sixteen years old. As if they didn’t trust her judgment in important matters. They loved her, but sometimes that love felt almost suffocating.

Even though the interruption had ended their confrontation for now, she knew Cal wouldn’t let up on her. Next time she’d have to be ready.

No matter what he did to try to convince her otherwise, she was going to marry Nathan. She was just having cold feet, which was natural. She could trust Nate. He’d sworn never to leave her, as Cal had. She needed a man she could depend on.

Loving Cal hurt too much. And love shouldn’t hurt. If she allowed her feelings to surface and he left her again, she’d never survive it a second time.

This wedding was for the best, for everyone concerned. Cal would just have to learn to accept her decision, whether he agreed with it or not.

## **Chapter Four**

Cal mentally cursed himself. He'd lost his temper and his control. He'd wanted to tempt Beth, remind her of their physical attraction for each other if nothing else. He'd ended up going too far, given he'd just arrived at the ranch. He'd practically forced himself on her and had talked to her worse than he would ever have believed he could.

Being in the same room with her, smelling her essence and touching her soft skin had affected him more strongly than he'd expected. All these years, he hadn't been able to get her out of his mind. And he knew now he never would.

Her feistier demeanor and attitude excited and intrigued him. She hadn't backed down from him but spoken her mind and in no uncertain terms. Not what he'd expected and he couldn't wait for their next private encounter. She'd certainly developed into one hell of a woman.

His need to strip her naked, physically and emotionally, almost overwhelmed him. He wanted to bury his cock so deeply inside her body and his soul so deeply inside her heart that she'd never even think of being with another man for the rest of her life.

A new bout of worry hit him, churning his gut until it hurt. Had Beth been intimate with Carlyle? Damn. The image made him sick, made him burn with jealousy and anger. He remembered her sensuality too well. So did his cock, which ached like crazy right now.

Had she shared her hopes and dreams with Carlyle as well, he wondered? Somehow that thought hurt even more.

He missed the special connection they'd always had with each other. Years ago, she'd put herself in danger trying to save his life and he'd done the same for her. That type of sacrifice forged a tight bond between two people.

He took a deep breath, knowing he had to get himself under control. No matter the past. No matter what either of them had done since he left, he believed they belonged together.

The plus side of all that had happened today was, he now knew she still harbored deep feelings for him. He'd seen the emotions in her eyes, felt the need in her responses.

No way was she truly in love with Carlyle, even if she'd fooled herself into thinking otherwise. His presence wouldn't have put her in such an aroused state if he'd been purged from her system by another man. He had practically smelled her desire for him clinging to her skin.

At the sound of a squeal, he turned just in time to catch a woman who launched herself into his arms. "Cal! You're home!"

The enthusiastic response from the once shy girl surprised him. He laughed and clutched her waist. "Emma. It's good to see you." Too bad Beth hadn't greeted him similarly. That would have been the homecoming of his dreams.

"Emma, please," Beth chastised. "Let him breathe."

Joe followed the excited woman into the study, a wide grin on his face. "I could barely contain her when she heard you were back."

"Look at you!" Emma's eyes shone with appreciation. "You're going to have every lady in town drooling after you. But then that wouldn't be anything new."

He chuckled. Cal was glad to see Emma and Beth were still friends. He set her down and studied the now grown woman. She'd matured into a real beauty. Her dark hair and eyes gave her a mysterious, sensual appeal. She didn't affect him like Beth, but he wasn't blind to her charms. He cocked an eyebrow at Joe who seemed to be admiring her from behind until he noticed Cal's stare.

Joe cleared his throat. "I invited Emma to join us for a welcome home dinner."

"I'll see if Nate can join us too," Beth added, looking more relaxed now.

Cal grunted. Eating with Beth's "new love" was not his idea of an exciting welcome home party.

As she started for the door, Joe reached for her arm. "I sent him over to Fox Valley to bring back some of that special feed Wade likes to use. We're getting low."

Cal hid a chuckle. Coincidence, or had Joe planned that? He had to wonder at the timing.

Beth looked from Joe to Cal and back again. "You did that on purpose, didn't you? Just to get Nate out of the way. Just to make things uncomfortable for me."

"I did it because it's ranch business." Joe's eyes hardened. "Don't ever accuse me of anything different. I don't like it." As if regretting his harshness, his stance relaxed and the tone of his voice eased, but only slightly. "Nate's not a part of this family...yet. He barely even knows Cal. This get-together is for him, not for you and your intended."

"Joe." Emma's hand on his arm silenced him.

Cal stepped between the two. Feeling the man's frustration, he loosened Joe's hold on Beth until his hand dropped from her arm. "Stop arguing. It's done and I'm starved."

"Me too." A smile spread across Emma's face. "Come on. Let's eat. Whatever Agatha is cooking smells delicious."

Beth looked oddly at Joe, frowned and then turned and caught up with Emma.

The women walked ahead of them. Well, Emma walked, or more accurately glided, as if on air. Beth practically stomped, grumbling under her breath. Cal couldn't help but smile. Yep, she'd definitely changed. Well, that was all right. He loved a challenge, especially a sexual one.

Joe lagged behind. When the women were far enough ahead, he spoke. "I told you to wait."

"I'm not the patient sort anymore." Confronting Beth had shown him her true feelings. If he'd waited, she would have had time to mask her emotions, get herself under too much control.

"How'd it go?"

"The wedding is still on."

Joe shook his head. "Well, I told you a simple talk wouldn't work. I'm sorry." He clapped Cal on the back.

"Don't worry. The wedding is still on. But the groom will be re-cast."

Joe's eyes widened. "Are you serious? Damn, you work faster than a gunslinger's bullet." A smile crossed his face. "I never would have believed changing her mind would be that easy." Slowly, his eyes narrowed and the smile faded. "Or was it?"

"Things aren't settled yet. But it's only a matter of time. She still loves me. I know she does."

Silence hung between them. Joe scrubbed a hand down his face. As they turned the corner toward the dining room, he let out a heavy breath and shook his head. "All right, what are you planning? I know you've got something going on in that brain of yours. You have the same determined tone in your voice Skylar gets when she's about to do something that Wade's told her specifically not to do."

"I intend to remind Beth of what we had together. Show her what she'll be missing if she marries Carlyle." All he needed was to get her alone.

"How do you plan to do that?"

He didn't hesitate in telling Joe. They were on the same side, after all. "I'm going to seduce her." And he intended to enjoy every moment of her sexual surrender to him.

Joe practically tripped over his boots. "Excuse me? Seduce her? As in get between her legs?"

"Crudely put, but yes. Now keep your voice down. Beth is mine. And she will be in every way. Come on. They're waiting for us. We'll talk about this later."

"You're damn right we will."

At Joe's words, Cal frowned. From the tone in the man's voice, he perceived a possible problem. Well, he'd take things one step at a time. Where it came to his and Beth's future though, nobody was getting in his way. *Nobody.*

\* \* \* \* \*

Carlyle strolled into the spacious dining room. Everyone was already seated at the ten-chair table, chatting and eating dinner. Cal sat at the head, with Elizabeth on his right. Emma sat on Cal's left, with Joe next to her. How familial. He felt like gagging.

Four sets of eyes turned toward him and widened. Silence struck the room.

What? Did he have two heads or something? One day soon, they'd be snappin' to attention whenever he approached. "Howdy, everyone." Joe had thought to get rid of him, but no way was he leaving town now. Not even for a short trip. Not with Cal here.

"I sent you to Fox Valley," Joe barked.

"I let Jameson go instead. He's sweet on a girl there and has been wanting to pay her a visit." Which was sort of true, in a round-about way, in case Joe checked on the story. More like Jameson was droolin' over some skirt from afar, but the excuse was close enough. Besides, he was foreman and had the right to send any man he chose. It didn't take a genius to bring back feed.

Elizabeth jumped up and hurried to his side. "I'm so glad you're here." She kissed his cheek.

He slipped his arm around her waist, sliding a glance at Cal, who looked stiff as a board. Satisfaction flowed through him. *That's right, buddy. She's mine.* "I figured there'd be a get-together and I didn't want to miss the party."

He squeezed her tightly, then walked her back down the table and held out her chair until she sat. After folding himself into the chair beside her, he reached for a dish of mashed potatoes and an extra plate. He felt everyone's eyes on him.

They hadn't asked him to sit and join them, but he didn't care. He knew they wouldn't throw him out and embarrass Elizabeth.

After dinner would be the perfect time to set his new plan into motion. He could hardly wait.

The food suddenly held no taste for Cal. Most of the small talk ceased. The mood in the room had definitely taken a downward slide.

Too bad. He'd been enjoying himself.

When they'd asked about the terrible Chicago fire that had destroyed nearly one-third of the city a little over a year after he got there, it made him feel like at least Joe and Emma were willing to move on without holding what he did against him. They wouldn't have brought up Chicago otherwise. Beth had remained disturbingly quiet as he talked about the fire and the devastation it had caused, though she'd listened in earnest. Now her attention was concentrated elsewhere.

The way she fawned over Carlyle made him sick. Even though he knew she was over-performing to make a point, he still didn't like the way she kept smiling at him, whispering in his ear, touching his hand.

He also didn't like the way Joe kept glancing at him, then at Beth and back again. Coupled with Joe's earlier words, he really wished he knew the man's thoughts. Maybe it hadn't been such a good idea to have told him his plans. But he figured he might need Joe's help to keep Carlyle occupied while he wooed Beth.

He'd soothe any objections Joe harbored later. He hadn't the time to explain before dinner and his plan had sounded more calculating and cold-blooded than he'd

intended. As if he was simply looking for a conquest to make a point or to gain control, which was as far from the truth as it got.

This was all so stupid anyway. He loved Beth. He'd never stopped loving her.

Out of fear and because of his own immaturity, he'd made a mistake. Granted it was a huge mistake. He'd hurt her badly. He'd destroyed her trust in him. But the love remained.

He would get her trust back, show her that he was the man for her. And prove to her that he'd never run out on her or hurt her again.

Beth pushed away from the table. "I'm through."

"Me too." Carlyle jumped up to hold her chair. "How about a stroll in the garden, darlin'?"

*Darlin'*. Cal practically choked on the word. The self-satisfied look on Carlyle's face, combined with the strange note addressed to him from Skylar that he'd found tucked under the pillow in his bedroom, told him all he needed to know about the man.

Well, maybe not all. But enough to suspect Carlyle wasn't everything he appeared to be.

Besides, he'd seen enough swindlers and gold-diggers in Chicago over the past four years to smell their scent a mile away. And Carlyle reeked.

Skylar had begged him in her note to do whatever necessary to make certain Beth didn't marry the man. He still wondered why she'd waited until now to tell him everything. Skylar held so many doubts about Carlyle that Cal knew she'd stand behind whatever he ultimately decided to do.

First on the agenda—he'd start snooping around to see what he could find out about the man.

"Yes." Beth smiled. "I'd like a stroll. That sounds nice."

Arm in arm, they left the dining room. Cal's head pounded painfully at the sight.

Emma patted his hand and her eyes filled with compassion. "I'm sorry. Not much of a homecoming for you, was it?"

"I need some air." He slid back his chair, laid his napkin on the table and left without another word.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth walked around Skylar's garden, holding onto Nathan's arm, admiring the colorful desert flowers and bushes her sister treated almost like babies. "It's a beautiful night."

Unfortunately, beautiful nights reminded her of Cal and their long-ago nightly swims at the pond. She pushed those memories aside. She'd be making new memories soon, with Nate.

Strange, she held no special moments in her heart of them yet. But then she was older now, more mature. Giddiness, private spots, clandestine meetings no longer filled her life.

"We're going to be breeding Midnight Run again tomorrow," he told her. "Do you plan on coming down?"

She wished. She really wanted to learn more about the breeding side of the business. "Wade doesn't like me down at the corrals during breeding."

"Wade's not here."

"I know, but..." She chewed at her bottom lip. "Joe wouldn't allow it."

"Joe isn't family. He can't tell you what to do. He doesn't own any part of this ranch. You do. I know he's a close family friend and Wade has given him a certain authority around here, but you should be able to do as you please without some man's permission. You're a grown woman, after all."

"Yes, I am." Beth raised her chin. He was so right. Squeezing his arm, she smiled.

"Besides, I'm the foreman here and I say it's all right. If any of the hands don't like it, they can deal with me." A smile of satisfaction crossed his face and he nodded as if that settled everything.

"Well, good," she replied. "I appreciate that." Nathan was always watching out for her. She felt so lucky to have him. Any doubts she ever had about their relationship were just silly and totally unfounded. "Maybe I *will* come down and watch."

Nathan's smile widened. Perfect. Watching Midnight Run breed always got him hot and hard. Maybe it would make Elizabeth hot too. And wet. He'd be sure to get her a good view, away from the ranch hands. Then he'd join her and once again try to get up her skirt.

Just thinking about the possibility made him erect and ready to fuck. He pulled her into his arms and held her luscious body against his. *Oh yes.*

"Nathan..." She glanced around, trying to push him away. "Someone might see."

"So?" He tried to kiss her, but she turned her head. "Damn it! What's wrong? We're engaged. We can kiss, for cryin' out loud!"

"Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad. I'm frustrated." He wanted to yell, grab her head, plunder her mouth, squeeze her tits, show her who was boss. But he couldn't do that yet. Not until he *was* the boss. And the rest of her family was dead and gone. Otherwise, he might lose everything.

"I'm sorry."

*Sorry, my ass!* He took a cleansing breath. *Stay calm.* He brushed a hand across her cheek. "It's all right. I understand." Sure, he understood...too well. Now that Cal was here, the bitch didn't even want to kiss him anymore. Oh, revenge was going to be so sweet. Once he got the little tease under him, he planned to fuck the hell out of her.



When he leaned forward to try to buss her cheek, he heard a growl. He glanced down and saw the stray dog standing beside Elizabeth, its teeth bared. "Get away, dog."

Elizabeth reached down to scratch the animal's head. The mutt stood fairly tall, so she barely had to lean over to stroke its light brown fur. "Shh, it's all right, Madge."

"Madge? You've named the thing?" And a stupid name too.

"We can't keep calling her *dog*."

Man, how he wanted to kick the mangy bitch dead! "You will come down for the breeding, right?" he asked Elizabeth, trying to ignore the dog, an obvious permanent resident around here now. "Promise me." Though difficult, he kept his voice low and controlled.

"I promise."

He released her. He had to go check out the corrals and the two barns and figure where he could take her that was private but still had a good view of the horses. "I'm kind of tired. I think I'll turn in for the night."

"Oh? It's not because I wouldn't..."

She looked at him, but her eyes didn't really reflect the proper amount of regret, in his opinion. He squeezed her hand, looking forward to squeezin' her naked ass tomorrow, if he got his way. "Really. I am tired. It's been a long day and tomorrow will be even longer."

He pecked her quickly on the cheek then scowled when the dog growled again. "I'll see you in the mornin'. All right?" The relief he saw in her gaze irritated him.

"All right. Good night, Nathan."

Once Carlyle was gone, Cal stepped out of the shadows. Dinner felt like a rock in his stomach and his head hurt from the tension he'd been feeling all day. "Well, that was a disgusting display."

Beth twirled toward him, her eyes wide. Her mouth opened, closed, then opened again. "How dare you spy on us!"

"You wouldn't even let him kiss you. That's love, all right." His voice sounded hard, but the fact that she'd fended off Carlyle's attentions gave him hope. Especially because he remembered how eager she used to be for *his* kisses.

The dog ambled over to him and sniffed his hand. He knew she was a stray. Joe had mentioned the dog at dinner, before Nathan joined them. Apparently she'd run off a couple of rustlers last week, which had finally endeared her to most of the hands. He scratched her behind the ears.

"I prefer to do my kissing in private."

"You didn't know anyone was here." He'd barely been able to hold himself back when Carlyle reached for her. He didn't want any man's hands on her, especially not that man's.

"Maybe I did know."

Cal studied her face and couldn't tell if she was bluffing or not. Instead of pressing her about it, he decided to change the subject. "So...you're going to watch the horse breeding?" Somehow, Carlyle had seemed too eager to get her there. The man was planning something. Cal was almost sure of it.

"What if I am?"

He shrugged. "Your choice. It's just not what I would have expected from you. The men will be uncomfortable with you there." An understatement. He watched as the dog lay down in a corner and curled up. Protective of Beth—he liked that. She was probably feeding the dog scraps to have gained her loyalty. *Madge* definitely had some wolf in her and seemed quite perceptive. She'd make a good addition to the ranch.

"Too bad. They'll just have to get used to it. For your information, I'm not the same person I used to be."

"Yes, I'm learning that." Cal slid his hands down into the front pockets of his pants and strolled toward her. Time to get some things into the open. "I'm sorry, Beth."

"You should be. This was supposed to be a private moment between myself and Nate."

"Not for that."

A wary look crossed her face. "For what then?"

"For hurting you." And he meant it. The last thing he ever wanted to do was cause her harm, physically or emotionally.

Pain slashed across her face. "Cal..." She shook her head.

"Really. I need to apologize." Clear the air between them. Finally.

"All right. I accept your apology. Can we leave it at that? I really don't want to talk about it anymore. I'm tired and it's long done. We need to move on with our lives. Separately. It's time."

*Like hell.* He moved closer. "You don't even want to hear my side?"

"Does it matter? I'm marrying another man and that's that."

"You don't love him, Beth."

"I really wish people would stop telling me how I feel!" She planted her fists on her hips. "I'm marrying him and nothing will change my mind."

He removed his hands from his pockets and raised one fist. A faded hair ribbon dangled from his fingers. "Do you remember this?"

A look of confusion crossed her face.

"That time in the barn..."

Beth gasped and her eyes lit up. Just from those few words, she remembered. It gave him hope.

"Our first kiss," she whispered, lowering her hands from her hips. "My first kiss. My first truly real one. I was wearing the ribbon and you pulled it out to free my hair."

"That's right." The kiss had meant as much to her as it had to him. He knew it.

"You kept the ribbon all these years?" Her eyes grew moist and she reached for the piece of blue silk.

He pulled it back, out of reach. "Yes. And you can't have it back. This ribbon is special to me. It's mine. I intend to keep it...always." He stuffed it safely back into his pocket.

"I don't know what to say."

He moved closer again, drawn to her, as he'd been from the very first moment he laid eyes on her. "I was stupid to leave like I did. I never intended to stay gone. I never intended —"

"Cal." She stopped him with a hand to his chest then snatched it back as if touching him hurt too much. "It doesn't really matter what you intended. You did it. I don't want to argue about what can't be changed."

"So that's it?"

"Yes, that's it."

He didn't believe her. He knew how she handled things. If she didn't let him fully explain, then she could keep him at arms' length. She was scared. He could see the truth in her eyes.

Leaning in close, he slipped his hand around the back of her neck and massaged the tense muscles there. "Don't fight this, Beth."

Beth pressed her hands against his chest and her eyes closed briefly. "Cal, please don't."

He sneaked a glimpse at the dog, afraid she might come to Beth's aid again, but the animal didn't even twitch. Moving nearer, he flicked his tongue against the corner of her mouth then swiped under her bottom lip.

Her limbs trembled and a sound of pleasure and pure need rumbled up from the back of her throat. She curled her fingers into his shirt.

Cal kissed the soft skin at her temple, letting his lips linger. "You belong to me," he whispered in her ear. "We belong to each other. Let me prove it to you. Tonight. Come with me to the pond...our pond." Their special place. The perfect place for a seduction.

She swayed into him, then pushed away and looked into his eyes. "I can't." She shook her head. "I can't." With a swift turn, she hurried away and disappeared into the house.

He stared after her. "Fine," he whispered. "But you will listen to what I have to say. You will accept my touch." A plan formed in his head and he smiled at his sexually wicked thoughts. "Get ready, sweetness. Your life is about to change."

From the corner, he heard a soft woof. He turned and chuckled. "Does that mean I have your approval?"

The dog's tail thumped the ground.

## Chapter Five

### *Daybreak*

Nathan caressed Elizabeth's cheek. She really was quite beautiful. More so than most of the women in Elk Valley.

Maybe he could have it all. Money, power and a gorgeous wife by his side. That wouldn't be such a bad life. He'd never had anything to truly call his own before.

When her face took on a dreamy look, he thought maybe she did care for him more than Cal Roberts and actually enjoyed his touch. But then he noticed her gaze was directed out the window of his cabin.

He turned to look. *Shit!* He should have known better. She was staring at her true love out by the barn. He appeared to be helping the hands with the horses, getting the mare and stallion ready for the breeding.

"Damn you!"

His emotions snapped and he pushed her backward, until she stumbled onto his bed.

Her eyes widened and he saw her fear. Good! He'd show her, once and for all, that no man compared to him. He pulled at the bodice of her dress, ripping the material.

She whimpered and slapped at his hands.

His cock throbbed painfully. He was determined to get inside her cunt before Roberts! No matter what *she* wanted. She belonged to *him* and needed a good, hard fuckin' to show the bitch her rightful place. His hands fumbled with her skirt and petticoats.

A clanging drew his attention.

He sat up and looked around. "Damn, I must have finally fallen asleep. What a dream!"

He'd been up most of the night, too restless to sleep. The clanging again filled the air and he looked out the window. Morning chow. Agatha was striking the triangle, signaling the men.

His stomach rumbled and he rose, more determined than ever to make Beth his and his alone. Especially now, after the dream, which made him realize how little time he probably had. He rubbed his crotch.

Once they married, if he and Elizabeth were actually able to forge some sort of bond and a life together, then fine. If not, well, he'd kill her off too, as originally planned.

By that time, he'd be wealthy enough to buy as many whores as he needed to make himself happy. Oh yes. Life truly was sweet.

\* \* \* \* \*

After a non-eventful and lonely breakfast—nobody had been around by the time he'd roused himself and gone in to eat—Cal returned to his room and once more read the note from Skylar.

He was lucky he'd found the envelope under the pillow when he arrived. If anyone else had found it or accidentally thrown it out, he'd be on his own and wondering if the rest of the family would support his actions or if both she and Wade would condemn him for interfering in Beth's life. Even though Joe had told him that Skylar didn't like Carlyle, that didn't necessarily mean she'd back *him* up and what he planned to do.

Now he had no doubts. His eyes caught on Skylar's words. Several passages she'd written stood out to him.

*Do what you have to...Keep Beth from marrying him...He's planning something evil.*

He wished she'd explained that last statement in more detail. Skylar had the uncanny ability to "see" things, to have truths revealed to her in her dreams. The ability had served her well. He'd seen the outcome with his own eyes, more than once.

*Keep Beth safe until we return.*

Damn straight he would. He trusted Skylar's judgment more than anyone else's. He would do as she asked. And not just because she asked.

Besides, regardless of Skylar's feelings or anyone else's, he'd have tried to stop the wedding, once he learned of it. Nathan did not love Beth. He could see it in the man's eyes. He desired her. But desire and love were two different things.

Something else was going on here. He just hadn't figured out what yet.

In addition to Skylar, he knew Joe and Emma were on his side. Pretty much. Joe didn't agree with his methods, or so he'd said, but he knew the man wouldn't stand in his way. They'd had a long talk after Emma had left last night. Joe had finally agreed to look the other way and not interfere.

He really wished Skylar and Wade were here though. He could use their help and support. Especially Skylar's. Working together, they'd have had this situation in hand in no time. But then, their trip had delayed Beth's marriage ceremony, so he supposed it had worked out for the best.

Why hadn't Wade put his foot down about this wedding?

Maybe he didn't want to meddle. Ordering Beth not to do something wouldn't have been a good solution anyway. She was so stubborn, even to her own detriment sometimes. If pushed, she'd probably end up doing exactly the opposite of what everyone wanted. In fact, if she encountered too much opposition, she and Nathan might even run away together. That would be disastrous. He'd have to be careful how he approached this.

Of course, maybe Wade actually did approve of the union. Joe seemed to think so. Skylar hadn't said, one way or the other, in her note how he felt.

He scrubbed a hand down his face and exhaled a heavy breath. Only a change of heart on Beth's part could stop the ceremony, for sure. He'd see to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emma sat on Beth's bed, nibbling a muffin. "I can't believe you're actually going to watch the breeding. It's unseemly."

"It is not. It's a natural thing. I would have thought at least you'd be on my side." Beth sat at the dressing table, putting up her hair. "It's just another part of the business, after all."

"I suppose. But if it were natural, the hands wouldn't need to get involved. Won't you feel embarrassed with all the men there?"

Emma's words rang true about the hands getting involved. But that's just the way things were done. "I don't know. I hope not. I'm sure it's not any different than watching other animals mate. It's not like we've never seen the act before."

"I know. But horses aren't the same as dogs or goats and such."

"Do you want to come?" She'd actually feel better with Emma there, so she wouldn't be the only woman present.

"Pa would have my hide. He's expecting me back at the office soon."

Disappointment filled her, but she didn't let on. She stared at Emma's reflection in the mirror. "You never did say what brought you all the way out here so early."

"Joe needed some more powder for those headaches he's been having, so I brought him a bottle. I'm kind of worried that he hasn't gotten over the pain yet. He refuses to come in to let Pa check him over."

Beth turned on the padded stool. "You do realize he's sweet on you, don't you?" She knew Joe hadn't had a headache in weeks. A horse had thrown him about three months ago and he'd busted open his head, but he'd healed pretty fast. She suspected he was using the fact that Emma's pa was the town doctor to his advantage. A way to see her more often.

Emma practically choked on the bite of muffin she took. "Sweet on me? Don't be silly." She blushed. "He's too mature to be interested in someone like me. We're just good friends. He's never said or done anything to make me think he wants more than that."

Maybe not, but Beth knew how Joe looked at Emma when she was looking elsewhere. It wasn't a look of lust—well, not only lust—but something much deeper. "He's not too mature." A little older was better in her opinion. An older man knew what life was about. "We're not schoolgirls anymore, Emma. He's only a couple of years older than Cal, I'm sure, if that. He hasn't done or said anything because I think you intimidate him."

"Me?" Emma's eyes widened. "That's ridiculous, Beth. He's had a lifetime of experience—travel, women. I saw him in town with Susan just the other day. They were

laughing and looked kind of...cozy." A frown crossed her face. "He was a gunfighter. He'd be interested in a worldlier woman than me."

"That's just silly. Do you hold his past against him?" Beth asked warily. She hoped not. Joe was a good man. He'd simply chosen the wrong path for a while.

"No. He told me about his life before he met you and Skylar. It's just, just..."

"What?" The fact that Joe had confided in Emma proved to *her*, at least, that he did have deep feelings for her friend.

She shrugged. "I couldn't possibly be enough for him."

The distraught look on her face convinced Beth that Emma too, felt more for Joe than she was letting on. "Just so you know, he's not interested in Susan. He was only helping her with some supplies. Since her husband Roy up and left her, she's had a hard time. You do like Joe, don't you?"

Emma eyed a blueberry hanging off the edge of the muffin, pretending an undue amount of interest in the sweet. "Of course."

"I mean as more than a friend." Beth leaned forward, hoping Emma would share her feelings. "Truth."

Emma looked over at her. She appeared hesitant, but then scooted to the end of the bed, closer to the dressing table and lowered her voice. "I—"

A knock at the bedroom door saved her from answering.

Beth sighed and sat back. She already knew the answer but had wanted Emma to admit it out loud. She'd love to see her and Joe fall hopelessly in love, like Skylar and Wade. Like she and... "Come in."

The door opened. Nathan stood at the entry. "Are you ready, Elizabeth?" He eyed Emma and a frown crossed his face. "You're not stayin' are you, Emma?"

Emma returned the frown then slowly stood. "No. I need to get back to town and help Pa with some patients."

Nathan visibly relaxed and an easy smile crossed his face. "Ah, that's what I thought."

"Nate, that didn't sound very nice." Beth popped up from the stool.

"What did I say? I know Doc Bray keeps busy."

"It's all right, Beth."

She hated that Emma and Nathan didn't like each other. Neither of them ever could explain why to her. Not anything that made sense anyhow. Just another problem to deal with. Why did life have to be so difficult? She followed Emma out the door.

Nate trailed behind them. She could feel the energy coming off him, an excitement she hadn't sensed before. All of a sudden, she felt nervous. No doubt from Emma saying that attending the breeding was unseemly.

How bad could it be? Skylar had been down a time or two.

There must be some reason why the women were generally barred from watching. Probably so the men wouldn't feel uncomfortable, she suspected. Well, that was just too bad. They were going to have to endure her presence.

Who knows? Someday, she might be running this ranch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan rushed Elizabeth into one of the barns. He'd thought his plans ruined when he saw Emma. That's all he would have needed, for her to tag along.

Many nights, he'd imagined both Elizabeth's and Emma's tongues sliding down his naked body at the same time. That would never happen in his lifetime. So best Miss I-Want-To-Be-A-Doctor—like that would ever happen either, except in her dreams—wasn't around to spoil things.

"We'll have a clearer view from the loft. And no one will run to Wade later. The hands will never even know you were here."

"The loft?" She twisted her hands, tangling her fingers. "I don't like sneaking around, Nate. Can't we just watch with the others? I don't care if Wade finds out. He'll yell, but he'll get over it."

With a hand around her arm, he tugged her toward the ladder. "It's not a good idea. It'll be distracting to the hands. Someone could get hurt. Besides, we'll have more fun alone." Fun. That was an understatement.

Damn, she smelled especially good today, like cinnamon and fresh fruit. He couldn't wait to taste her cunt and bury his tongue deep.

He'd been looking so forward to this that he'd barely slept a wink last night. Visions of stripping her bare and sinking into her, over and over, had kept him too hard to doze off.

Other than that short dream he'd had early this mornin', he'd stayed awake fantasizing. He'd almost taken his own hand to himself but resisted, wanting to be more than ready for today. "Up you go."

"Well...all right." Slowly, she climbed the ladder and he followed.

His heart pounded against his ribs. He felt his temperature rise and his cock swell in anticipation. Finally, he had her right where he wanted her.

Beth stood in the loft, watching the breeding below, out in the small corral. Star, the mare, balked at first, then seemed to calm somewhat, but was now fighting again, not at all pleased with the proceedings.

Midnight Run, with help from some of the hands, finally succeeded in mounting her. The stallion sank his teeth into her neck. The mare was making an awful fuss as he mated with her. The noise was deafening. Dust kicked up everywhere as the animals moved, tickling Beth's nose and clogging her throat.



The ranch hands clapped and cheered. They seemed to be having a good time and thought the mating a success, from the smiles visible on their faces. From the loft though, she really couldn't make out their conversations, beyond their occasional bouts of laughter and a few shouted instructions.

While she watched, Nathan moved up behind her. His hands glided up her sides, over her ribs. The urge to bolt was unexpected and overwhelming. Like Star felt?

Strange. She'd never felt like this when Cal touched her. But then she and Cal had never watched a mating together. Well, not one as fierce as this. They'd spied a couple of rabbits once, while out for a walk, but those bunnies had been cute. She'd seen other larger animals mating while with Emma or out alone. The horses though...

She knew if Cal were here now he would try to make her feel more comfortable. Like by telling one of his really bad jokes, or by making a game out of things, or encouraging her to talk. He always seemed to know what she was feeling.

Nathan grabbed at her breasts. With a low curse, she pushed his hands away, but didn't say anything more. He already knew how she felt about getting too intimate before the wedding.

Had she really changed so much? Thinking back to how wanton she'd been with Cal confused her. Especially because he still often filled her fantasies. Deep down, she understood why but didn't dare admit to it. Not even to herself, until she'd really thought through her feelings.

Nate pulled her back against him and rubbed his crotch against her backside. She wiggled away. He was doing that a lot lately, making sure she felt his need. It was starting to disgust her. Was sex all he cared about?

Although, since they were to be married, she should want him touching her. Right? He was handsome and sweet and caring.

But...something was wrong. She felt it in her soul and was beginning to understand it had nothing to do with her, but a lot to do with him.

"Quite an exciting sight, isn't it?" He rested his hands on her shoulders.

Exciting? Beth wouldn't use that particular word. Violent seemed a much better description.

"Horses know how to do it right," he whispered in her ear. He pulled aside a few strands of hair that had fallen from her bun and scraped his teeth along her neck, as if mimicking the stallion's actions. "Let me show you how it feels to be taken like that." His hands moved down to her skirt and he began pulling it up.

"What?" She felt lightheaded and couldn't seem to catch her breath. What was he doing? She clutched at her skirt. Why wouldn't he stop pushing her when he was well aware of her feelings about intimacy? Tangled in the dress's material, her fingers curled into tight fists, relaxed, then tightened again.

"I'll shake you to your core, baby. You won't be able to get enough. Bend over these bales of hay for me." He snapped open the front of his pants.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan pushed into her roughly from behind. *Ahh*. He was so hard from watching Midnight Run mount and mate with Star that he could barely contain himself. He pumped his hips furiously.

"Yes. More," she begged. "I love it! You know how to give it so good."

He squeezed then slapped her bare ass. "All you can take, baby." She was so wild once she got going, just like the mare. He wrapped her hair around his fist and gave her what she'd asked for. Fuckin' her harder. Faster. Until he stiffened and groaned, spilling his seed deep inside her.

"Oh yes." He collapsed next to her. "That's what I needed."

Lanelle snuggled up beside him. "So how come you're here, giving your all to me instead of blondie right now? What happened? You two have a fight or something?"

The memory sent a new level of frustration through him. Nothin' was working out as planned. He'd had to come to Delia's whorehouse in the middle of the day, simply to get some relief.

After Elizabeth ran out of the barn, he'd tried servicing himself up in the loft—spraying his milky *all*, as Lanelle called it, over the hay—but even that hadn't helped enough to settle him down. He'd needed a warm, wet and willing cunt to fuck.

"The stallion mounted Star and was going at her good and hard. Elizabeth stood there in the loft, really enjoying it, I thought, because she couldn't take her eyes off the action. When I touched her, she fended me off, but I still thought she might be willing. After I got my pants open, she pushed me away and ran like the devil himself were after her. I have no idea where she went after she climbed down the ladder. I was too hard to run after her. It wouldn't have done any good anyway, I'm sure. Better to let her calm down first."

Lanelle chuckled. "The breeding was too much for the darling?"

"I don't know. I guess so. She's such a cold bitch. When I finally do get between her legs, and I will, she'll probably just lie there like a dead fish." But that was all right. He'd train her to like it—like training a dog to come for its master. She'd come for him. Over and over. Eventually, he'd have her begging for his cock to fill every hole she had.

"Don't worry. I'll keep you warm and satisfied." Lanelle rubbed his chest.

"I'm countin' on that, at least for now." He smiled wickedly and pushed on her head. "Get down there and put that lovely mouth of yours to better use."

"Already?"

"I'm pent up like you wouldn't believe. Suck me good and deep and don't stop until I fill your mouth." But it wasn't Lanelle's mouth he was picturing in his mind. In his mind, a blonde-haired beauty was leaning over him, with her lips and tongue on his cock and balls, lickin' and suckin', begging to taste his seed and loving every moment of it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal stepped through the trees by the pond. He spied Beth sitting on a flat rock, her arms around her shins. Her legs were drawn up and her cheek rested on her knees. A huge sense of relief spread through him.

When nobody was able to find her, Joe had gotten worried. Since Nathan was gone too, he feared they might have run off together.

Cal hadn't believed that. He'd have felt it in his heart if she were gone. But he did feel something was wrong. So he'd decided to check the pond. If something upset him, this was where he would come. He figured Beth might do the same. Apparently, his instincts were still on target where she was concerned.

"Are you all right?"

Her head snapped up. "Cal. What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. You disappeared and didn't tell anyone where you'd be."

"Sorry. I wanted some privacy." She glanced up at the sky. "It's not late."

"No, but we were worried anyway." She didn't look as if she'd been crying. That was good. She hadn't yelled at him. That was even better. "Did something happen?" She seemed pensive.

"Not really."

Which he knew meant yes. He lowered himself beside her. "I didn't see you at the breeding." She must have changed her mind about going, for which he was grateful. She didn't need to witness that kind of mating.

"I was there. Nathan said we'd have a better view from the loft...in the back of the small barn."

Cal stiffened. Shit! It didn't take a genius to figure out why the man had taken her up there to watch the event. Secluded, cozy and a perfect spot to watch the action. "I see." He desperately wanted more details, wanted to speak his mind, but he didn't. She'd only draw away if he pushed.

"I couldn't stay. After Midnight Run mounted Star and Nathan—" She shook her head. "I've seen other animals mate. But this, it was all so...rough and violent." With a trembling finger, she traced circles in the dirt between them.

"It's not necessarily like that with people," he replied in a soft voice, sensing her conflict.

"But it can be." She looked into his eyes.

"Yes." He nodded. "It can be. Did Carlyle hurt you?" He was barely able to contain the level of his voice. If that bastard hurt her, the man was as good as dead.

Beth's eyes widened. "No! Of course not. He'd never hurt me. He just wanted, well—"

"Did he force you to do something?" Cal's fingers tightened into fists, first one hand then the other.

"No. Nate wouldn't force me into anything."

Cal relaxed slightly, though he didn't agree with her words. Gently, he took her hand and laced their fingers. When she didn't tug away, his heart soared and he felt like maybe they had a chance to get back some of the trust he'd so foolishly destroyed.

Looking down at their joined hands, she curled her fingers more tightly around his. "I just started thinking of the wedding and all." A blush crept up her cheeks. "I mean, when you and I were together, I always wanted..." She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I don't know what I'm thinking or feeling anymore."

He heard what she wasn't saying. She was worried about the physical aspects of being married. Probably wondering whether Nathan would be a tender lover or a savage one. Damn. A bride should look forward to being with the man she loved, not afraid of the bond.

But then he didn't believe she truly loved Nathan. Carlyle had manipulated her emotions for reasons known only to him. And she'd never really see that until faced with a love her heart couldn't deny. *Him*.

Slowly, Cal wrapped his arm around her. She didn't pull away and encouraged, he pushed on. Now would be the best opportunity he had. While she wasn't spitting mad at him. He rubbed her back. Resting his chin on top of her head, he softened his voice. "Will you come somewhere with me?"

Immediately, she stiffened.

He waited, but when she didn't relax against him, he sighed, knowing she wasn't ready to fully trust him again. Not that he blamed her. His words might even have been the same words Nathan used to lure her into the barn.

She pulled back and her eyes cleared of the sadness that had been there. Wariness replaced the look. "Where? Why?"

Too late to back down now. Besides, this was long overdue. At least she hadn't said no. He stood and tugged her to her feet. "A very special place. I think it's time I remind you of a few things and time you listened to what I have to say."

## Chapter Six

Joe paced back and forth on the boardwalk outside of Doctor Bray's office. Impatience rose and waned inside him like the whipping wind as he waited. "Come on, come on." He stopped and banged the bottom of a wooden support post with the toe of his boot as he watched the passersby.

The gray clouds that hovered overhead matched his mood. Gusts blew through without notice. The air had turned cool and moist. Another storm was on its way. Good for everyone's crops and watering holes, not so good for what he needed right now, which was nothing that covered or obscured tracks or evidence of someone's presence. Or anything that would cause people to seek shelter someplace they might not normally go, thus making his search more difficult.

He squinted against the swirling dust, cursing the additional gloom piled atop an already black day. "I should have stayed in bed." He knew that wasn't a good solution, but the fantasy of thinking so, even momentarily, felt good. When the door to the office swung open, he turned sharply. *Finally.*

He stepped forward, then hesitated and backed up a couple of paces.

A well-dressed woman he didn't recognize came out. She gave him a small smile and a nod of greeting, which he returned. He waited until she proceeded across the dusty road, then he moved forward and peeked inside the door. "Emma?" He felt as if he'd been waiting forever.

Emma stepped out, wiping her hands on a clean, white cloth.

Normally, just seeing her brightened his day. Today his troubles felt so great he didn't allow himself the luxury.

"Sorry you had to wait." She smiled. "It's been busy the last few hours. Just minor problems mostly, but they've been keeping me occupied all afternoon."

"That's all right." Not really, but it wasn't her fault, so no reason to make her feel as bad as he did. Distracted by his thoughts, his head turned and his gaze followed the people rushing through town. The one person he sought wasn't among them. "I was hoping you could help me."

"Sure. If I can. It looks like I'm free for a while now. What's going on?"

This place was getting too big, he grumbled to himself. It would be easy to miss her. Before long, they'd have near to eight hundred residents here. Too many to keep track of. He didn't know how folks managed in the big cities where thousands lived.

"Joe?"

His worry hovered close to panic—a feeling he rarely experienced. He should have kept a tighter rein on things. "Damn." He knew better.

"What is it?" She pressed her fingers to his shoulder.

When her delicate hand touched him, he realized he'd spoken aloud and she'd heard his curse of frustration. He cleared his throat. "Sorry." He turned his full attention to her, needing her help. She always knew how to keep him calm. And she might have some information. "Do you know where Beth is?"

"Not exactly. I mean, she intended to watch, um, the breeding this morning with Nathan. After that, I don't know what her agenda was. Maybe she planned to go by the schoolhouse. She's usually there sometime during the day. Certainly, she told someone at the ranch where she'd be. Agatha maybe. Is something wrong?"

Joe worked hard to keep the tension in his body from escalating. "She didn't show up at the breeding. Nathan didn't show up. And now Cal's disappeared. All their horses are gone too. And no one at the ranch knows anything. I spoke to the school teacher earlier. He hasn't seen her today."

"Oh goodness." Emma tossed the cloth inside the office and closed the door. "Well, I'm sure it's nothing to worry about. Let's take a walk through town. Maybe one of them is around here somewhere."

Joe nodded and they started down the boardwalk, side by side. A determined team. He already felt better. He didn't know how she managed to calm him so easily, but she could with just one soft look.

Even with everything going on right now, he had the desire to reach out and hold her hand. To reach out and do so much more. To forget everyone else, except the two of them.

Emma's light blush when she'd mentioned the breeding had touched his heart. Protectiveness rose up inside him. And desire.

He'd ached to caress her cheek until the blush faded away, or until he replaced it with a blush caused by *him*. Just to feel the tenderness of her skin, he'd walk through fire. Any excuse to touch her. The softness of her cool, creamy flesh would have helped him put aside the current troubles plaguing him, at least for a moment.

Those types of thoughts, of touching her, of taking her to some deserted cabin, stripping off her clothes and exploring every inch of her gorgeous body, had played through his mind often in recent months. In fact, his thoughts dwelled on Emma far too much, even affecting the quality of his work by keeping him distracted and he couldn't let it continue.

He wasn't the type of man she needed in her life. She needed a professional man—a doctor, a banker, a preacher. Someone respectable, who she could be proud to have at her side. Not an ex-gunfighter with no real future ahead of him.

If things were only different, if he'd lived a different life, a more worthy life. But that's not how things were and he couldn't change it.

But maybe he could help change the path Beth had chosen before she made a mistake that could ruin her life. "If anything happens to Beth..." he muttered, apparently not low enough to keep Emma from hearing.

"Happens?" Her voice rose to a tone that sounded very near distress. "You think...what? That Nathan might actually physically hurt her?"

He should have kept his mouth shut, but he had a bad habit of talking to himself when stressed. He tried to keep his voice light, so she wouldn't grow even more agitated. "Interesting assumption. How do you know I was speaking about Nathan and not Cal, or referring to something else altogether, like Beth falling off her horse maybe?"

"I doubt she'd fall off her horse, Joe. Besides, I know how you think," she answered, her voice sounding calmer.

"You do, huh?" A smile crossed his face. If she knew all his thoughts, she'd blush for a week and probably run and hide whenever he appeared.

Emma shrugged. "Well, I can guess."

He doubted it.

"It had to be Nathan you were referring to. Or you wouldn't have sounded so worried. Cal isn't a problem. Cal loves Beth," she continued. "Any fool can see that. He'd never hurt her. Well, not physically. Actually, not even emotionally—not on purpose anyway. Any fool can also see Nathan is just using Beth for...something. I'm not sure what yet. I just know that I don't trust him."

"Not quite any fool," Joe mumbled, the smile slipping from his features.

"Yes, well...I hope Beth comes to her senses before the wedding. None of this would have happened if Cal hadn't sneaked away like a thief in the night all those years ago. Beth was so lonely and hurt. She's still vulnerable, too vulnerable to accept the truth of how Carlyle is using her."

"I know. I think Cal regrets leaving and staying gone. In fact, I know he does." Joe stopped and peered inside Sam Carter's Mercantile. No Beth to be seen. *Damn*. He and Emma continued down the boardwalk.

"Yes. I suppose Cal probably does. I've seen his pain. I don't know why he did it, but I don't believe he left and later married to intentionally hurt Beth—even though that was the result. Thank goodness Wade and Skylar needed to leave earlier than expected for their trip abroad. Otherwise, Beth and Nathan might be marrying this month as scheduled or might already be married, if Nathan had his way. It would be too late for anyone to do anything about it."

Joe rubbed his chin and shifted his gaze toward her. "Actually...um, Skylar kind of manipulated that, so the wedding would have to be postponed. She figured it was the easiest and safest way to gain some time."

Outside the Crooked Trail Saloon, Emma stopped and turned toward him. She stood silent a moment, then burst into laughter. "Oh that's brilliant. Good for her! I'll bet she was the one who got Cal to return too."

He smiled. "You'd win that bet. It was hard to do, but she finally got everything to work out the way she wanted. Wade was planning the trip anyhow. Skylar just pushed up the date. She's really hoping Cal will be able to convince Beth not to marry Carlyle."

"I hope so too."

He was glad that Emma's attitude about Nathan matched his own. It felt good to be able to confide and share things with a woman. Sure, he was able to share with Skylar. But she was Wade's wife and he didn't want to intrude on that relationship too much.

His friendship with Beth was very brotherly. He always felt it his responsibility to shield and protect her, so he'd never opened up to her like he would with a confidant.

Talking to Emma made him feel lighter. She had that special way about her—a way of easing a man's load with one word or smile.

"Was Wade in on any of this?"

"No. Since Nathan took that bullet for him, he has a blind spot where the man is concerned. Skylar thought it best to leave him out of it for now. Until we can prove Nathan is no good. As soon as she found out that Cal and Missy were no longer married, she telegrammed Cal to come out here to take over the ranch while she and Wade were away. She arranged for an earlier departure, to prevent Beth and Nathan from marrying and then left Cal a note about the two, along with her thoughts. I was supposed to fill him in on the rest."

"Wait. He didn't know Beth was getting married when he headed out here?"

"Not until I told him, after he arrived."

"Why?"

"Skylar didn't want him reconciling himself to the idea before he got here. She figured to blindside him with the news so he'd act fast and out of gut instinct. If he had too much time to think on it, he wouldn't be as aggressive, she feared. Without Wade here, he'd be free to do as he saw fit, without interference. I'm not sure how wise that was, but I've agreed not to interfere either. Skylar also figured if she and Wade weren't here, Beth wouldn't rebel and marry Nate out of anger or frustration with Cal. She'd at least wait for their return."

"I don't know. Cal loves Beth so much. I think he would have ridden hard to get here, regardless. I doubt he'd ever have accepted her marriage without a fight, especially once he was no longer married himself. And I wouldn't count on Beth not rebelling. She could still change her mind and marry Nathan early, you know. Especially if she's feeling pressured not to, or feeling confused. You know how impulsive and hard-headed she gets at times."

"She promised Colton that he could be ring-bearer. She loves that little guy too much to disappoint him. Either way, Cal's here now and he's determined to get Beth back, using any means he has to. He's not giving up on her without one heck of a fight."

"Well, I hope he succeeds. Wade's not going to like all this deception though, when he hears about it. After what he went through with Skylar, honesty is so important to him now."

"I know. But as long as everything works out in the end, he'll get over it. I hope."



A man stumbled out of the saloon and Joe pulled Emma aside. Quiet settled between them as they started again down the boardwalk, glancing inside shops and other businesses.

They passed by Dale's Barber Shop and the Mule Deer Inn, still not finding Beth. Joe wouldn't be able to relax until he knew she was all right. Wade and Skylar would have his hide if anything happened to her. Hell, he'd have his own hide if anything happened to her. As they approached the end of town, he stopped in mid-stride. "Son of a..."

Nathan was coming down the steps of Delia's whorehouse, whistling like he hadn't a care in the world.

Emma sucked in a sharp breath. "I don't believe it."

"Carlyle!" Joe yelled, stepping off the boardwalk and stalking toward the man. "Stay there, Emma," he tossed back over his shoulder. He didn't want her involved in a situation bound to turn ugly.

A few feet from the whorehouse, Nathan stopped in his tracks. The smile on his face faded. "What do you want, Joe?"

"Where's Beth?"

He shrugged, as if in casual response, but his eyes held a wary look. "I don't know. She wanted to watch the breeding, but then changed her mind at the last minute. I don't know where she went after that. I'm sure she'll show up for dinner, if not before. Have you tried checking at the schoolhouse?"

Joe glanced from Carlyle to Delia's. Movement along the whorehouse railing caught his eye and he looked up. Lanelle leaned over the second-story balcony in a flimsy black robe, her breasts about to spill out, quite obviously listening to the goings-on. He'd bet that she was the one Nathan had gone to see. The woman was trouble, to be sure, with a long history of hate on her side, especially toward other women. Though men didn't seem to fair much better with her. She'd even gotten him tossed in jail once years ago with her lies. His gaze returned to the man in front of him. "Care to explain?"

"What?"

"Somehow I doubt your trip to Delia's had to do with ranch business." He normally didn't fault a man for indulging in some physical comforts. But once a man committed to a woman, he should abstain from such activities with anyone other than his intended, if she were willing to give herself to him. If not, then he should do without until hitched.

"Well, it *was* business, if you must know. I was looking for one of the ranch hands."

"Which one?" He doubted any of the crew would venture out to Delia's in the middle of the day. Nobody was off the clock right now that he knew of anyhow.

"Parker."

Parker? *Lie*. Just as he'd thought. Nathan was such a poor excuse for a human being. "Parker is fixing the leaks in the barns. I talked to him before coming into town."

"Oh." He hesitated. "I didn't know."

What a snake. "He said *you* ordered him on it."

"Hmm. Um, actually, I asked him to take care of it tomorrow."

"Right. And to take today off and go visit his family in Fox Valley but not to tell anyone about it. He told me everything. Setting up your excuse? There's no reason for you to be looking for him at Delia's if you told him to go out of town." He'd wondered at the odd tale when Parker related the incident to him.

"I, uh, thought maybe he'd stop here first."

"Why?" he swore he was going to put down this viper with his own poison.

Nathan shrugged. "He mentioned something about it bein' a long time since he'd had a woman."

*Nice try, but another lie.* "No he didn't. I guess you didn't know that Parker doesn't care for the ladies." Let him try to get out of that one.

Nathan's jaw tightened and he shifted, scuffling his boots in the dirt. "Fine." He glared. "I was just takin' the edge off. How's that?" After visibly relaxing, he smirked. "I'm sure you'd rather I come here than take advantage before the wedding."

"You're just full of excuses and lies, aren't you? So much for love."

"Don't judge me, Jackson. After the wedding, I'll be keeping Elizabeth tied to our bed...literally. I'm looking forward to givin' it to her so good she won't be able to walk for a week. That's love."

A growl escaped Joe. He felt like beating the life out of the man. No way was this marriage taking place. "You are one rotten apple."

Carlyle laughed. "Like you've never poked a whore or had a lusty thought." His grin widened. "But then I suppose you're gettin' plenty these days. I'll bet a doctor's daughter really knows her way around a man's body. Probably as good as any whore."

"You just went too far." Joe drew back a fist but missed Carlyle's face as Emma flew past him, out of nowhere and jumped the man from the side. They fell to the ground.

Her fists connected with Nathan's face and chest. "You are a vile, vile creature. And I hate you!" She pummeled him repeatedly.

"Stop!" Carlyle cried out and grabbed for her wrists.

Joe latched an arm around her waist and pulled her off before Nathan could get a good hold on her. He kept one arm around Emma's waist and pointed a finger at Carlyle with his other hand. "You're fired. And if I see you near Beth, I'll kill you."

Nathan scrambled to sit up. "You can keep me from Elizabeth, but you can't fire me!" He wiped the blood from his lip where Emma had split it open. "Wade won't allow it."

"Have you lost your mind? When Wade hears about what you said and did, he'll kick you into the next territory. If you don't believe that, then you can take your job status up with him when he gets back. In the meantime, if you set one foot on ranch

property, you'll be shot for trespassing." That was mostly an idle threat. The men wouldn't shoot Nathan—not fatally anyhow, unless he fired first. But they would keep him off the ranch if ordered.

Without another word, Joe turned and hustled Emma through the crowd that had gathered and took her back to her father's office. "Are you all right?" He grasped her hands in his and looked for bruises. Such delicate hands.

He should have torn Carlyle apart. The man seemed to have snapped, confronting him as he had and publicly insulting both Beth and Emma. Certainly, Carlyle had to know what the outcome would be. "I told you to stay back."

"I know, but I couldn't and I'm fine. Just livid. I wish that man would disappear off the face of the earth."

"I'm sorry you had to suffer his words." Carlyle'd had no call to say those things.

"Really, Joe. It's all right."

"No. It's not." He should have looked for Elizabeth on his own and not gotten her involved. Emma had definitely surprised him though. Not only had she bravely followed him, but she hadn't run away in humiliation at Nate's words. She'd taken up for herself and attacked the bastard.

He felt so proud of the once shy girl. She'd grown a lot in the last few years and had certainly become a determined, strong-willed woman.

Joe knew he shouldn't ask, but he couldn't stop himself. "Can you come back to the ranch with me? Cal and Beth may have returned by now. I hope, anyhow. At least we know Beth wasn't with Carlyle. She's going to have a fit when she finds out I fired him—until I have a chance to explain what happened. I could use some moral support. Beth will need some too, I'm sure. She'll handle things better if you're there. If you don't mind." He held his breath.

A sad look crossed Emma's face. "I'm sorry. I can't leave town right now. I need to wait until my pa returns from his rounds in case someone comes by the office needing care."

Disappointment hit hard, but he admired her loyalty to family and duty. "All right. I'll come back for you later then. Will that work?" He hoped she'd agree to that. He really didn't want to have to handle this situation alone.

"No need." She pulled her hands from his. "I'll ride out myself as soon as I can. Don't look so worried. It's all going to work out."

For the first time in quite a while, he actually believed that might be true. He tucked a stray lock of black hair behind her ear. So soft. "I hope so."

\* \* \* \* \*

Carlyle brushed the dust from his pants. He glared at a pair of townsfolk who were still lingering and seemed overly interested in his business. When he growled at the young couple, they scurried away. He glanced back at Delia's.

The balcony stood empty, but he'd bet Lanelle had witnessed his and Joe's entire confrontation. He'd been stupid to go see her in the middle of the day, he supposed. If *Beth*—he hated that name, which is why he always used her full given name—just would have cooperated. But what was done, was done.

He rubbed his chest then touched his cut lip. He winced and anger slowly built to fever pitch inside him. All his plans were ruined.

If Elizabeth found out about his visit to Delia's, she'd never marry him.

Once Joe caught him in the lie, he hadn't bothered to censor his words, intent on getting Jackson riled, just for the fun of it. He hadn't expected Emma to jump on him like she had.

Damn Parker for talking to Joe. He'd specifically told the man to hightail it out to Fox Valley for the day, but to keep it quiet so the other men wouldn't ask for time off as well. At least, that's what he told Parker was the reason for staying quiet. He'd then told him to do the barn repairs tomorrow. That gave *him* the excuse he'd need if spotted at Delia's. The lie had almost worked too. Hellfire!

The way Elizabeth felt about whores, she'd probably run right back into Cal Roberts' arms, even though Cal had done worse with a whore than just fuck her. Worse in *his* opinion, at least.

Unless he got to Elizabeth first and whisked her away.

That would give him some time and options, since she would have no idea about what had gone on here in town. He could convince her to elope, not take no for an answer this time.

Then he'd keep her away until he'd arranged the necessary "accidents" to get rid of everyone who stood between him and the Sinclair fortune. Yes, that would work!

Plans were already in motion for eliminating Wade and Skylar. Their trip had provided the perfect opportunity. Upon their return, amid all the chaos at the dock, a robbery would turn into murder. So simple.

Enough money could buy anything, even a person's death. And he'd be nowhere near the scene to be blamed. He'd recently finalized all the details, sending a coded telegram to his contact, who'd send a confirmation back after the deed was done.

Colton, the boy, was not to be harmed, but sold under the guise of adoption. He would live and he would forget.

Somehow, Nathan couldn't order the death of the child. Since Colton was so young, eventually the boy wouldn't remember who he truly was, so there would be no threat and no reason to kill him.

Then only Cal and an elderly grandfather in Chicago stood in his way. And Joe too. Though not family, Jackson would hunt him and Elizabeth to the ends of the earth, he was certain. He'd eliminate each of them, one by one.

Right now, he had to find Elizabeth and she could be anywhere. The flighty female.

First, he had a quick stop to make here in town, then he'd ride out. Joe would wait at the ranch for her at least until dinner before gathering the men for a search.

He'd lay in wait and grab her at Rock Junction before she got home.

Unless she'd already returned. Damn, he hoped not. Joe would tell her everything.

He'd rather not kidnap her out of her own bedroom if he didn't have to. That would make things messier. But if forced into it, he'd figure a way to do what had to be done. Then he'd lie his way out of what had happened today.

The "Parker story" would still come in handy if he could get to her before Joe did. She wouldn't know about the man's sexual proclivities, he was sure. Just his dumb luck. He couldn't figure out what would make a man shun women. He shuddered at the very thought. It just weren't natural, in his way of thinkin'.

He wouldn't have any problems convincing Elizabeth his story was the truth. She could be quite gullible at times.

"Spoiled bitch," he mumbled. The whole damn family was nothin' but a pain in the ass. Once he had Elizabeth under his control though, then life would be sweet.

## Chapter Seven

Beth and Cal stepped up to the four-foot-high entrance of the cave and peered inside. "Oh my," Beth whispered. She'd almost forgotten about these small caves along the rocks. She and Cal had taken refuge in one during a downpour several years back. "You really wanted us to come out here?"

"Sure."

That long-ago rainy day, Wade and Skylar had found a cave to shelter themselves in at the same time, while they'd been out searching for her and Cal. She knew they'd had a much more romantic time than she and Cal had. A small laugh bubbled up from her throat.

"What?"

"I was just remembering when we found Wade and Skylar that time."

Cal grinned. "Oh yes. That was an eye-popping scene. We interrupted at just the wrong moment." He winked.

She stared at him, her mouth open, then she pushed against his chest. "You know something!" She'd always wondered what had happened between the two in that cave. Skylar had been practically naked when she and Cal had stumbled upon them, but her sister never would reveal any details. That had been well before the two married and her curiosity still ran high about how far Skylar had let Wade get with her.

Rubbing his chest, Cal laughed. "Skylar didn't tell you?"

"Not a word." She'd thought of asking Cal if he knew anything years ago, but was too embarrassed at the time. She was older now and her curiosity outweighed any embarrassment. The way Skylar always talked to her about watching herself with men, she'd felt she had to live up to some ideal, even though she'd always suspected Skylar hadn't heeded her own words. At least, not with Wade.

"Well, you're going to have to listen to what else I have to say first, if you want to hear those details."

"That's so unfair."

"I know." Cal smiled then ducked and strolled inside first.

She followed close behind. Stale air and dust greeted her. The cave itself, after they got through the entry, was high enough for them to stand straight. The enclosure wasn't nearly as dreary as she'd thought it would be.

"Hopefully no critters have taken up residence in here." He searched the inside, poking in the dark corners with a stick he'd found on the ground.

"Careful." She shuddered at the thought of nasty bugs or rats or snakes. Any other small animal she could handle.

Glancing around the interior, she followed Cal's movements. Not much to see. Rock, stones, dirt, a few scattered twigs. Overall, not that much debris and cleaner than she'd expected. The entrance was large enough to keep the cave dimly lit, so at least they weren't surrounded by pitch dark. "Why did you bring me way out here?"

"Come on. All clear." He ushered her farther inside. "Memories."

Laughing at his wistful tone, she glanced at the markings on the walls. She couldn't tell if this was their cave, Wade and Skylar's, or another. Nothing familiar stood out to her. "Since when are you sentimental?"

"Sometimes it's good to stop and look back. Don't you think?"

"I suppose." Mostly looking back made her think of everything she'd lost. "Not much to look back on, in my opinion."

He glanced at her oddly and then a sad expression crossed his face.

"As far as the cave is concerned, I meant." There was plenty to look back on as far as their relationship was concerned. She could never deny that, no matter her feelings. "We should have marked the cave somehow, so we'd know if this was the same one we were in."

He nodded, his expression slowly easing and moved deeper within the interior. "I can't tell. They all pretty much look alike, I imagine."

Beth thought back to that rainy Sunday afternoon, so long ago. He'd been a perfect gentleman when they'd taken shelter in the cave. Sometimes she wished he hadn't been. Maybe then he'd have been more enticed to stay in Elk Valley.

Losing the man she loved to a whore had been a bitter and heart-wrenching experience. Especially since Missy so closely resembled her.

Maybe Cal hadn't realized back then how much she'd wanted him and how easily she would have given herself to him, though she found that hard to believe. He had to have known. *He did know!* She needed to stop making excuses for him.

Their last night at the pond, she'd been more than willing. Ultimately, he was the one who had convinced her they needed to wait. She'd been disappointed, but thought he'd been looking out for her and her reputation.

Maybe he'd simply desired Missy more, even back then. She had no idea if they'd ever spoken or even knew each other, but it was probable since Elk Valley was quite small back at that time and he had been in Delia's more than once, looking for Wade, before he and Skylar married. Or so Cal had said that's why he'd been there. She only knew of Wade being there once and Cal hadn't found him that time. Well, twice. She'd been with him once, looking for information. She often wondered if Cal had ever actually found Wade in the whorehouse when he went there and if so, what Skylar thought about it, or if she even knew. Those kinds of women held all sorts of secrets to satisfying a man. Secrets she'd probably never know.

"It seems a lifetime ago when we were last here," he said, glancing back at her.

He was right. The memories of her life, after her mother died and her father left, played through her mind. In the beginning, surviving had been hard. While struggling to keep the now-destroyed homestead, Skylar had always proven so strong. Unlike herself, who'd acted pretty spoiled, unwilling to accept the situation for what it truly was.

Then Joe had come to town, looking for a job. He'd helped them out when no one else would. After he left, Wade and Cal had ridden in and their lives had changed forever. Joe had finally returned and decided to stay and then Cal had gone.

So much upheaval with the men in their lives.

She'd thought Nathan would be a stabilizing force. He'd promised her that he would be, after she'd explained some of her past to him. Now she was having doubts. When everyone she loved held the same opinion of the man, except Wade, it became hard not to listen.

Nathan had always been good to her though, for the most part. Sure, he'd been pressing the physical aspects of their relationship lately and sometimes she caught him staring at her strangely, or ogling other women. But she dismissed those things as minor. As far as she knew, he'd never betrayed her as Cal had.

Maybe after Cal, she just didn't expect as much from a man anymore. And maybe that was wrong on her part. She didn't know.

She and Cal looked around the cave in silence. He seemed lost in his own memories, as much as she was in hers. "A lot's happened in the last few years," she whispered, more to herself than him.

"Too much," he replied, also in a low voice.

Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Cal returned to the mouth of the cave and peered out. "I think we're stuck here for a while. The storm is coming in fast. A fierce one. I can feel the energy in the air. Better not to get caught out in it."

A streak of lightning drove his suggestion home.

"Well, dang." Beth rubbed her arms. "How long do you think we'll need to wait? This place isn't exactly set up for comfort."

"No telling. We'll make do." He set his rifle aside, then took off his jacket and spread it on the ground. "You know this is now part of my land? I should see to clearing some of it and building a place." He indicated his jacket. "Sit down and get comfortable."

She'd almost forgotten Wade had given Cal a good portion of the land several years ago, before Cal had taken off for Chicago. She looked down at the jacket. "On the ground?"



"Unless you'd rather stand for who knows how long. You don't need to stay afoot, Beth." He smiled. "I won't jump you." He wagged his eyebrows. "Unless you want me to."

"Funny." The mixture of relief and disappointment that went through her felt strange. She and Cal had always been so comfortable together. He seemed almost like a stranger at times now. He wasn't the same carefree young man he'd once been. Life had made him more reserved or something. She couldn't quite pinpoint the change. All she knew for certain was that he was different, though she still saw glimpses of the open, sweet Cal she'd once known behind his gorgeous green eyes.

He sat and held out his hand to her. "Come on down."

Without taking his hand—touching was not a good idea—she sat on the jacket next to him. Her shoulder brushed his, but she ignored the contact. "What are your plans, Cal?" He'd mentioned building a home. She had assumed he'd return to Chicago after Wade and Skylar came back from their trip.

She wasn't sure how she'd handle him being near on a permanent basis. "Are you really going to build on this land? I didn't even know the property line extended this far." She wasn't quite certain that it actually did. She didn't remember seeing the property edge this low down on the maps. She'd need to recheck that. If so, their land holdings were even vaster than she'd realized.

The steadiness of her voice, as she so casually asked him questions, surprised her, but she didn't want to argue with Cal anymore. It was all too draining. She wanted to move on with life. To do that, she needed to know his intentions but also needed to calmly handle whatever choices he made. Somehow.

"My plans are to get you to listen to me."

"That's not what I meant and you know it." She didn't want to discuss the past. She had no control over that, but she did have control of her future. "I asked about the land."

"I know." He reached out and touched her hand, curling his fingers around hers. When she tugged against his hold, he refused to release her. He looked into her eyes. "I want to talk about something more personal."

That's what she feared. Not much she could do to stop him while trapped here, so she was pretty much forced to listen, whether she liked it or not. Unfortunately. *Stay in control.*

"I can't change what I did, Beth, though I wish I could."

Why couldn't he let it rest? The past was over and done with. They were two different people now, heading in two different directions in their lives.

"You're cold." He moved closer and wrapped one arm around her, drawing her into the warmth of his body. "Sorry there's not enough on the ground in here to make a fire with."

Beth didn't fight him. She simply didn't want to anymore. *Two different people*, she repeated in her head, trying to convince herself. So why did he feel so good to her? So right. She closed her eyes briefly. "Cal..."

"Just relax. We have to keep warm. Besides, I know you like to snuggle."

"Not with you."

"Since when? No, don't answer that." He sighed and held her closer, rubbing her arm. "You know, your old burnt-up cabin was supposed to be ours when we married. I was going to rebuild it." His voice sounded sad, full of regret.

"Things changed." The cabin was long gone. Destroyed. Just like their relationship was destroyed.

"They can change again." He turned more fully toward her. "I admit that I messed up badly. I wasn't ready for where we were headed back then. I made a lot of mistakes. I don't even know now how I could have made the choices I did. Things just got so complicated so quickly. I tried to do the right thing, but it all turned out wrong. Please forgive me. We deserve another chance."

The right thing? How could leaving have been the right thing? At the pleading look in his eyes, tears welled up in her own, then spilled over and rolled down her cheeks. So many emotions hit her at once. He wanted another chance? To do what? Hurt her again? He'd said earlier, *when we married*. Not *if*. That told her a lot.

Still... The funny thing was—or maybe the sad thing—he'd never told her that he loved her. Not now and not even years ago when everyone, including herself, assumed he did. Maybe he never really had, or not enough anyhow.

Why he wanted her back now, she didn't know. Maybe he just wanted a place to belong after all the turmoil in his life. Or maybe he simply didn't want anyone else to have her. She didn't know what to think anymore where Cal was concerned.

He wiped her tears away and lightly kissed her brow. "Don't cry. It tears me up inside. Especially when I know I'm the cause."

"Yes, you are the cause. You tore *me* up inside long ago. And it's something I can't forget."

Cal's heart sank. What more could he say? "I know. I was stupid. I should have talked to you about my feelings instead of acting so hastily and leaving like I did."

Beth scooted over, putting a couple of inches between them.

He had really believed he could change her mind about them. He'd believed their feelings for each other were strong enough to get past anything.

Maybe he'd been wrong.

"So that's it then? There's no hope for us?" The need to do something more to sway her decision gripped him hard, but he didn't know what to do.

She clasped both hands in her lap, holding them so tightly her knuckles turned white. Looking down, she didn't respond.

His life, his only hope for happiness, was over. And it was his own fault. He couldn't even blame Carlyle. *He* was the one who'd run like a scared child all those years ago, when things got too serious too fast for him to deal with.

He'd needed space and time to think. Then instead of returning home when he should have, he'd made one mistake after another, until his present and future were in shambles.

Well, if everything he'd ever dreamed of having was lost, then he had nothing else to lose. Did he? He could continue to let circumstances and past concerns ruin his life, or he could take control like he should have long ago. Like he'd intended when he headed back here from Chicago. He reached over and lifted Beth's chin, angling her head to his advantage.

"What—"

Leaning toward her, he covered her lips with his.

She pushed her palms against his chest, but only for a moment. Then her fingers curled into the material of his shirt and she kissed him back. A sound of surrender vibrated in the back of her throat and he took full advantage.

His tongue swept past her lips to claim the sweet, hot recess of her mouth. Nothing had ever tasted so good. His kiss started as a desperate means to get her attention, to distract her from her troubling thoughts of the past and to stake a claim for the future, as primitive as that sounded.

No matter her words, he knew, deep down, her feelings matched his own. If she could just get past her fear, anger and disappointment over what he had done and trust him.

Despite all her protests, she responded to him like a woman starving for a man's touch, his touch. As their tongues mingled, the kiss slowly changed from hunger to something tender and heart-melting.

He pulled back and nuzzled her cheek. "Nobody makes me feel like you do," he whispered.

She looked stunned.

He felt stunned. She was the only woman who could make him totally lose his ability to think. His gaze followed her tongue when she licked her lips, as if she still tasted him. He groaned at the sight, imagining her tongue tasting other parts of his body beyond his mouth.

When her eyes began to clear and it looked like she was regaining control of her senses and about to pull away from him emotionally, he leaned in and kissed her again with all the tenderness and desire he felt for her in his heart.

From here on out, he would have no regrets of opportunities missed.

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan glanced up at the rain. He hated the rain. It was a damn inconvenience most of the time.

But the thunder and pelting sheets drowned out a lot of noise, so a storm was to his advantage today. He knocked on the sturdy wooden door and waited.

His lip throbbed and his chest still hurt. Nobody got away with making him look like a fool. Those days were long gone.

The door swung open. Emma stood at the entry. Her eyes darkened and a frown crossed her face. "What do you want? I'm not treating you, if you're hurt. And my pa is out right now. If you really feel the need, go see the barber. He fancies himself just as good at healing folks."

He shoved her backward and stalked into the office. "You're the one I want." He slammed the door behind him and turned the lock, clicking it into place.

"What the heck do you think you're doing, Nathan?"

He back-handed her across the face, sending her tumbling to the floor. "Payin' you back, bitch."

"Ah!"

Before she got her wits about her and while still on her knees, he grabbed her arm in a bruising hold and pulled her up by the hair with his other hand. When she attempted to scream, he released her arm and circled her throat with his hand, so only a choked gurgle came out. "If you make a sound, I'll shoot you right in the heart and make it look like a robbery gone bad."

He almost laughed at the way her eyes bugged out. He loosened the hold on her thick hair and let his hand drift down her back to her shapely ass. She jerked, but he held her throat tightly. "Joe's a lucky man. I bet you're one sweet fuck. Tell me," he whispered in her ear. His tongue darted out to graze her lobe. "Do you suck his cock like a good whore? Do you swallow every drop of his seed? I'd bet my monthly wage that you do. How many men have you fucked or gone down on your knees for?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw her hand come up. Something crashed over his head before he could do anything to stop it. A glass container. "Argh..." He released her and staggered around the office, reaching out for purchase. He felt a trickle of blood run down the side of his face.

Emma ran toward the door. "Help!"

Rushing after her, he stumbled but managed to grab the back of her dress. He hauled her up against him. "You just sealed your fate." He pushed her over the examination table and pulled up her skirt. "Let's see how you like my cock pounding your nasty cunt, you little tease." He tugged on her pantalets.

"No!" Her elbow jerked back and caught him on the chin.

Stars danced in front of his eyes. "Damn it!" He knocked her to the floor and drew his pistol. "You're trouble, pure and simple." He tugged open the front of his pants.

"Get your clothes off, bitch. Now!" He felt his cock swell. "I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget."

"I'll kill you before I let you touch me!" She reached up and grabbed a surgical knife from a nearby table. "I'll cut it off if you get near me, Nathan. I swear!"

"Emma?" The knob to the office door jiggled, then a key scraped in the lock.

"Papa!" Emma scrambled to her feet and ran to the door.

Damn it. Nathan fastened his pants and took off out the back. He hadn't finished what he'd wanted to do to her, not having expected such defiance and fire from her, but he'd take out his frustration on another tease. A blonde-haired one.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth sighed against Cal's lips. She still loved him. Nathan had been a poor substitute and nothing more. She could protest otherwise aloud, but she couldn't lie to herself. Now what was she supposed to do about it? Putting their relationship back together after everything that had happened wouldn't be easy.

Cal's lips slid across her cheek and down to her neck. A jolt of desire speared through Beth. Her arms slipped around his waist. He felt so solid and warm and he excited her more than any other man.

His tongue swept across the pulse in her neck and she moaned at the contact, feeling his touch all the way down to her toes. She leaned back against the cool rock wall to give him greater access to her flesh. Somewhere in the back of her mind she knew they shouldn't be doing this, but reason and good sense fled the moment his mouth touched her.

Here in the cave, nothing mattered except the two of them. They seemed in their own private little world. Besides, life was so short and she'd seen so much tragedy. How could she not attempt a grab at true happiness one more time?

His fingers fumbled with the small line of buttons on the front of her dress.

A gasp, somewhere between shock and desire, caught in her throat.

"Shh..." he whispered against her skin. His mouth moved across the swell of her breasts.

At the touch of his lips, hot throbbing need spread throughout her body. Her heart raced as if she'd just run a mile. How could she feel so much from one touch of his lips? She didn't know, but she wanted to feel more. "Yes, oh yes," she murmured.

His fingers moved faster, opening button after button.

Before she knew it, he was pulling at the ties of her chemise. "Cal..."

He looked up and their gazes locked. His breathing was just as heavy as hers. She'd never seen so much desire in a man's eyes. His hand edged inside the chemise a little at a time, until finally he cupped her breast. Her bare breast.

At the warmth of his hand against her naked skin, she let out a whimper. She'd wanted his touch for so long.

He didn't move or speak, nor did he look away. His eyes dilated and grew more intense as his thumb brushed her hardening nipple. Once. Twice.

To stop from crying out in pure pleasure, she bit her bottom lip. Moisture gathered between her thighs. She craved to strip Cal naked, to feel his bare skin beneath her fingers.

His gaze dipped down. Slowly, he pulled open the chemise, exposing her breasts to his view. "Beautiful."

The husky sound of his voice thrilled her. She tried to speak, but nothing came out. All she could do was arch toward him in a silent plea for more of his tantalizing touch.

*Oh yes.* She wanted this. Cal smiled. He leaned over Beth and kissed the skin between her full breasts. His fingers gently caressed the soft, creamy flesh. He'd dreamed of this too many times to count.

Gently, he guided her down to lie flat on her back. He nuzzled his way up one breast, hoping she wouldn't push him away. His tongue eased out and he licked her rosy nipple.

"Ah!" Her fingers tangled in his hair.

His lips closed over the wet nipple and he began to suck, tugging lightly on the bud. *Delicious.*

"Oh, Cal." She pressed up against him. "Don't stop."

Giving her pleasure, and knowing she loved it, made him feel closer to her heart. He knew she'd never allowed Carlyle to touch her like this, by the way she'd pushed him away in the garden. He'd bet no other man had ever touched her like this either, which made him feel privileged and powerful. She trusted him enough to allow his intimate touch. Now if she'd only trust him enough to let him hold her tender heart.

He shifted uncomfortably. His cock ached for release, but that wasn't an option. Yet. He didn't want to scare her off.

Still, if he could show her how right they were together, maybe she'd rethink her decision and give them another chance at a future together. Demanding more of a physical response, he lapped and sucked at her nipple, grazing his teeth along the tip.

She squirmed and mewled beneath him.

His hand slid down inside her dress to rest lightly on her stomach. His mouth reluctantly left her breast to cover her lips in a searing kiss. Now to see just how much pleasure she'd allow him to give her. Barely moving, his hand slipped lower until his fingers eased inside her pantalets.

She made a little sound against his lips, but she didn't push him away or protest in any way. In fact, she arched her hips. His heart rate increased, as did his excitement. So damn sexy!

Taking advantage of her need, he eased his fingers lower. His tongue played with hers as his hand continued to descend until his fingers tangled in her silky curls. Soft, warm, moist.

Making small sounds of need now, she clutched at his shirt.

As his hand cupped her, he broke the kiss and looked into her eyes. "Beth?" The question hung between them, the sexual tension in the air high.

"Touch me," she whispered, desperation in her voice. "Inside."

At her words, he about choked. Before she changed her mind, he pushed his finger past her soft curls and touched the hidden fleshy bud between her legs.

Her eyes widened and she trembled. "Ohh..." Without hesitation, she spread her thighs. "Cal, yes. Stroke it."

His heart pounded so hard now he thought his chest would explode. His finger caressed her—softly, slowly. He wondered if she'd ever done this to herself. Maybe while thinking of him. A tantalizing thought. He licked her lips. He intended to give her a climax she'd remember for a very long time.

Something tugged at Beth. Deep within her. Something powerful. She felt so wanton, lying there on her back, with her breasts exposed and Cal's hand between her spread legs.

She liked his touch. No. More than that. She loved his touch and the feelings coursing through her body.

An intense sensation of pleasure built within the sensitive bud as he caressed her. Growing, spreading. They stared into each other's eyes and she held onto him, knowing something special was happening.

He leaned down and licked her lips, his tongue stroking her in the same rhythm as his finger until she imagined his tongue between her legs, licking her with abandon. The wickedly sexual image caused a sob of need to escape her.

Cal looked into her eyes. "I love you, Beth," he whispered.

*I love you.* The words she'd longed to hear from him for so many years. Her heart exploded. Her body exploded. Ecstasy shot through her and she cried out, arching her back.

"Cal!" Her fingernails dug into his arm. She'd never felt so much physical pleasure in her life. The tremors rolled through her over and over again.

He continued caressing her, continued to gaze into her eyes, until the last wave left her and she relaxed, totally spent.

A small smile crossed his face. "You are so gorgeous." He leaned down and softly kissed her lips. "That's how I'll make you feel every time, if we're together."

"Promise?" She felt closer to Cal than she had in years, closer to him than anyone. Her path in life seemed so clear to her now, as it had so many years ago.

His eyes grew serious as his hand skimmed over her thighs. "Do you still love me, Beth? I need to know what you're feeling right now. It's important to me. And to our future."

"Yes, Cal. Yes, I do," she answered without hesitation and pulled him down for a deep, lingering kiss.



## Chapter Eight

Carlyle spotted two saddled horses outside the small caves located along a line of rock formations on the edge of the Sinclair property. He recognized the geldings and the markings on the saddles. Cal and Elizabeth. They must have taken shelter inside.

He would do the same. Rain rolled off his hat and a strong wind whipped right through him. Shivering, he suddenly felt very tired and soaked to the bone.

The memory of teaching Emma a lesson invigorated and warmed him less than he'd hoped, less than if his visit to her had been more successful. He hadn't the time he'd wanted to teach her how to treat a real man, damn it. How to show a man some true respect!

At first, he'd only intended to smack her around a bit for what she'd done to him in public. But after getting close, tasting her fear and having her at his mercy, well...fuckin' her would have been the best revenge, the ultimate show of dominance over the little bitch. And the perfect way to stab Joe right in the heart.

His cock still twitched every time he thought about how great it would have felt to stick her cunt hard and deep or maybe even shove his huge cock right up her ass. He chuckled, thinking about her luscious backside impaled on his shaft. *Oh yes. One of these days when she least expects it, I'll reappear and take her good.*

Even if she told everyone what he'd tried to do at the clinic, it wouldn't matter. He planned to be long gone before any of them could confront him. Later, he'd return to finish the job.

And now that he'd found Elizabeth, they'd be able to leave Elk Valley even earlier than he'd originally expected. His plans were still salvageable.

Roberts might be a problem. If he could get Cal homebound peaceably, without Elizabeth, things would go easier. But if not, as he suspected, he'd just shoot the skirt-chaser and take Elizabeth forcibly.

That would be one family member out of the way. Except if he killed Cal now, his other plans might fall through. And Beth would be a lot harder to control.

He didn't want Wade and Skylar returning sooner than expected. If he fatally shot Cal, and Joe managed to get a message to them, they would be on the next ship home. Nor did he want Wade arranging for a new will to the inheritance while still in Europe just to foil him, if Joe or someone else figured out his plans. He also didn't want the grandfather showing up in town, feeling he might be needed here.

Most of his plans would need to be reworked if he deviated now. It would be easier to kill everyone and deflect his own involvement if their accidents happened in different cities and as originally planned.

He figured as long as nobody died right now, Joe wouldn't contact Wade and Skylar or the grandfather. He and Cal would try to handle things themselves, so his murder plans for the other Sinclairs could still be carried out on schedule. Everyone going in the right order was the key to his plan's success.

He knew a man in Fox Valley who could get him medication to control Elizabeth. After her family was finally dead and gone, nobody would even question their right to the Sinclair fortune. He could probably even claim it himself, as long as he had a marriage license and a signed paper from her—which could easily be coerced. He'd have to find out the particulars from a lawyer at his first opportunity.

If not, if she had to appear in person to claim the inheritance, that was all right too. She'd be alone, with only him to cling to. She wouldn't be a problem, especially once he got her hooked on the drug.

He dismounted and tied his horse next to the others, under the shelter of a group of trees. He headed for the entrance to the nearest cave.

At first, he couldn't see or hear anything when he entered and thought he'd figured wrong about which cave Elizabeth and Cal were in. Maybe they'd chosen another one down a few yards. Several were in the immediate area. Then his eyes adjusted.

What the hell! He was not seeing what he was seeing.

Rage seared through him like a line of fire. Elizabeth lay on the ground, the front of her dress wide open. Cal's tongue was teasing one bare nipple and she actually giggled as he licked her. *The filthy whore!* She wouldn't accept his tongue in her mouth and here she was with Roberts' tongue on her tit and apparently lovin' every wet stroke.

He must have made some sound, for she turned her head toward him. Her eyes widened and she screamed, pushing at Cal's head.

Without even contemplating his actions, his anger too great, Nathan drew his gun and fired.

\* \* \* \* \*

At the ranch, Joe paced in the study, his frustration growing. He looked out the window. Dark. Rainy. Eerie. Too much time had passed.

Desperation tugged at his emotions. No Cal. No Beth. No Emma. Where were they? He couldn't wait any longer. "That's it."

He'd already sent men out to look for Beth and Cal. But he needed to be out there too. The housekeeper was here in case one of them showed up. As instructed, she would tell them that he and the ranch hands were out searching and to wait for their return.

After grabbing his hat, he stormed from the house, entered one of the barns and mounted his horse which was already saddled and waiting for him as he'd ordered earlier. The wet, cold and lack of moon made for a miserable night.

Faster than safe, given the rainy weather and limited visibility, he rode through the gate and headed east. A sense of urgency kept him moving.

Before he knew it, lost in thought more than he should have been under the circumstances, he was on the edge of town. While so close, he'd check on Emma. Some emergency with a patient must have prevented her from coming out to the ranch as she'd promised. Or maybe her father didn't want her out in this weather. Either way, he needed to see her, just to assure himself that she was all right.

He tied his horse to the hitching rail in front of the doctor's office. Emma and her father lived on the second floor, which made things convenient. He knocked at the clinic entrance and waited.

An older man opened the door, looking drained and weary.

"Doctor Bray," Joe greeted. "Is Emma here?"

The doctor's expression changed from weariness to anger. "Stay away from my girl! You and yours bring nothing but trouble." He slammed the door shut.

In shock, Joe stared at the closed door. "What the hell?" He walked around to the back of the clinic and looked up at Emma's window. A lantern was on in the room, so she must be home. He grabbed some pebbles and tossed them at the glass pane.

A moment later, the window opened and Emma looked down.

"What's going on?" he called up. "I went to the door and your father slammed it in my face." Doctor Bray was generally such an easy-going man. His actions made no sense.

"Keep Beth away from Nathan, however you have to." She pulled her head back inside and closed the window with a soft whoosh.

Emma sat on her bed, her arms wrapped around herself. She couldn't stop shaking. She'd always felt so safe, especially in her own home. She didn't think she'd ever feel safe again.

Even after the terrible thing that had happened though, she was glad that she and Joe had seen Nathan coming out of the whorehouse earlier and that Joe had confronted him. At least that man would be out of Beth's life. Nobody but her pa would need to know what had happened in the office afterward. She should have listened to Joe and stayed put on the boardwalk. Not made Nathan angry.

Joe had plenty of reasons to keep him from Beth now, without having to hear what that man had done to her, so she didn't plan on telling him. Beth would heed Joe's words too, especially with so many witnesses. She'd have no choice but to believe the story and finally come to accept Nate's true nature.

The window rattled again. She wished Joe would just go away. She couldn't see him now. Not like this. The window slid open and she gasped.

Joe fell inside the room. "Damn." His boot caught on the window ledge and his hat flopped off his head.

"What are you doing? How'd you get up here?" She rushed to her door and locked it. "If my pa finds you here, he'll shoot you."

"I'm trying to figure out what's going on. Dang it! Give me a hand. I'm stuck."

She hurried back across the room, lifted Joe's booted foot from the ledge and dropped it to the floor with a thud, then closed the window. "Were Beth and Cal at the ranch?"

"Thanks. Um, no." Joe rolled over, grabbed his hat and got to his feet. "Neither of them—" He stopped in mid-sentence when he looked her way.

Not wanting him to see her face, she turned away. With a gentle touch, he pulled her back around. She tried to hide behind her hands, but he forced them down.

His eyes widened. "What happened?" he asked, his voice full of concern.

"It's nothing. Where could Cal and Beth be?" she asked to distract him and also because her concern had piqued.

"You're black and blue. As if—" His jaw tightened. He tossed his hat on the desk beside the window. "Someone beat the hell out of you." He grabbed her shoulders. "Who was it? I'll kill him!"

Shrugging out of his grip, she walked across the room and sat on the bed. Tears rolled down her cheeks. She couldn't hold them back. She felt the mattress dip when he sat beside her. His arm slipped around her back. As if the most natural thing to do, she leaned into him and sighed. He was cool and wet but also felt strong and solid. Safe.

Still... Worry for Cal and Beth rolled through her, as well as fear for all of them now. What a mess!

"Emma?" Her pa's voice carried through the door.

She immediately stiffened but felt thankful she'd locked the door. She straightened, her heart slamming against her ribs.

"Are you all right? I heard something fall."

"Oh, um, I-I'm fine, Papa. I just dropped a book. Sorry."

"Well, get some rest, dear, if you can."

"I will."

After they heard her father go back downstairs, Joe asked in a gentle voice, "Who did this, Emma? Tell me. It wasn't your father, was it?"

"No! Of course not." Her pa had never hit her. Oh, how she missed having a ma to lean on. Her mother had died in childbirth, so she'd never known her. Whenever she'd needed a feminine touch, like now, she'd had to do without. She swiped away a tear before Joe could see it.

"Then who?"

"It was," she hesitated, almost unable to say his name, "Nathan." She couldn't lie to Joe about what happened, though she hadn't really wanted him to know. Besides, he'd see through her if she tried to lie.

"Son of a bitch!" He jumped up and began to pace. "When? How?"

"It doesn't matter. He's certainly long gone by now. If he does show up again, just be sure he doesn't get Beth alone. He's dangerous. We have to find her and Cal. Warn them about him before it's too late. If Nathan finds those two before we do, no telling what might happen."

"If Carlyle shows up anywhere near one of us, I'll kill him." Joe's eyes burned with anger and hatred until they locked with hers, then tender concern entered his gaze. "Tell me what happened." He sat down beside her and took her hand in his.

"Joe, we need to find Beth and Cal. That's our first concern. It doesn't matter what—"

"Tell me."

Though Elk Valley thrived on gossip, she trusted Joe not to spread a word of the story. No sheriff worked in town to report this to, not since the last one had hightailed it out of the territory. Having someone other than just her pa looking out for her would feel good.

"After...after you left, Nathan came by the office. He pushed me inside and locked the door, then he slapped me across the face." She sniffled. "He said it was payback or something. I guess for me jumping him out on the street."

Joe cursed under his breath. "I should have made sure you were safe. Waited until Nathan was out of town before I left you alone. With Beth and Cal missing and the confrontation in front of Delia's, I wasn't thinking clearly. I know better."

"It's not your fault, Joe. Nathan's evil! I tried to scream and get away from him, but he said he'd shoot me. I hit him over the head with a glass beaker. It cut him, but not badly enough. He grabbed me. He said such vile things. He..." Her voice hitched.

"Did he touch you, Emma?" Joe asked tightly.

"He pushed me down over the exam table and pulled up the back of my skirt," she choked out, her fingers trembling. "He tried to get my pantalets down."

His hand tightened around hers.

"I hit him with my elbow. He knocked me down and demanded I take off my clothes. He opened his pants," she added in a whisper.

Joe's face darkened in anger and sweat rolled into his eyes. He blinked several times. "Dead. Nathan is a dead man."

"I refused to take anything off. I grabbed a surgical knife and...well...then I heard Papa outside the office. Nathan must have gotten scared, because he took off out the back door." She leaned against Joe and cried. As he held her close, she felt his heart pounding.

He murmured into her hair. "It'll be all right, Emma. I'll see to it."

\* \* \* \* \*

"You killed him!" Beth rolled Cal onto his back. Her chest ached, seeing the blood that flowed from his head. This could not be happening. She felt paralyzed, unable to move. She could barely think.

She'd just gotten Cal back and now she'd lost her true love forever. Tears flowed so heavily from her eyes that she couldn't see. "Cal..."

They'd still had a lot to discuss, but for the first time, she'd begun to think they might actually be able to work through things. She'd never love another man like she loved Cal.

Her heart was dead. A strange numbness overtook her, as if her body and brain had shut down.

"He was attacking you. Trying to take advantage. I have every right to protect my intended."

Beth looked up and wiped the tears from her face. She wanted Nathan dead. Her hatred for him burned so deeply that nothing else would satisfy her now. She saw the smirk on his face, the satisfaction in his eyes. Nate's true self? Why hadn't she seen it sooner?

He'd never allowed her to see it, that's why, she realized in horror.

So why had others been able to see his nasty nature or at least suspect he wasn't as he appeared? Even Madge didn't like him. She couldn't believe she'd been so blind. So stubborn in her need to control her own destiny. Apparently, he'd even fooled Wade, who usually proved such a good judge of character. Skylar had been right all along. She owed her sister a big apology.

As she looked back down at Cal, a pain like she'd never felt enveloped her. And guilt. Her hands fluttered over him, needing to touch him one last time. Suddenly, she felt a heartbeat and the warmth of his skin. He was alive! Her own heart raced. She couldn't let Nathan know. He might decide to finish the job. But at the same time, Cal needed help. What should she do?

Nathan re-holstered his pistol and stepped forward.

"Stay away from him!" She reached out her hand to ward him off.

He pushed her aside. "Oh calm down." He crouched and felt for Cal's pulse. "Not dead. Convenient for us that he was too busy to see who shot him."

"If you kill him—"

"I'm not going to kill him. Yet." Nathan turned and dragged a finger between her breasts. "So I finally get to see your luscious tits."

"Oh!" Her fingers fumbled with the ties to her chemise.

He captured her hands in his. "If he can see them," he nodded at Cal, the tone of his voice angry, "then I can see them." Nathan released her and grabbed the dress and chemise, ripping them open wider.

"No!" She slapped at his hands, fear gripping her hard.

"Damn, you've got some nice big ones on you. A lot bigger than Skylar's. I've seen her tits too, you know."

Beth gaped at him. *Sick*. The man was totally sick, whether what he'd said was actually the truth or a lie. If the truth, Wade would certainly kill him, if someone else didn't do the job first.

Now, this close to Nathan, she noticed dried blood on the side of his head and she wondered what else he'd been a part of to get the injury. She didn't ask though.

Her mind raced, trying to figure out what to do, how to help herself and Cal before it was too late. She tried to pull back, but he wouldn't let go of her clothing.

"Why are you doing this?" Though terrified and shaking, she refused to cry again in front of him. She needed to keep her wits about her and not show any weakness. She needed a weapon. Unfortunately, Cal's rifle was too far away for her to get her hands on. Slowly, she reached out, hoping to grab hold of Nate's pistol, while he was distracted by her assets.

As she leaned forward, his eyes followed the movement of her breasts. "Oh sexy. That's good. Make 'em jiggle for me, baby."

Exposing herself like this to him made her feel dirty and vulnerable. But she had to do anything she could to get herself and Cal free of this man.

When her fingers closed around the handle of his gun, he grabbed her hand. "Sorry." His gaze moved from her breasts to her eyes. "I'm not quite that stupid." His other hand cupped her chin in a punishing hold. "Now, as much as I hate to say this, cover yourself up. We're going to Fox Valley and we're going to be married. Then I intend to fully acquaint myself with those plentiful tits of yours and with the rest of your lovely body as well."

"Like hell. I'll never let you touch me, you bastard. I'll certainly never agree to marriage."

He chuckled. "My, but haven't we picked up some bad language. Be sure to remind me of it later, on our wedding night. I'll more than enjoy spankin' your ass as sufficient punishment. After I get through with you, you'll learn to enjoy everything I do to your body. You'll be begging for my touch and for so much more."

She felt nauseous. Did he really believe what he was saying? She could never want him now that he'd revealed his true self and how sick his mind was.

His eyes hardened and he pushed her away. "Do as I say. Fix your dress."

Cal moaned and his hand twitched, but his eyes remained closed.

Nathan frowned and Beth feared he might shoot Cal again, despite his earlier words. She quickly refastened her chemise and the front of her dress. "He's out of it, Nathan. Defenseless. Please, don't hurt him."

"Pleading for your lover's life? How sweet." He stood and picked up Cal's rifle, then stared at Cal's body as if trying to make a decision.

When Cal didn't make any additional sounds or movements, Nathan leaned down, grabbed his arm and hefted him over his shoulder. "Let's go, Elizabeth. And if you try anything, I'll kill the both of you."

Nathan strolled out of the cave, knowing she would obey like any pathetic ranch hound. His threat had been an idle one, but the bitch wouldn't know any different.

She was such a weak-minded woman. Dumb as dirt, in his opinion. Lucky for him, he supposed, but aggravating at the same time. He preferred more of a challenge. Made the victory so much sweeter.

Regardless, no way did he intend to kill her anytime soon. She held his pathway to a fortune.

After securing the rifle, he settled Cal across a horse and tied him on. Then he forced Elizabeth to mount another horse and tied her wrists to the saddlehorn.

The little whore had let Roberts tongue her bare breast. He still could hardly believe it. No tellin' what else she'd allowed. He'd wanted to be the first to taste her body!

Well, if she'd already been used, he'd have no problem fuckin' her for all she was worth, whenever he damn well felt like it and in any and every way known to man or beast. He'd treat her just like the slut she'd proven herself to be.

When they got farther out, he would set Cal's horse loose. Since Cal was tied to one of the older ranch horses, the gelding should head straight home to the barn. This would work out perfectly. He'd be injured, but not dead and wouldn't even know who had done it.

In the meantime, he'd take off with Elizabeth. They'd be well on their way by the time anyone figured out what had really happened, if they ever did.

The rain would cover their tracks. No one would be able to find them. Wade was the only real expert tracker left in these parts—taught by the Apache, rumor had it—but he wasn't around. So they should be free and clear for the most part.

As soon as he mounted, the rain stopped, as if someone had purposely dammed the flood to irritate him. *Shit*. Even the weather was against him. Well, he'd just have to watch his tracks more closely than he'd planned. He tied the reins of Cal's and Beth's horses to his own saddlehorn, then with both of them in tow, he led the way.

After several minutes of riding in silence, uneasiness crept up his spine. The fact that Elizabeth rode her horse so quietly worried him. At least if she were yelling or arguing with him, she wouldn't be sitting there trying to figure out a workable plan of escape.

Not that she could outsmart him, but still... He glanced back at her. "Did you like it? A man touching your body?"

She didn't answer.

Frowning, he faced forward. "I'll teach you to like it," he yelled over his shoulder.



Still, no response. *Damn woman.* He couldn't even goad her into a confrontation. Well, no dirty cunt got the best of him!

She grated on his nerves like no other. Once they were husband and wife, he would torture her mind and body until she begged for mercy. And then he'd torture her even more.

Outwardly, Beth remained calm. Inwardly, her mind raced, totally in chaos. She was in such trouble. She realized it with a sense of dread that made her almost physically ill. Worse, Cal was in trouble. And she was his only hope.

A way to get loose from Nathan existed. Somewhere. She just needed to find it.

Nathan pulled up on the reins and maneuvered his horse next to hers. She watched him closely. What was he up to now?

When close enough, he reached out and stroked her cheek. She shuddered but remained silent. His fingers slid down to the front of her dress and he cupped her breast. She jerked back as best she could and his hand dropped to the side.

"Don't be so uppity. It's not like you've never been touched. I just wanted a feel."

She shook her head. "What's the point of all this, Nathan? You can find someone else to marry."

"Someone else?" His eyes darkened. "Just how stupid are you?"

Shocked by his vicious tone toward her, she said nothing for several moments. Why anything he did or said shocked her now, she wasn't certain, except that she was still trying to adjust to the impossible situation she found herself trapped in.

She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Apparently, I'm quite stupid for trusting and loving you." Though she realized what she'd felt for Nathan wasn't actually love, only a need for some man in her life to distract her from thinking about the man she really loved.

When she mentioned love, his eyes softened, but only briefly. As his expression changed, once more darkening to a dangerous look she now recognized, he cleared his throat and his voice hardened.

"We're going to Fox Valley. We'll get hitched. Then everything will be perfect."

This was crazy. He was crazy. "You're doing all this just to marry me? You love me so much that you'd kidnap me and try to force me to marry you?"

"I love your money, sweetheart. And I intend to love your body...often. Well, use your body actually. Love doesn't play into things here."

His words burned through her, but she remained silent. He was more dangerous than she'd ever believed he could be. So cold.

"As far as you personally, you're way too gullible for my intellectual tastes."

Intellectual? The man was not only sick and crazy but possessed a very warped image of reality. He wasn't making sense. Though she would admit to being gullible as

far as he was concerned. She disregarded his physical threat for now and concentrated on what he'd first said. "You mentioned money. What money? I don't have any money."

"The Sinclair fortune."

"That's not mine." At his easy answer to her question and the gleam in his eyes, an uncomfortable itch started at the base of her spine and quickly spread.

"It will be once everyone else in the family is dead."

She gasped. "What are you planning?" Fear for her loved ones rushed through her. Such an idea never would have occurred to her. How could anyone be so cruel and calculating?

"Me? Planning? Oh, just something devilishly wicked." A menacing laugh erupted from him.

He spurred them forward, increasing their pace away from Elk Valley and all Beth knew. She tugged at the saddlehorn for what felt like the hundredth time, but still couldn't get loose.

Panic and an uncertain future loomed before her. Apparently Nathan would go to any lengths to get what he wanted.

Nathan cut Cal's horse loose and slapped the gelding's rump.

Beth held back the squeal that threatened. After a moment, her heart calmed as she realized Cal was better off. The horse would return to the barn. Someone would find him.

Now just she and Nathan headed toward Fox Valley. If she couldn't get away from Nathan, he'd eventually end up killing everyone she loved. She couldn't let that happen, even if she had to kill him herself.

Why he hadn't killed Cal when he'd had the chance, she didn't know. His ultimate plan must truly be something wicked.

A single tear slid down her cheek, knowing she was on her own now and would have to figure out her own escape. Suddenly, her head turned and her heart leapt. Or was she alone?

A movement in the trees caught her attention. Her pulse began to race. Could it possibly be?

## Chapter Nine

Emma grabbed Joe's arm. "Take me with you." She knew he'd head back to the ranch, and then if necessary, out into the night. Though still scared to the bone, she wanted to help.

She hoped Beth and Cal had simply run off together and that's why they hadn't yet been found. She really wanted things to work out between those two. They loved each other and belonged with each other. Beth and Cal had felt a connection from their very first meeting. She didn't think they'd ever truly be happy without one another.

Waiting alone to hear what had happened to them would make her crazy. No way was she getting any sleep tonight. She needed to be doing something.

"Forget it." Joe opened the window and straddled the frame. "I'll come for you tomorrow and let you know any news. Meet me in the mercantile at noon. That way I won't need to get past your father."

Desperate, she grabbed a handful of his shirt. "If you don't let me come, I'll follow you. I swear. Please. It'll be safer for me if I'm with you. What if Nathan comes back?" Maybe she was playing a little dirty, tugging at Joe's sense of duty and protectiveness, but she did fear Nathan. And she would feel safest with Joe. She knew he'd never let anything happen to her.

Besides, she didn't want to put her father in danger if Nathan returned to finish what he'd started. He would try to defend her and he could get hurt. Her father was her only parent. She loved him with all her heart. If anything ever happened to him...

If Joe agreed, she could leave her father a note, so he wouldn't worry. He'd be angry, but he'd know she hadn't just disappeared. Emma saw the resignation in Joe's eyes and knew she'd struck a nerve he'd respond to. *Yes.*

"Your father will toss me in jail for this."

"No, he won't." She scribbled out a note and left it on the desk. "We have no sheriff to authorize it."

"That doesn't matter. The keys are in the desk, available to any citizen who needs to lock someone up."

"They are?" She had no idea. She wondered how many people were actually aware of that. Probably not many, she assumed, since she couldn't remember anyone being jailed since the sheriff left. "Well, don't worry about being put into a cell. My father likes you. He just doesn't like what you were and thinks you're dangerous."

His eyebrows shot up. "To you?"

"To our way of life. He's always hoped for a certain future for me and, well..." She shrugged, not wanting to say that her father feared her feelings for Joe might be too

strong and distract her from the medical career he'd always wanted for her, as soon as they could afford to send her off to school. She had to admit that lately she'd had second thoughts about going, not wanting to leave her father and friends and the only home she'd ever known.

A frown crossed Joe's face. "I understand his feelings, I guess. Yours too." His brow furrowed and he grumbled, "Taking you with me though is against my better judgment."

With a softer look, having eased the tension from his face, he reached out and stroked her cheek. "But if anything happened to you here, while I wasn't around, I'd never forgive myself."

She briefly touched his hand as they stared into each other's eyes. "My father probably won't even find the note until morning. I might be back by then, right?"

"Maybe." He dropped his hand to his side. "We'll go back to the ranch first, in case Cal and Beth have returned home."

We. Great. He was going to take her with him.

"If so, all our worries will be over. As long as Nathan has left town, as I suspect, we'll be able to continue our lives in peace. I really don't think he'd be stupid enough to stay around here now anyhow."

"I hope you're right." She twisted her hands, worried that Joe didn't actually believe what he'd said about Nathan and was just trying to soothe her. She'd only truly feel better when Nathan was caught and disposed of in some manner. "Do you think he might have hurt Beth and Cal, like he tried with me and that's why we can't find them?"

"Let's not think the worst for now. Those two might just be holed up together somewhere." He glanced at the ground. "Wait until I get down, then I'll help you climb down after."

As a disturbing thought struck, her heart clenched. "You won't leave me once you're down there, will you?" He could just take off with a wave and a grin. By the time she got down there herself, he'd be gone.

"No, of course not."

"Promise?" She cringed at the whine in her voice. She sounded like some insecure little girl, but she couldn't control her tone after everything she'd been through today.

"Promise."

He looked her directly in the eye and she knew he spoke the truth. Her confidence in Joe grew and something solid and special tugged at her heart.

When she nodded and smiled at him, he climbed down to the ground then looked back up at her. "Climb on over. Use the indents in the wall there to come down a little more, like I did. After that, jump. I'll catch you. It's easy. Don't be scared."

"Too late for that," she mumbled. She'd never realized how easily someone could get up to her room if they wanted. Something would need to be done about that. And soon.

She climbed out the window. Hanging onto the ledge, she found the two footholds and a handhold in the wall and moved over. "Got it." She looked down, a definite mistake, and promptly fell, her hand slipping from its tentative hold on the wet perch.

"Whoa," Joe's voice carried to her.

"Ooph." She slammed into him hard, but he caught her and managed to keep to his feet, only staggering backward a couple of feet. "Oh goodness," she breathed out. "Sorry about that. Nice catch. Thanks."

"I'm impressed. You didn't even scream."

"Well, I wanted to, but I hit you too fast and it knocked the sound right out of me."

Joe chuckled and set her on her feet. "Let's go. We'll ride double. If we take your buckboard, your pa might hear."

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth stared at Nathan's back, wishing he'd burst into flames or something equally evil and preferably fatal. All her worries would then disappear in one deadly puff of smoke.

Fantasies aside, now that she only had herself to worry about, her escape options had broadened, which gave her hope. If Nathan wanted Wade's money, he certainly wasn't going to kill her, no matter what he threatened, which was also good to know.

She continued to pull at the ties around her wrists. A little give kept her working at the rope, though her skin felt raw and painful from the effort. She desperately needed a weapon.

Even if she got loose, even if she got her horse loose, she couldn't outride Nathan. She had to incapacitate him somehow to give her the time she needed to get away.

She glanced toward the trees. No movement, but Beth knew *she* was there. Somewhere. Watching. Waiting.

He stopped their horses beside a swollen stream and dismounted. "We'll camp here for the night." With a wicked grin on his face, he strolled toward her. "I think we're going to have an entertaining next few hours. It's time we really got to know each other. Don't you think?"

A loud clap of thunder vibrated the land and rain once more poured down.

"Damn it!" He glanced up at the sky. "We'll have to take shelter under those trees. I have a tent with me. Don't worry. We'll be cozy."

Beth knew it was now or never. Nathan would force himself on her tonight. She saw the intention in his eyes. As he approached, her leg shot out and she kicked him in the head. Hard. Right in the same spot she'd noticed his head wound.

He fell like a rock.

"Hyah!" Her heart pounding, clutching the saddlehorn tightly, Beth kneed the horse into a gallop. Still tied to the other horse, Nathan's gelding followed along. She glanced over her shoulder and saw Nathan stagger to his feet.

"Bitch!" he screamed, his voice fading as she outdistanced him. He drew his pistol and fired in rapid succession.

Damn man was aiming for the horses! She leaned down low and sent up a silent prayer the rain would put off his aim and that he wouldn't hit her by mistake.

She heard him cry out in pain or maybe surprise and she faltered for just a moment but didn't look back. Another shot rang out and she heard a sharp cry, not human this time. Tears rolled down her cheeks. *No!*

Once she was certain neither of the horses had been hit, she rode for all she was worth. Even if not severely injured, Nathan couldn't catch her, not on foot. Though once able, she knew he'd be coming. Sometime. Probably soon.

She needed to get back to the ranch. To her family. To Cal. Warn all of them about what Nathan planned. She prayed Cal would be there safe and sound when she arrived.

Rain fell in heavy sheets, like a dam had broken loose. That would slow her down, but more importantly, the weather would slow Nathan down. If able and on foot, he'd likely need to take shelter until the storm let up. But hopefully, the man was too injured to follow at all. If so, maybe he'd simply die out here in the elements.

Although she wouldn't count on that possibility.

She held back her tears, knowing this entire predicament was very much her fault. No! She shook her head. Nathan's fault! Well, mostly.

At least they hadn't ridden too far. She knew where she was and how to get home. She slowed her mount, not wanting either horse to stumble and get hurt. These mustangs were her only way to freedom.

Even though she knew Nathan couldn't possibly catch her now, she kept looking over her shoulder. Her fear was still too great to relax. She wouldn't relax until she finally arrived home and was safely behind the main gate of the ranch.

And maybe not even then.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal drifted in and out of consciousness. His stomach ached. His head throbbed. What happened? Where the hell was he?

He was moving, but slowly. He felt tilted. Upside down. On a horse? He tried to force his eyes open, but they wouldn't cooperate.

Rain chilled him to the bone. Beth, where was Beth? He couldn't remember. Oh, the cave. Yes, he remembered the cave.

He remembered the softness of her skin. The taste of her breasts. His fingers stroking her intimately and how she'd responded.

It hadn't been a dream. He knew it. She'd wanted him and he'd wanted her so badly his cock had almost exploded in his pants.

After she'd climaxed and he had been teasing her nipple with his tongue, everything had gone black. Why? He'd so wanted to drag his tongue down her stomach and taste the cream between her thighs, if she would have allowed him.

Was she all right? Worry for her flooded him. Again, he tried to move, tried to open his eyes. Again, he failed.

Wait. He heard shouting. Someone grabbed him and pulled him down. With the change of position, nausea gripped him hard.

What was going on? Damn, he hurt. Several people were carrying him. He tried to speak, but nothing came out of him except a groan.

The rain stopped. No. He still heard it. They'd just gone inside a building. A woman's voice registered in his ears. Not Beth. The woman directed them to a room.

Lots of chatter. Mostly men's voices though, he thought. He couldn't make out all the sounds. Then he felt a soft bed under him and he drifted into oblivion.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe covered Emma's hands with one of his. She felt so cold. He'd given her his slicker and she was snuggled tightly against his back. He liked the feel of her riding behind him, pressing her breasts against his back. So did his cock. If she lowered her hands any more, she'd feel more than she'd bargained for on this trip.

Just thinking about Nathan putting his hands on her made his blood boil. He would not hesitate to kill Carlyle if given the opportunity. If her father hadn't returned to the clinic when he had...

No. He wouldn't think about that. She was safe. Now. With him.

Up ahead, he saw the gate to the ranch. It stood open. He could make out movement on each side. Sentries. Good. Now that he'd had time to mull things over in his head, he knew without a doubt that Emma would be much safer at the ranch than back in town. He just hoped her father would understand.

She'd mentioned being home before morning. With the rain and Nathan still on the loose out here somewhere, he doubted that would happen. She'd be spending the night.

Hopefully by morning everything, including the weather, would look brighter.

As they rode through the gate, ranch hands immediately surrounded them.

"Joe!" Jameson called out. "Mister Roberts' horse brought him in less than twenty minutes ago. Looks like he's been grazed in the head by a bullet."

Emma gasped.

"How bad is he?" Joe asked.

"Don't know yet. He's inside. We sent for Doc Bray. Didn't you see Parker up the road?"

"Dang, he must have passed us right by in the rain. Probably missed him at the junction. Visibility is almost nothing out there."

Jameson helped Emma down. His eyes widened. "Miss Bray? Your face..."

Emma glanced away.

"Shut up, Jameson." Joe followed, handing over the reins of his horse to one of the other men.

"Um, sorry. Maybe you can look at Cal, ma'am, in the meantime, until your father gets here," Jameson suggested. "The housekeeper's cleaning him up now."

"Of course." Emma nodded.

"Has Beth come back?" Joe asked.

"No sign of her. We just changed shifts. More men are out looking. It's slow going in this weather."

"Nobody gets in or out of here without checking with a sentry. Understand? I want to know where everyone is at all times," Joe ordered, worried that someone at the ranch or from town might be helping Nathan. As foreman, he'd probably made at least a few alliances. He couldn't believe Nathan had engineered all this himself. If a hand disappeared, a townie started snooping around or a stranger showed up, he wanted to know about it. "Keep a particular eye out for Carlyle."

"Nate? What's happened? I thought you fired him."

"I did. It's a long story, with too many details to go into now. If Carlyle's found, he's to be restrained at all costs. As are any strangers. Don't trust anyone you don't know personally."

With Cal being hurt, Joe now fully believed Nathan had Beth. Or someone working for Nathan had her. He needed to question Cal as soon as possible. If the two had been together, neither would have left the other unless given no choice. And if by some strange fluke Beth wasn't with Carlyle, he still wanted the man found and punished for what he'd done to Emma.

"Yes, sir. I'll inform the rest of the men. And, um, I meant no disrespect earlier, ma'am."

Emma nodded.

"Come on." Joe ushered her inside. "You're getting soaked."

The housekeeper met them inside the entry hall. She spoke before either of them could utter a word. "He's all right. The bullet just grazed him. He was out for a while, but has since come to. I'm having a hard time keeping him in his bed though. He insists on going out and looking for Miss Beth."

"Where is he?" Emma asked, slipping off Joe's slicker.

Agatha's eyes widened.



"I know his room," Joe answered before the housekeeper said anything. She'd obviously noticed Emma's bruises, as had Jameson. He left his hat and gun in the entry. "This way."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal's heart hitched when Joe and Emma entered the room. For a minute, he'd thought maybe Beth had made it home. Cal immediately struggled to get out from under the bed covers. "Nathan's got Beth."

"Stay right there." Emma pushed him back against the pillow. "Are you sure about Beth?"

"Yes, I'm sure." He grabbed her hand. "What happened to you?" Her face was swollen and bruised. She'd obviously taken a hit or two...from someone.

She tugged her hand free. "Don't concern yourself with me. Let me look at this." She pulled away the bandage around his head and examined the wound.

Joe paced. "Nathan has her," he repeated in a grumble. "I knew it."

"I finally remembered what happened," Cal said, wincing when Emma touched a sensitive spot. "I took Beth to the caves right on the edge of our property line."

Joe stopped pacing, cocked an eyebrow then frowned.

Cal ignored the look. "We got caught in the rain. Nathan found us. He shot me and took Beth. I never saw him, but after I was down, I heard him. I didn't remember at first, but then it came back to me."

"Where was he taking her?" Joe asked. "Do you know?"

"No. I was in and out of it. If he said, I didn't hear. We need to find her quickly. He's dangerous."

Joe and Emma exchanged a look he didn't understand. But he did recognize the concern in their eyes.

"Yes, we know how dangerous he is," Emma said. "This doesn't look too bad. Agatha did a good job cleaning you up."

"We need to go now, Joe," Cal said. "Before they get too far. No telling where he plans to take her."

"The men are out looking. You're in no shape to sit a horse, especially in this weather. I'll go. I'll start at the caves and see if I can find any tracks or signs indicating which direction they went. I'll take a couple of hands with me. If we find a trail, I'll send one of them back with the information."

"A trail in this weather?" Cal questioned. How in the hell were they ever going to find her? It would take a miracle.

"We have to try."

"Joe!" Jameson called, rushing into the room. "Miss Beth just rode in. The hands are helping her into the house now."

"Is she hurt?" Cal asked, his heart pounding with worry.

"I don't know. She looked fine, but I rushed up here before she dismounted, so I'm not certain."

"Where is she?" Emma asked, urging him out into the hallway.

Cal threw back the covers. He had to see her for himself.

Joe stopped him, holding out his arm to prevent him from leaving. "Stay there. If she can walk, I'll bring her in. If not, I'll come back and get you."

"The hell you will. I'm going now." He stood up but fell back on the mattress with a groan.

"You're not steady enough yet. Just stay there. I'll be back in less than five minutes."

"I'm here," Beth announced, rushing into the room, followed by Emma. She looked bedraggled – wet, dirty, hair hanging limply and rubbing her wrists. She waved Emma away, who was trying to look for wounds.

"Let me see your wrists, Beth."

"Later."

Cal breathed a sigh of relief, seeing her alive and safe. She immediately headed toward him. He just wanted to hold her in his arms forever.

"Are you all right?" she asked him.

"Yes. Are you? I've been worried out of my head." He pushed himself upright and pulled her down beside him. "What happened with Nathan?"

"You knew he had me?"

"I heard his voice after he shot me, the dirty bastard." Cal gritted his teeth.

"He's still out there. I got away from him and took both horses, so he's on foot. He might be injured." She touched his head then looked back at Emma. "How bad is it? Emma! What happened to you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine. Cal's not bad. A couple of days' rest and he should be well on his way to recovery, but my pa is on his way and he'll let us know for sure. I'd like to look you over, Beth. Make sure you're all right and wrap your wrists."

"I'm fine. Just tired and dirty mostly. My wrists can wait. You don't look fine, Emma. What happened?"

Emma glanced at Joe. She chewed at her bottom lip a moment then nodded.

After expelling a heavy breath, drawing everyone's attention, Joe spoke. "Nathan attacked her."

"What!" both Cal and Beth exclaimed at the same time, their gazes snapping back to Emma.

"I'm *fine*," Emma assured them. "I'm just banged up a little. That's all. But it does prove how dangerous he is."

Cal had a feeling there was more to the story, but she obviously didn't want to talk about it. He knew nobody would push her for details, though he really hoped she would share her troubles with someone.

Apparently, Joe knew at least some of what had happened. Maybe even everything. As long as Emma didn't try to cope alone with whatever had happened, he would feel better. She should be able to lean on someone in times of trouble. He knew that any one of them would be more than willing to listen and help her.

"Yes, he's definitely dangerous," Beth acknowledged. "We all need to talk about something that can't wait. Nathan has devised a plan you won't believe. He didn't tell me the details but we'll need to take whatever precautions we can in case he decides to go through with it."

Joe frowned. "What kind of plan?"

"After everything that's happened, don't you think he'll just hightail it out of the territory?" Emma asked, wringing her hands.

"Not now," Beth answered. "He's too set in his head. To tell you all the truth, I really don't think he's completely sane. He's...obsessed. To the point of no return, I fear."

## Chapter Ten

Nathan looked down at the dead dog. "It can't possibly be her." Madge? He nudged her with his boot. Yep, definitely dead. She'd jumped him from the side, grazing his arm with her teeth, but she hadn't broken the skin.

Luckily, he'd managed to get a shot off and kill the bitch before she'd actually injured him. Somehow, she'd known, tracked them and come to Beth's aid when he was firing at the horses. "Dumb dog. Should have stayed out of it." He re-holstered his pistol. "I guess bitches stick together."

Without another thought for the animal, he trudged through the mud and rain, slipping and sliding across the terrain, as he headed back toward town. No damn horse, no damn job, no damn woman, no damn money and more than one plan gone sour.

It all left a bad taste in his mouth. Only one place remained for him to go and without cash he wasn't so sure he'd be welcomed there.

Somehow, some way, he was going to get that fuckin' bitch and the Sinclair fortune. Or at least part of it. He couldn't believe the little twit had outsmarted him. *Him!* That's what he got for thinkin' with his cock.

He'd tried to make Elizabeth love him. That hadn't worked. She still cared too much for Cal, no matter how many times she denied it. He'd tried to take her forcibly. That hadn't worked. As it turned out, she had more spunk and ingenuity than he'd given her credit for.

Maybe he'd just kill them all and rob them blind.

Wade probably kept a safe full of money somewhere in the ranch house. The amount wouldn't be anywhere near what he'd planned to take and no real power would be gained for him, but at this point, he was almost willing to take what he could get and the hell with the rest.

Even though pretty much foiled, he wouldn't call off the plans for Wade's and Skylar's murders. He couldn't get his money back now, anyhow. Let them suffer. Let them all suffer. At least he'd have some satisfaction, knowing their pathetic, little lives would be ruined.

His foot slipped out from under him on a pile of wet leaves and he tumbled backward, landing on his butt with a splat. "Hellfire!" He sat there in the mud, fuming.

Maybe once he made it back to town he'd visit sweet Emma and finish what he'd started earlier. Someone was getting fucked tonight, he knew that. After what Elizabeth had done to him, he wasn't going to be the only one.

He pushed to his feet.

Yes. He'd show Miss Emma what it meant to have a real man between her legs. He'd do her right in her own bed, so every time she lay there, she'd think of him. The thought hardened his cock and warmed his chilled body. He saw no reason why he shouldn't have a taste of both those uppity women.

When he finally fucked Elizabeth, he could tell her all about stickin' his cock into her best friend first. "That will be priceless!" He laughed into the wind, moving quickly now, feeling energized once more.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emma couldn't believe her ears. After Beth finished telling them what had happened with her and Nathan and Madge, everyone simply stared. Speechless.

"I'm sorry," Beth said. "I should have seen through him long before now. I'm also sorry that I didn't find out more details while he held me captive. I should have asked questions but I only wanted to find a way to get back home. And I'm sorry about Madge too." She looked despondent. "I couldn't go back for her and see if she was still alive. I might not have gotten away if not for her. Just knowing she was there gave me hope."

Cal reached for her hand. "This is all Nathan's doing, not yours. He's an expert at manipulation. We'll need to get a message to Wade and Skylar to warn them, just in case Nathan has anything already planned involving them and Colton. A message should also be sent to my grandfather. He can get private protection from the Weberton Detective Agency in Chicago if he needs it."

"I'll take care of everything in the morning," Joe said. "You and Beth should stay in the house for a while. Avoid tempting Nathan if he is still skulking around. I'll have the men continue to keep watch. We'll find him."

Emma's attention shifted when her father strode into the room. His clothing looked damp, but he didn't appear drenched by any means. Maybe the pouring rain had let up. For him to have arrived so quickly and in such good condition, he must have taken the buggy out here at top speed. "Papa. I'm glad you're here."

"Doctor Bray," Beth greeted. "I'm glad you're here too. Cal seems to be all right, but we'd all feel better if you'd check him over."

He glanced over at Cal then back at Beth. "Of course." His gaze shifted and his lips tightened before he spoke. "We'll discuss your disappearance, Emma, after I'm through here. I found your note and was halfway out here when their ranch hand stopped me and told me about Cal. Now, everybody out while I look him over."

"Yes, Papa." She followed Beth out of the room, not looking forward to facing her father later. Joe trailed behind. They all went downstairs to the study.

"Thank you both," Beth told them. "For everything. I'm sorry if I've been difficult lately. I was so wrong." She brushed at her mud-coated skirt. "I'm a mess. I really need to go back up and change my clothes."

"Good idea," Emma responded. "Don't worry about anything that happened, Beth. We don't blame you. Do you want some help?"

"No, I think I'd like to be alone for a while. To think. Then I'll probably check on Cal and turn in for the night."

"All right. See you in the morning."

"Night, Beth," Joe added, but a grim look lingered on his face.

After Beth left, Emma turned to him. "All right." She arched an eyebrow. "You're brooding. What's wrong?"

"What's not wrong?" He dragged a hand down his face. "I want you to stay here at the ranch until Nathan is found. Agatha will fix you a room. There's plenty of space since Wade extended the guest wing upstairs last year."

"I don't think my father will like that much. Isn't that where you stay?"

"Yes, but I'll convince him. With all the hands around and the armed guards we have posted, you'll be much safer here than in town. After what Beth told us, I think Nathan might be headed back here. He's been humiliated and bested by two women. He's going to want revenge."

She wrung her hands, twisting her fingers into knots. Joe might be right. Nathan's pride was probably hurting him pretty badly right now. "How long will you be gone tomorrow, sending those messages?" She felt so much safer when she knew he was near.

He reached out and untangled her fingers then took her hands in his. "Not long, so wipe that worried look off your face. I'll just send a quick telegram to Chicago to Cal and Wade's grandfather. Then I'll contact the dock master where Wade and Skylar will be disembarking, warn him of what's going on and have him get the authorities to board the ship before anyone gets off. They'll be able to provide security, let Wade know the situation and at least see him, Skylar and Colton safely out of town. Wade can arrange for a safe route from there and added security if he feels that's necessary."

"What if the dock master doesn't take it seriously? What if the authorities don't?"

"There's only so much we can do from here. Even if I went out there myself, I might not be able to do anything more before their arrival. I'll ask Wade's grandfather to also send a message. He has more clout and will probably know someone in authority out there." Joe squeezed her hands. "It'll be all right. Nathan might not even have gotten that far in his plan. He might just have been running his mouth. All we have is what he said and a lot of speculation."

"I know, but I wouldn't put it past him."

"Me either, which is why we need to start informing people. Just in case."

"He's fine," a deep voice announced.

"Papa," Emma looked over at her father as he entered the study. Her heartbeat immediately kicked up.

Joe stepped back from her, releasing her hands, but not quickly, as if they'd been caught doing something wrong. He let his fingertips linger on hers before pulling completely away. She fought hard to hold back a sigh. The gesture was so romantic and he seemed totally unaffected by what her father might think, which endeared him to her even more.

Her father frowned. "Cal's got a hard head. Not too many people who get head-shot twice in their life come out so well."

Emma nodded, remembering several years ago when another bullet had grazed Cal's head during a shootout.

"Try to keep him in bed at least through tomorrow. After that, he should still take it easy for a while. If his headache gets worse or he starts to feel nauseous, send someone out to get me. Let's go, Emma."

"Um..."

"Sir," Joe began, stepping forward. "I think it would be best if Emma stayed out here with us, considering what happened with her and Carlyle. We have guards all around the ranch house. Until he's found she'll be safer here."

Her father looked from Joe to her and back to Joe again. Emma couldn't tell what he was thinking. She was glad Joe hadn't told him about Nathan's other devilish plans. Her father would get too worried and send her out of town, probably to Boston to stay with her aunt, just to be certain she wouldn't end up in the middle of things. She did not want to go to Boston. Not now.

"So she told you what that bastard did to her?"

"Yes."

"I want my daughter home with me."

Emma's hope faded. Her father sounded as if he'd made his decision and intended to stick to it.

"I understand that, sir. But I'm sure you realize that you can't be there with her at all times because of emergencies and even the regular care of your patients. Here, she'll be watched over. Until we know for certain that Carlyle isn't around or until he's found and turned into authorities, she's better off here. All the hands are armed and well-skilled."

*Maybe he'll change his mind,* Emma thought with renewed hope. Joe had presented a good argument.

Her father frowned then let out a frustrated sound. "I don't like any of this and I'll miss her help at the clinic but I have to agree with your reasoning." He turned to her. "Send one of their hands into town tomorrow and I'll give him a bag with some of your things, dear."

She smiled, feeling relieved. "Thanks, Papa. It'll be all right." She kissed him on the cheek. "I promise. Don't worry so."

He gave her a quick hug. "Can't help it, child." He looked at Joe. "If anything happens to her, I'm holding you directly responsible."

"Understood."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan shoved his cock into her cunt. "Oh fuck! Yes! You like that, don't you, my pretty little slut?"

The woman whimpered and nodded. Her blonde hair hung forward, covering her face, and he imagined her to be Elizabeth. *Yes.*

"So what are your plans now?" Lanelle asked from the chair across the room. "And do you have to talk so vilely all the time? It's really quite disrespectful."

Nathan glanced over his shoulder, his fantasy ruined. "You actually expect to be given respect?"

Lanelle's eyes narrowed. "Careful, Nathan. You still need me."

*Damn whores.* "Can we talk when I'm done here?" His fingers curled around the blonde woman's hips and he pumped her savagely from behind, getting out all the frustration in his system. "Ahh...yes!" His hips slapped against her, the sound of flesh against flesh filling the room.

Lanelle drummed her fingers on the side table. "Well, hurry up. I don't have all night. Delia is out of town, so I'm in charge until she gets back. I need to make sure the customers are taken care of and collect the money."

With a grunt, he waved his hand at her. "Then go do whatever you need to. I'm going to be a while." He smacked the woman's ass. "How long do I get with this one?"

Lanelle stood. "Keep her as long as you want tonight. She needs breaking in anyhow. She's still new here but not young enough to pass off as fresh meat."

He pulled out of her and flipped her onto her back. Her large breasts caught his eye. "Good. I'll take you up on the offer." He twisted her nipples until she squealed like a sow.

"Don't hurt her!" Lanelle warned. "I'll slice off your balls if you do. We're short on girls as it is."

"I'm not going to hurt her. Nothin' permanent anyhow." He took one plump nipple in his mouth and sucked. "Mmm."

"Well, all right. Go ahead and have all the fun you want then. I'll check on you later." Lanelle patted his ass.

Nathan released the woman's nipple and glanced to the side. "I'll do you later."

"You better find some money first. I don't do freebies. Besides, I've been *done* enough tonight. My cunt is worn out."

"Then I'll stick my cock in your ass." Nathan laughed as he slid down the woman's body and spread her legs.



"In your dreams. You know I don't do that shit. You better stick it in her if you want some butt action."

"Oh I plan to."

The woman's eyes widened. But he didn't pay her much attention. He'd been given free rein over her tonight. He'd take what he wanted. Lanelle he catered to, but only because he needed her. This whore he only needed for tonight so he wasn't concerned about her wants or feelings.

He gave the whore's cunt a couple of quick licks, smiling when she moaned. He knew what women liked. He knew how to make them scream in pleasure...or pain. He also knew Delia ran a clean house so he never feared puttin' his mouth on her girls, unlike in some out-of-town brothels he'd visited from time to time.

Later, with Lanelle's help, he'd get what he could of the Sinclair fortune. She had drug connections right here in town. He wished he'd known that sooner. Lanelle, damn woman, never gave up any information unless the promise of money flowing her way suddenly became a factor.

His plan to get Elizabeth hooked would still work. He just needed to obtain the drug and get to her. If he couldn't kill everyone off, not a rational possibility given everything that had happened, he'd kidnap and ransom Elizabeth.

Lanelle had a place right here in the whorehouse where he could stash her. Delia wasn't around that much anymore, which would make it easy, especially if they sneaked Elizabeth in early in the day while the rest of the girls slept.

The drug would allow him to control Elizabeth, just as he'd planned originally, and when they got her back, she'd be a totally different woman—an undesirable, used-up slut. Roberts could have her then, if he was still interested.

He scooted up and sat beside the whore servicing him. When she looked at him in question, he grabbed her hair. "Get down there and suck my cock." He needed his head cleared.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth, all changed and cleaned up, knocked lightly on Cal's door. She didn't want to disturb him if he'd fallen asleep but she did want to check on him.

"Come on in." His voice filtered through from the other side.

She cracked open the door and peeked inside. "You sure you don't mind?"

"Of course not. Especially when it's you." Cal smiled and his eyes crinkled endearingly. He sat up in the bed and leaned back, adjusting the pillows behind him.

She entered and closed the door. He'd changed into his night clothes and his color looked a little better. "Doctor Bray said you'll be fine. You just need to rest. Agatha came up a moment ago and let me know Emma is going to stay in the guest wing until Nathan is caught. She can keep an eye on you and make certain the wound heals properly. Joe will handle contacting everyone tomorrow. In the morning the men will

start looking for Nathan. If he's still around they'll find him. We'll rotate shifts since we still need to keep the ranch going too. Some buyers are coming through in a few days to look at a couple of the horses."

Cal nodded. He patted the bed beside him. "Sit with me a while."

She smiled and walked over to the bed then lowered herself down to the mattress, trying not to bounce or jar Cal, knowing his head must still hurt. "How are you feeling?"

"Very inadequate, I'm afraid."

"What? Inadequate. Why?" That was the last thing she'd expected him to say. And she had no idea what he meant by it.

"Nathan could have killed you." Cal touched her hand. "I knew he was dangerous. I should have taken better care of you. I should have insisted you stay clear of him. Seen to it however I had to."

"Cal, you had no way of knowing what he was going to do. Besides, I wasn't being very cooperative and wouldn't have listened to you. It's my fault. I should have been smarter all along then none of this would have happened." She'd wasted years trying to forget Cal, any way she could. She'd been so stupid when she knew in her heart all along that he was the only man she'd ever truly love.

"Well, maybe we both made mistakes. I just wish they'd been less life altering."

"Me too." A tentative smile crossed her face. "No more mistakes. Right?" Her fingers curled into the blanket.

"Right. All that is in the past." He patted her clenched hand then cocked his head, looking into her eyes. "What is it? You're still holding something back."

Another small smile tugged at her lips. "I never could fool you." Burdening him now with serious issues wasn't a good idea, no matter how much she wished otherwise. "It's not the right time. We'll talk about it later."

"Come on." He tugged on her fingers. "What is it?"

She wouldn't feel completely comfortable with him again until she talked out her thoughts and feelings. "Are you sure you're up for a serious discussion?"

"Beth, just tell me."

Maybe now, while they were alone and unlikely to be interrupted would be the best time to broach things. He seemed strong enough and also alert enough to handle what she wanted to say. "I'd like to start over if we can, Cal. But there are two things I really need to know or I'm afraid they'll always cause a wedge between us."

"What?"

"Why did you really leave me? Why did you marry Missy?" His previous explanation had sounded shallow to her. She hadn't been willing to listen to him before when he'd first arrived at the ranch. And at the cave his words had seemed like those of a desperate man. Now she needed to know the real truth.

## Chapter Eleven

Cal forgot all about the throbbing in his head. For about two seconds. Then a stabbing pain shot through his temples and he wasn't certain if it was from his wound or the sudden stress he felt. He winced and rubbed his forehead.

He wasn't prepared for the questions about Missy. Sure, at some point he knew she'd ask again, but not now. He tried to think of the best way to put things then opted for simple honesty and nothing more.

"I could spin the tale to make myself look good or try to come up with a long complicated explanation like in some storybook fictional tale but the fact is I got scared and I ran." Hard for him to admit, over and over, that he'd been an idiot. But he'd say it every day of his life if that's what it took to redeem himself. His explanation might not be what she wanted or expected to hear but his words were the truth.

"Scared? That's it? That's the truth?"

"Yes." He saw wariness in her eyes.

"Scared of what?"

"You. Us." He'd wanted her fiercely back then. Just as fiercely as he wanted her now. Then he'd been too young to handle all that meant. Now he craved everything he'd thrown away.

"Why?" She squeezed his hand.

"I didn't feel ready for what you expected from me." For the sex—yes. Oh yes. For the family and responsibility of a home—no. That prospect had scared him shitless. He felt her stiffen and cursed his inability to express his feelings better.

"I see. But you were ready and able to give whatever you believed those things were to Missy." Her voice wobbled a bit.

Damn, he hoped she didn't cry. He couldn't handle tears from her. "She manipulated me much like Nathan did you. Nathan used emotional tactics. Missy approached it differently. But in the end, it all turned out the same." He should have known better. Been stronger. Trusted in his feelings for Beth and her feelings for him.

"Manipulated you with her body, I presume."

Cal cleared his throat but he didn't look away. "Yes."

"You didn't want me...my body?"

"No. I mean, yes, I did! But that wouldn't have been right." After all the family had been through, another scandal, or even just gossip about their relationship had been the last thing they had needed. He'd already begun to hear rumblings in town and they hadn't even done anything inappropriate. Well, maybe swimming together naked

hadn't exactly been appropriate but he'd never touched her intimately. And nobody knew about their almost nightly meetings.

"Let's see. It was all right to fuck and marry Missy because she was a whore. But not all right to fuck and marry me."

"Where the hell did you pick up that language?" *Ow*. His head throbbed. He needed to remember to keep his voice down.

"Don't change the subject. After you fucked her she got pregnant so you felt obligated to marry her. Is that right? Or did you marry her before? I never quite got that part straight."

"I would never choose to marry another woman," he answered tightly. He couldn't blame her for the attitude and harsh words, he supposed. At the same time, he mourned the loss of her sweetness and the way she used to look at him with such pure love and trust. "A lot went on with us, Beth. She told me she was pregnant so I married her. Yes, I felt obligated and responsible for the child I helped create. Later she said she lost the baby. I'm not even sure now if she ever really was expecting."

"But you stayed married to her."

He heard the hurt in her voice. "Yes. She was distraught or seemed to be. I didn't feel like I could leave her."

"And you continued to sleep with her."

For a moment he looked away, not able to face her. But then he looked back, meeting her gaze. "Yes. She got pregnant again. I, of course, believed the child was mine again, but it wasn't. The whole incident turned very complicated and heart-wrenching so fast."

"I'm sure." She drummed her fingers on her knee. "I didn't know about the miscarriage."

"She lost the baby right after we married. Nobody but Grandfather knew about it. I'm actually surprised he kept it to himself."

When she said nothing else, only stared at him, a sad smile crossed his face. "Why do I get the idea you're feeling some satisfaction in my suffering?"

Beth stood from the bed and paced back and forth. "All this is really hard for me to understand, Cal. And if the baby did exist I'd never be happy about the loss of a child."

"Of course." His smile faded. "I shouldn't have implied that you were. I'm sorry. When I left here, I never intended to stay gone. I wanted a little space, some time to think and to plan. That's all. I missed you so much. Missy played on that then everything got out of control. She filled my head with— Well no, it was my fault, my responsibility, for listening, for being—"

"Gullible?"

He chuckled. "Good word. I guess it fits. Or did. I think I've grown a lot since then. Or at least I hope so."

"Gullible is what Nathan called me. He and Missy would have made a perfect pair." She sat back down beside him. Her eyes and attitude turned even more serious. "You have to promise me."

*Promise?* At least she hadn't run out on him and was still willing to talk. That gave him hope. "Anything."

"Promise that you'll never, ever leave me again."

A chance. She was giving them a chance! Relief rushed through him. He could definitely give her that promise. "I'll never, ever leave you again." He repeated the words, meaning them with all his heart. From now on he intended to run toward Beth, never away from her, no matter what. "You need to promise *me* something in return now."

Her eyes widened slightly. "What?"

"That you'll always trust me. No matter how things seem." When she hesitated, his heart began to sink. "Without trust we have nothing, Beth." After everything that had happened, if she could give him that promise, then he'd know for certain their relationship would make it.

"You're right." She nodded and took a deep breath. As she exhaled she repeated the words, looking into his eyes, "I'll always trust you, Cal. No matter how things seem."

He relaxed, knowing she meant it from the look in her eyes and knowing now they could move forward. "Will you stay with me a while? Until I fall asleep?"

"Yes, I'll stay." She smiled at him and covered his hand with hers.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emma followed Joe up to her room. She'd always loved the comfortable elegance of the Sinclair ranch. Mixed with a southwestern flair, the house looked impressive while maintaining a very welcoming feel.

"Agatha put a few things out on the dresser for you, so you can clean up. She set out a nightgown there for you too. It's one of Beth's, I think. Consider this room yours for as long as you're here. I think you'll be comfortable."

She nodded. "Where is your room?"

"Down at the end of the hall. I thought your father would feel better if we weren't right next to each other. You'll be safe here."

"I know. Thank you for suggesting I stay. After seeing how easily you got up to my room I wasn't looking forward to going back there tonight. Not with Nathan still on the loose."

"I'll talk to your father about the window when I go into town tomorrow. See if we can figure something out to make your room more secure so you're safer when you do go back." He reached out and stroked her cheek.

His gentle touch affected her so much she almost forgot what she'd been about to say. "Um, you're not going to tell him that you climbed up to my room, are you? I'm sure he assumes I somehow sneaked out the back door when I came out here. I didn't say anything to indicate otherwise in my note."

"I won't mention it. I'll simply tell him that I noticed how easily someone could get up to your window if they wanted." He cupped her cheek and his fingertips slid into her hair.

Emma closed her eyes and leaned closer.

Joe groaned and pulled her into his arms. He held her tightly. "Damn, if anything had happened to you. If that bastard had..." His voice trailed off.

Heart pounding, Emma's arms circled his back. She didn't want to think about Nathan. She wanted to think about Joe and how his touch made her feel. Every nerve ending in her body came alive in his arms.

He grabbed a handful of her hair and pulled her head back until their eyes met. Joe looked so delicious, so tempting. Emma licked her lips.

"Hell, woman! I'm not made of stone. I'm on the edge as it is. I can only take so much. And damn it all but that was my limit." He lowered his head and his lips swiftly descended to taste hers.

Yes. She practically melted against him. Joe's mouth felt so firm and warm against hers. She'd fantasized about this moment for years.

He teased her lips until she opened her mouth, then he swept inside. His tongue touched hers and they both moaned.

So good. He tasted like spice and passion. When the door slammed behind them it startled her and she pulled back. He'd kicked the door closed, she realized, as he stared intently into her eyes. *Oh my.*

Joe dipped down, lifted her in his arms and carried her to the bed.

She tried to speak but her voice stuck in her throat. She felt her heart beating right through her chest.

Gently and without a word, he lowered her to the mattress. He followed her down and his lips again covered hers.

She trembled beneath him, enjoying the weight and closeness of his body. One of his hands slid down to rest on her stomach. She mewled against his mouth and tangled her fingers in his hair.

Joe's tongue moved in and out of her mouth in such a way that her whole body throbbed, especially between her legs, as if she were feeling the same motion in more intimate parts. His hand lowered to caress her thighs through the dress. She arched against him, wanting more. Needing more.

She pulled her lips from his. "I ache, Joe," she whispered, out of breath. "Physically and emotionally. In a good way. A needy way. For you," she added, barely audible.

His brown eyes dilated and he stared intently at her, as if memorizing every inch of her face. "Me too. I want you so much." Lightly he trailed his fingers between her legs.

"Oh..." Even through her dress and petticoat she felt the contact. Her breasts seemed too full and she wanted to rip open her chemise. She wanted Joe to touch her. She wanted to touch him. Everywhere. She plucked at his shirt buttons.

He groaned and tugged at the bodice of her dress.

A light knock made their gazes shoot toward the door. They jumped apart, scrambling from the bed, and re-adjusted their clothing.

After they seemed relatively put together, Emma cleared her throat. "Y-Yes," she said, but her voice cracked. She swallowed hard, hating her lack of vocal control. It implied guilt, which she *was* feeling, sort of.

The door opened and Agatha peeked in. Her eyes widened as she stared first at Joe, then seemed to focus on nothing and no one in particular, as if not wanting to embarrass them. "Oh I'm sorry. I wanted to check and see if you needed anything, Miss Emma, before I leave for the night."

"No thank you. I'm fine."

After a slight hesitation, Agatha nodded and backed out into the hall. She left the door open though. As a hint?

A look of regret, then resignation, crossed Joe's face. "I think I better leave while I still have my wits about me."

Disappointment flooded her, even though it probably was best for now. "I'll see you tomorrow, right?" She looked forward to seeing him again, more than anything. Tonight her dreams would be filled with visions of him and his tender touches.

His fingers brushed her cheek. "Definitely."

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan looked around, making sure nobody lurked about, then he climbed up to Emma's room. Damn, getting up there was almost too easy. He'd bet more than one man had made the climb up to her. With the window facing away from the main street anyone could hide in the shadows until the perfect opportunity arose.

Slowly he pushed at the window. Unlocked. Good. Luck was finally with him tonight.

Lanelle had been busy after he'd finished with the whore so he'd thought now would be the perfect time to visit Emma. The anticipation of gently waking her then not-so-gently binding her burned through him. Maybe he'd even leave her exposed, bound naked in her bed, limbs spread, for her father to find, or whoever her first visitor turned out to be. Totally humiliate the little bitch, just like she deserved.

He really didn't know if he was up for another fuck so soon. But he wasn't against torturing the girl for a while. That always got him rock-hard.

Over the years, he'd put fear into a lot of whores. In fact, he fancied himself an expert at the torture and control of women.

Doing Emma would be more fun than most. She had such a luscious body. A really great ass and full lips. Her tits weren't as big as Elizabeth's but that was all right. As long as he had a mouthful, he was happy. He knew Doc Bray was out of the office because of the sign on the door, which worked out in his favor. He could take more time to treat her just right.

The room looked pitch black. No light came in under the door from the hall. Good.

He silently climbed through the window and glanced around. Dang! The little whore wasn't even here. At this time of night, he'd expected her to be sound asleep in her bed.

Maybe she was downstairs. The bed didn't look slept in. Strange, given the late hour. He'd take a quick stroll of the area. He'd find her.

He could make out a lantern on the desk, so he lit it, not wanting to tumble over anything in the dark. A stray piece of paper caught his eye. He picked up the note from the desk and scanned it. Addressed to her father.

"Damn it!" She'd gone to the Sinclair ranch. He crumpled the note in his hand and stuffed it into his pocket. These bitches would drive him crazy yet. "Fine." He'd leave *her* a note.

He sat at the desk and picked up a pen and pulled a pad of paper closer. "I'll put the fear of Nate in all of them." He chuckled. "Emma will go running to Elizabeth with this for sure." Quickly, he scribbled out the note then re-read what he'd written.

"Perfect." He rose and pushed the slip of paper under her pillow where she'd be certain to find it but nobody else would.

Before leaving, he opened her dresser drawer and lifted out one of her undergarments. "A souvenir." Later he'd rub it along his cock and fantasize about her lips sucking him deep until he spilled his seed all over the material. Then he'd return the garment to her...very nicely soiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal struggled to open his eyes but only managed a crack. He felt exhausted. Oh right. He'd gotten shot. Well, grazed by a bullet. For a moment he'd actually forgotten.

His stomach rumbled and he realized how hungry he felt. That must mean he was doing better. Last night he could hardly get a piece of bread down his throat. His head had hurt too badly to eat. A hearty breakfast was just what he needed to regain his strength.

Slowly he forced his eyes fully open and began to focus. Light filtered in from the slit between the curtains. Morning. Still early from the sun's position. When he moved he brushed against something soft and warm beside him.



His head turned. Beth. Tenderness immediately spread through him. He turned on his side next to her and stroked her cheek. She'd fallen asleep beside him and apparently stayed all night. Her raw wrists pained him. This morning they looked bruised. She should have let Emma or Doctor Bray wrap them.

He wasn't sure whether to wake her or not. He supposed he should before anyone found her here. Not that they'd done anything wrong but people had a tendency to talk. He wasn't that familiar with Agatha or how discreet the woman was, or any of the help here for that matter, if anyone should walk in on them.

"Sweetie," he whispered next to Beth's ear. "Wake up." She looked so beautiful asleep that he really hated to disturb her.

She stirred and her eyes fluttered open. "Cal?"

"Yes. It's me." Ahh, she looked even more beautiful awake, where he could see her gorgeous blue eyes. Waking up next to her like this every morning would truly be a blessing.

She pushed to a sitting position and looked toward the window. "Oh goodness. I slept right through the night, didn't I? I was so exhausted." Her attention quickly returned to him. "How are you feeling today?" She touched his head.

"Better. I'm glad you stayed. That's probably why I slept so well."

"Me too." She smiled. "I felt...at peace, relaxed. It's been a long time since I've felt that way." After examining his wound, she pulled her hand away from him and rubbed her back. "How about some breakfast?"

"How'd you know? I was just thinking of food."

"I figured you might be ready. I can hear your stomach. At least I won't have to twist your arm to eat something."

With a laugh, he patted his gut though his mind drifted to eating more than just food. He was definitely feeling better. "It is a bit loud, isn't it? Will you eat with me?" He wanted her nearby so he'd know she was safe. Not that he expected Nathan to storm the house, but still, he wanted her within reach for perfectly justified and selfish reasons.

Her grin matched his own. "I wouldn't have it any other way."

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you get the powder?" Nathan asked, excitement in his voice. He could hardly contain himself, knowing his new plan was about to be put into action.

From her pocket, Lanelle pulled out a bottle with some sort of white substance in it. She lifted the vial toward the light. "Here it is."

"Where'd you get it? Certainly not from Doc Bray?"

"No, of course not. I got it from Dale."

"The barber?"

"Why do you think so many folks still go to him for tending? He has some good stuff. He gets it from someone back east, from what I hear."

"What is it?" He studied the bottle.

"Morphine."

"I've heard of that." He frowned. "Isn't morphine a pain killer? That's not what I wanted."

"After a while she'll be begging for it and willing to do anything to get a dose. And I mean anything." An evil twinkle entered her eyes and she smiled.

"Really?" He returned her smile. *Perfect*. "That sounds exactly like what I need. So how do I give it to her?"

"Mix it in with her drink so she doesn't know, in the beginning. You can make her feel really happy and uninhibited or make her so relaxed she'll pass out, depending on how much you give her. If you give her too much, it'll kill her. So be careful."

Nathan didn't want her dead. Not yet anyhow. "How much is too much?"

"Hell if I know. Start small."

"Well damn. I don't have time to experiment. I'll start medium. I need to get her under control on the first attempt or at least knocked out."

Lanelle shrugged. "Your choice."

"Do you have the room prepared in the basement?" Everything needed to be in place and ready before he proceeded.

"All done. After you get her, hide her in the caves until I say it's clear. We want to make certain none of the other girls finds out she's here. One of them might try to help her."

"Roberts will look for her in the caves since that's where I originally kidnapped her from."

"Well, hide her somewhere else then. It's going to be tricky getting you two into the whorehouse during the day without anyone seeing you. And there's no way at night."

"I've been thinkin' about that. We'll use a wagon. I'll keep her in the back under a tarp. You drive it around to the rear of the whorehouse. Nobody will see if we're quick about getting her out."

"All right. How are you going to get near her to put the stuff in her drink?"

"I'm not." He smiled.

A wary look crossed Lanelle's face. She planted her hands on her hips. "What's that mean? I hope you don't expect me —"

"No, of course not. Don't worry. I've got a plan."

"You've always got a plan."

Yes. He prided himself on figurin' out all the angles. His ingenuity sometimes amazed even himself.

\* \* \* \* \*

When Joe entered the study, Emma looked up from the book she was reading. She placed the volume on a side table, bored with the story anyhow. "How'd it go in town?"

"Fine, I guess. I sent the messages. Hopefully, we'll get responses soon. I talked to your father too. He's going to get the wall repaired outside your room so no one can climb up or down. He's also going to have some shutters put up on your window that will lock from the inside. I don't think he was fooled though. He knew I was up in your room."

"Oh goodness. Did he say anything?"

"Not directly. We both kind of pretended otherwise. Let's leave it at that and hope for the best. At least he didn't punch me."

"Did my father give you a bag for me?"

"He hadn't packed it yet. Apparently, some child got snake-bit early this morning and he's been tending the boy."

"Oh no. Who was it? Will he be all right?" She hated to think of any child suffering.

"He'll be fine. We don't know the lad. He and his family came in on the stage yesterday and were staying over at the Mule Deer Inn, waiting to connect with another stage coming through in a couple of days. We'll send someone into town later today to get your bag."

She nodded. "All right. Thanks."

"While I was out, I looked around for Nathan. Asked some questions. Nobody seems to have seen him." He set down his hat and unstrapped his gunbelt. "I'll be going back out soon to help the men move a herd of horses to another pasture with more water. So I won't be around until late. Will you be all right here?"

"I'll be fine. I'll do some more reading, take a walk in the garden maybe, something." She wasn't used to being idle but wasn't about to complain, given the situation.

"Just be sure to stay close to the house. Don't wander around."

"I won't." She wished she had her journal. Writing passed the time for her and relaxed her. Maybe she'd borrow a piece of paper or two from Wade's desk. Putting her feelings to paper always helped her sort out her emotions.

"How's Cal today?"

"I haven't seen him or Beth yet. The best thing for them is rest. I'm sure they're both exhausted after everything they went through yesterday."

"Yes, I can imagine. And Agatha? Where is she?"

She wondered at all the questions. She supposed he did need to keep track of everyone's whereabouts to ensure their safety, but still, she felt something else was going on. "In the kitchen, I think."

“Good.” He grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet.

“What—”

His lips covered hers in a hot kiss. Her fingers automatically curled around his arms and she hung on, loving the way he took charge. Their tongues mingled until she felt near to fainting.

When he pulled back, he smiled down at her. “To get me through the day.” He let her go, grabbed his hat and gun and strolled out of the room.

Emma stood staring after him in a fog of desire. Her legs shaking, she sank back down into the chair she’d been sitting in. “Goodness.” If she stayed at the ranch much longer...

She smiled and leaned back against the cushion, hugging her arms around herself. In her head, she created new and exciting fantasies about the sexy Mister Joe Jackson and wondered if they might somehow come true.

## Chapter Twelve

When Beth entered the room with a bowl of water and some towels, Cal felt of his face. A few whiskers here and there but not bad. He didn't see a razor in her hands or anywhere else. Maybe stashed in her pocket? He did notice that she'd finally wrapped her wrists.

When she turned the door lock, he went on alert. "What are you doing?" They'd enjoyed a pleasant breakfast of eggs and bacon and toast together and he hadn't really expected to see her again until later.

"I'm going to clean you up. Agatha said you asked her to prepare a tub. I don't want you trekking up and down the stairs and trying to get in and out of a slippery tub yet."

"I see. So you're going to...bathe me? Yourself?"

She wasn't looking at him but moving things around on the dresser that didn't need moving. "You have a problem with me doing that?"

"Um, no." Hell, no. He was all for it and so was his cock, which twitched in anticipation. With the door locked, he intended to thoroughly enjoy any attention she gave his body, even though they both knew he was perfectly capable of bathing himself.

"Take off your shirt, please."

After she'd gone through the trouble of setting all this up, he didn't intend to let her get off that easily. "I could use some help."

She turned toward him, a concerned look on her face. After a brief moment, she smiled. "You're teasing."

"Actually, no. I would like you to take off my shirt." He wanted to feel her hands on him, feel and watch her undress him.

She brought a couple of cloths and the bowl of water over and set them on the side table next to the bed. She sat on the mattress and reached for his night shirt. "I think you're milking this sympathy stuff for all it's worth." Slowly, she unbuttoned the shirt.

He held back a groan, but barely. "You're right."

She laughed and his heart soared. With his cooperation, she tugged the shirt off and neatly laid it aside. After a glance at his bared chest, she turned and dipped one of the cloths into the water, then wrung it out. He could tell she was pretending to be unaffected by him. But he felt the heat coming off her body, saw the slight tremble of her hands.

Beth turned back to him and glided the damp cloth along his chest. He leaned back against the pillows and enjoyed the moment. Her hands slid past his ribs, down to his

stomach. She hesitated, chewed on her bottom lip a moment, then released the bit of flesh and pulled back.

Interesting. "What were you thinking just now?" he asked in a low voice.

Her gaze snapped up to his and her face flushed. "Thinking? Nothing. Why?"

With a chuckle, he reached out to stroke her cheek. "Put the cloth down, Beth. We'll use it later. Maybe to clean *both* of us up."

"What? I don't quite—understand." A look of wariness, then awareness, crossed her face. "Now, Cal. I only wanted—"

"Yes, I know what you wanted." He took the white cloth from her hand and set it aside. Feeling his passion for her building within him, he pulled her toward him until their mouths met.

Her hands flattened on his chest, but she didn't fight him.

His tongue teased her petal-soft lips. He needed to get closer to her, touch every inch of her body.

A moan escaped her and she opened for him.

He swept inside, thoroughly tasting her, craving to taste even more. A concern struck him hard. He pulled back, his breathing labored. "Where is everyone right now?" He didn't want someone interrupting them, pounding on the door to get in, thinking something might be wrong because it was locked.

"The hands are out moving a herd or on guard duty or doing other chores. Agatha is in the kitchen. I think Emma is in the study reading. Joe went to town earlier. I'm not sure if he's back yet or not."

He smiled and relaxed. So the upstairs was theirs for a while. His fingers began unbuttoning the back of her dress.

Her eyes widened, then smoldered.

When he realized she wasn't going to stop him, his heart rate kicked up. He leaned forward and kissed her neck while he continued unbuttoning her dress. His tongue darted out to taste her skin.

"Mmm." She squirmed and her fingers curled against his chest. "Are you sure you're up for this?"

"Oh, I'm definitely *up*." Slowly, he peeled the dress off her shoulders as far as he could. He kissed her ear, her cheek, her chin, gradually pushing her backward, until she lay flat on her back on the bed.

Wondering what her response would be, he pulled the dress down to her waist, trapping her arms at her sides within the material. When she looked at him with excitement and desire in her eyes instead of fear, he groaned. His hands caressed her shoulders, easing down to the ties of her chemise. One tie at a time he pulled them open, exposing the flesh beneath.

As he opened her chemise, Beth arched her back. He stared down at her bare breasts. Her rosy nipples caught his attention and brought back memories of the cave, except here he got a much better view of her creamy skin.

"Lick them," she whispered.

His gaze snapped to hers and his cock turned rock-hard. "Damn, you sure know how to drive a man crazy with lust."

"Only you."

With a groan, he leaned over her and lapped at one hard nipple.

"Mmm," Beth responded.

He circled the tip, sucked it into his mouth and drew on the fleshy bud. Just as delicious as he remembered. He released the nipple to give the other one the same attention. Perfect breasts, he thought. Full and firm. When he nibbled on the opposite bud, she squirmed beneath him.

"Yes...oh, I like that."

Cal squeezed her breast, lapping and sucking and biting the nipple. He couldn't get enough of her. He feathered soft kisses all along her cool flesh. He could taste her breasts every day for the rest of his life and never tire of them...or her. He took the first nipple back into his mouth and sucked on it hard.

"Oh!" Beth struggled to move but the dress bound her in place.

At his mercy. He liked that. He wanted to make her as crazy with need as she made him. Begging him for fulfillment was exactly what he needed from her, so she'd never regret anything intimate between them.

She whimpered and arched her hips.

He pulled back and looked into her eyes. "What do you need? What do you want me to do to you?"

"Between my legs," she whispered. "Like in the cave."

"You want my fingers to stroke you there?"

"Yes and..."

"And? Tell me."

Her face flushed, but she didn't look away. "Something I heard about. But you might not want to—"

"What is it? Anything." Anything she wanted, he'd do for her.

"Could you...kiss me down there too? Maybe use your tongue a little. That would be so exciting." She rushed the last part out as a mere whisper, looking at him in expectation, mixed with uncertainty.

*Damn.* She'd actually heard of a man doing that to a woman? He wondered from where and if she'd be willing to return the favor. She was so open and seductive. "You want me to lick your cunt?" Her sharp intake of breath told him all he needed to know. "I'll lick you there. As much as you want."

He felt her need, her desire escalate. He saw it in her eyes. Her breathing quickened and the sexual energy coming off her body was more than he'd ever expected or dreamed of.

Slowly, he began pulling up the skirt of her dress.

Beth's heart pounded in her chest. She needed Cal. He made her feel things no man ever had. Made her want things no man ever had. She couldn't get the memory of everything they'd done in the cave out of her head. She wanted to experience that same pleasure again with him. And more.

While she was bathing him, her thoughts had drifted to opening his pants and washing every inch of his body...with her bare hands. Something must have shown on her face, for he'd picked up on her rising desire.

His fingers touched her bare thighs above the stockings she wore. She tensed for a moment then relaxed and eased her legs open just slightly in invitation. She saw Cal swallow hard.

"Lift your hips," he told her.

When she did, he slid down her short pantalets and discarded them. All the while, he looked into her eyes. Her dress had slipped back to cover her, so her lower body was still hidden from his view when his gaze finally shifted. Her pulse raced, needing this more than she ever believed she could.

Cal looked back up at her. "Any second thoughts before I lick you?"

For a moment, her voice caught in her throat. "None." And she meant it. She trusted him with her body and with her life.

Gradually, he folded back her dress and petticoat, resting the material on her stomach. His eyes devoured her nakedness. When he spoke, his voice sounded strained. "Spread your legs again for me."

Her heart pounded and she felt her whole body flush. She spread her legs.

"More, Beth. Really wide."

So decadent, she thought as she willingly complied. Exposing everything to Cal felt so right.

"Yes. Like that. Beautiful."

Thank goodness she'd locked the door. If anyone stumbled upon them now, with her arms trapped and her dress bunched up around her waist, she wouldn't be able to do much to cover herself or explain away their actions.

She glanced toward the window. Good. Drapes were tightly closed. Not that anyone could see in unless they climbed up a tree.

The possibility of discovery wasn't enough to discourage her from being with Cal. She just didn't want to flaunt their newly intimate relationship, if given the choice. Things would be easier that way.



Cal leaned over and lapped at the inside of her thigh.

She gasped. So good. The touch of his tongue made her whole body ache! She felt the air between her legs. And Cal's breath. An arousing sensation.

His thumbs touched her, opening her cunt wider. A whimper of need and anticipation almost spilled from her lips, but she held back the sound. Then the tip of his tongue touched her, brushing against the bud of nerves he'd caressed back in the cave. "Ah!" She couldn't stop the cry from escaping. Never had she felt anything close to the intimate stroking of his warm, moist tongue. Her entire body tingled.

He smiled.

To her delight, he again lowered his head between her thighs. He licked, then sucked that bud right into his mouth. He began to draw on it, slowly and steadily.

"Cal!" She bucked beneath him. This certainly wasn't the same as when his fingers had stroked her. This sensation shot through her like lightning, over and over again, with each draw of his lips.

His hands slid beneath her bottom and he held her tightly.

"Oh-oh!" She cried out, the tension building inside her. She bit down on her bottom lip, trying to keep quiet. When his tongue touched her, while he sucked, her body exploded. She screamed, unable to control herself, and thrashed beneath him. "Cal! Yes!" She couldn't take much more, but she wanted more at the same time.

His finger. Oh! He'd moved one hand and was sliding his finger up inside her! Now, two fingers, curling them, stroking her. "Yes! Oh Cal, yes!" She heard her voice as if from a distance—crying, begging, needing this. She'd never felt anything up inside her before, filling her. The sensation made her crave even more.

Her body exploded again, as if she were shattering into a million pieces. She shrieked and then everything fell silent. Damn. Had she been as loud as she'd sounded? She hoped not. With a sigh, she closed her eyes. She couldn't move and didn't want to.

Vaguely, she felt Cal pull out his fingers. With a gentle touch, he removed her dress and undergarments but left her stockings on, which intrigued her.

"Good thing there's a second floor. The whole house might have come running."

She opened her eyes to see him on his knees next to her, gazing at her with a soft look on his face. "Sorry. I couldn't be quiet," she whispered, barely finding the energy to speak.

"I know. I'm glad." He stared down at her naked body. "I wanted to please you."

"You definitely did that. Why did you leave my stockings on?" She couldn't help her curiosity.

"It's sexy."

She chuckled but quickly sobered at his sudden change, at the intense look that crossed his face. She could see the outline of his cock clearly through his night pants and looked forward to exploring his naked body.

Being intimate with Cal couldn't be wrong. No matter what anyone said or thought. It felt too right. Too good. While still on his knees atop the mattress, he pulled open the string of his pants.

Her dress no longer restraining her, she rose up on her elbows, not a bit self-conscious about being naked in front of him. She wanted to see him naked too. Touch him. She was willing to do anything to give him the same type of pleasure he'd just given her.

She knew all about the oral aspects of sex. Not long ago, Emma had read about the act in a medical book, of all places. They'd discussed the sensual act at the time. Beth had been totally put off by the idea, much more so than Emma. But after running it through her head for a while, her curiosity had peaked. Finally, she had gotten up the courage to ask Skylar about it.

Her sister had flushed beet red, then told her things no mother would probably ever tell her daughter, saying if she were marrying, she should know about certain aspects of the relationship between a husband and a wife. Beth was glad for the knowledge.

Cal pushed his pants down his hips and after maneuvering them off his legs, dropped them to the floor.

She swallowed at the sight of his cock, which appeared much bigger than she'd expected. Long, thick, hard. She sat up and reached out for him, more curious than wary, as she'd once thought she'd be. Actually, she felt eager, wanting to know every inch of him and what brought him pleasure.

On a groan, he closed his eyes and let her explore.

She traced the ridges with her fingertips and curled her fingers around the shaft to test the width. Her fingers didn't meet. The texture felt velvet soft over a hard-as-rock purplish-red base. The tip interested her the most. The blunt shape, the clear drops of liquid. She smiled, knowing what those meant. She dipped her head and boldly licked them off.

"Oh damn!" he groaned. "Yes!"

His musky taste and smell filled her. Decadent. Her fingers lowered and grazed his balls.

He jerked and his eyes shot open. "Easy down there."

Nodding, she lowered her head and let her tongue trace them lightly. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Cal's hand fist and relax. She glanced up at him. Sweat had broken out on his forehead.

She kissed the tip of his cock and let her tongue brush back and forth along the warm flesh. His hands came up like a rattlesnake, so quickly he startled her, and she gasped.

One hand grabbed his shaft, the other tangled in her hair. "Enough teasing. You like the taste? Then suck on the tip. Now!"

His voice so demanding, his touch so demanding, but not hurtful... She loved that she affected him this strongly. Her lips slowly closed over his cock and she began to suck.

"Ah! Yes!"

Her fingers rested on his thighs and she sucked more vigorously, moving her mouth up and down his cock, as best she could. He was too large for her to take much of him in her mouth, but she did her best. Her hands slid around to his ass and she scraped her fingernails along his skin and down the back of his thighs, hoping it might stimulate him more.

Groaning, he leaned over her, holding her head more tightly now, breathing heavily. "Don't stop," he ground out. "Use your tongue. Yes, like that. Oh yes!"

She knew what would happen if she continued but was determined to give him that pleasure. "Mmm. Mmm."

"Ah, Beth! I'm about to—"

Cal roared and his seed shot into her mouth and down her throat. She choked a little at first, not having expected it, but then relaxed and just let it happen. When he seemed about done, she sucked for more and swallowed quickly as he spewed again.

"O-Oh..." He moaned low and deep. His body jerked a couple of times then slowly his grip on her loosened.

She felt him relax and finally he pulled out of her mouth, collapsing back against the pillows. She coughed a couple of times and wiped her mouth.

"Sorry about that," he said, his voice barely audible.

The only thing she cared about was his pleasure. "Was it...all right?"

"All right?" He stared into her eyes. "That was one damn great suck, Beth. Excuse the language."

She didn't fault him, only smiled, feeling relieved and crawled up next to him, snuggling against his chest. "I'm glad I pleased you."

"You more than pleased me, sweetheart."

She traced circles along his bare thigh. "I wish I could stay but I'm going to have to go before people get suspicious. I'm expected downstairs."

He wrapped his arms around her. "I know."

"Do you think anyone heard us?"

"I don't think so. I'm glad Wade and Skylar built me a room in the family wing, instead of me having to stay in the guest wing. It seems much more private over here."

"I'm glad too. They always hoped you would come home some day. They wanted you to have your own place in the house."

He nodded, a slight smile on his face. He dipped his head and looked into her eyes. "They? What about you?"

"Me too." She turned her head and kissed one flat, brown nipple, letting her tongue trace the bud of flesh.

Cal groaned. "I wish I were well enough for another round right now, but you wore me out. I'm not at full strength yet."

She smiled slightly. "Sorry."

His arms tightened around her. "Are you all right?" he asked in a gentle voice. "I mean, you don't regret this, do you?"

She looked up at him. "Not at all." Her fingers brushed across the smattering of hair on his chest. "I think we both need to get cleaned up and dressed though. Someone's bound to come checking soon."

She pulled away but he caught her hand before she got too far. "Come back and see me tonight?" His eyes looked hopeful.

"I'll come." She felt her body flush just thinking about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

Emma pulled a weed from Skylar's garden and tossed it aside. So beautiful. So peaceful. The sound of a water fountain in the background soothed her nerves. She imagined Skylar spent quite a bit of time out here. She stood and turned.

A man loomed over her and pushed her back against the wall. His arms trapped her, coming up on either side of her shoulders. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

She gasped and her heart began to pound. Her mouth opened but he spoke again before she could answer.

"I told you to stay close to the house. I could have been anyone."

"I am close to the house, Joe. I'm pinned up against it." She almost laughed, but restrained herself. His overprotectiveness warmed her, for she knew he cared.

At her answer, a smile tugged at his lips. "Don't play with me."

An answering smile lingered on her lips, along with a provocative response. Joe's eyes grew intense, as if knowing her thoughts.

"Unless you want me up under your skirt right here, you better not say what I see in your eyes."

Her smile faded and she gulped at his brazen words, immediately thinking it best to change the subject. For now. "I-I don't know what you mean." She glanced away a moment before meeting his gaze again. "I, um, got bored. I'm used to tending to the clinic. The garden is just outside the study. I'm safe here." She tried not to think about his masculine presence, his mouth not that far from hers, the desire clearly visible in his eyes.

"You're not safe from me."

His deep voice rumbled in his throat, causing her entire body to ache. "You're all sweaty." It was the only thing she could think to say with the blood roaring in her ears and her legs trembling beneath her.

He pulled back. "So I am." Quickly, he stripped off his shirt and wiped down his chest.

Emma practically swooned. Her senses felt overloaded, looking at all that bare masculine flesh. Too much.

Helping her father, she'd seen lots of men's chests, but Joe's body seemed more muscular, more defined. Combined with his flirting and passionate looks, she felt as if she were drowning in a pool of hot desire. "Did you get the horses moved?" she asked, trying her best to keep her voice steady.

"Yes. It went well and faster than I thought." He gave her more space by stepping back another foot. "I'm going to clean up out back. I'll be in to change in a few minutes. Go on inside. I'll meet you in the study a bit later and you can get me caught up on everything that happened around here while I was out."

"All right." She nodded, watching him stroll from the garden, paying particular attention to his broad shoulders and the muscles in his back. "Oh my," she whispered and fanned herself with her hand. He was almost too much to handle. But she was having such a good time trying.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe splashed water from the trough over his chest and back. Overall, the day had gone well. He'd done everything needed and nothing bad had cropped up to add to their current list of troubles.

His only problem now, besides Nathan, seemed to be staying away from Emma. He didn't know what was going on with him lately. Every time he got around her, he couldn't control himself.

But then what man would be able to resist her? He wanted her so badly he hurt. And she seemed to want him too. That didn't make controlling himself easy. Last night he'd relieved himself with his own hand, he'd been so pent up with frustration and need.

He wasn't sure what had provoked him to strip his shirt off in front of her. Well actually, her words had encouraged him. After he'd done the deed, he clearly saw the desire in her eyes. She had liked what she saw, which pleased him tremendously.

A movement of skirts caught his eye. "Who...oh." Just Agatha going out to the smokehouse, which reminded him about the downed fence line behind the small building. He needed to get a man on that tomorrow. He wanted the ranch as secure as possible.

Maybe Agatha was planning to make some of her famous spare ribs tonight. His stomach rumbled at the thought. Seeing Agatha also brought back memories of his and

Emma's heated encounter in her bedroom, of him carrying her over to the bed, of his fingers fumbling to get her bodice open. Damn, his cock ached.

He doubted the housekeeper would gossip about finding him and Emma in her room with the door closed and them looking disheveled but he still worried. He never wanted to do anything that would reflect badly on Emma. He cared about her too much. When rumors had spread about him and Skylar years ago, her life had gotten much more difficult. He never wanted Emma to go through that.

He'd be glad when Skylar, Wade and Colton made it back home safely. The entire family should be here and together. Besides, it was time they were finally reunited with Cal.

Unfortunately, he knew that sooner or later Nathan would show up and try to destroy the family. He felt it in his bones. Carlyle wasn't the type to just run away with his tail between his legs.

Even with the hands guarding the property, Nathan could still pick them off with a rifle if he managed to get close enough and maneuvered a clear shot. When he'd seen Emma out in the garden, his heart had almost stopped. It probably was one of the safer places on the ranch, fairly secluded, but his mind had conjured up all sorts of gut-wrenching images.

They couldn't hide out here forever though. They had to live their lives. And if he was wrong about Carlyle returning, Nathan might haunt them forever. They'd have to try to put him out of their minds, eventually, and hope for the best.

He pulled his shirt back on. He needed to change. Maybe he could talk Emma into a nice, safe game of checkers later, after dinner. Anything to keep his mind off stripping her naked and sinking his cock between her thighs. Her staying here was more of a lure than he'd anticipated. Especially with her sleeping only a couple of doors down.

Last night, after everyone had gone to their rooms, while he'd thought of her lying in a bed nearby, he'd been tempted to sneak down the hall to her room and knock on her door. Knowing she'd probably let him in, she'd probably let him do whatever he wanted to her body, had made the desire hard to resist.

He smiled. Maybe he was being too cocky here. What had almost happened on her bed didn't necessarily mean she'd be willing to strip bare and spread her legs for him. But a man could dream.

\* \* \* \* \*

"I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it," Nathan said, feeling the frustration build inside him. "Just do it." This was his last hope, his last chance. Nothing and nobody was going to prevent him from succeeding this time.

"I'm not sure when I'll be able to. It's tricky."

"Tonight. It has to be done at night, so we can get her out unnoticed. Bring her to the pond between the old property lines before the Sinclair and Davenport lands were joined. You know the one."

"Yes, I know, but —"

He grabbed his reluctant partner's arm. "You're in this just as deeply as I am. Either you come out, like me, with enough money to live on for the rest of your life, or you end up in jail or dead. If I get caught, I'm turning you in too. You're the one who fed me all the information I needed, in exchange for," he smiled, "favors."

Nathan watched the resulting play of emotions, the resignation. He'd won this battle. He intended to win them all.

"All right. I'll do it. But I'm not killing anyone."

"I'm not asking you to." He pulled out the vial of morphine and handed it over. "Do it just like I told you. And bring the vial to the pond with you. I need it back."

"Fine."

His plan was ingenious and would make things so much easier. By the time they realized what had happened, it would be too late.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth ran into Emma outside the study. After one look at her friend, concern struck her. "Are you all right?"

"Of course. Why?" Emma gave her a look of confusion.

"You're flushed."

Emma palmed her cheeks. "Am I? I guess I'm a little warm today. Where have you been? I haven't seen you for most of the day."

"Sorry about that. I slept in then had breakfast with Cal, then my daily chores kept me busy." She felt good at sounding so in control and not even stumbling over her lie.

Normally she'd confide in Emma about every little thing, but her relationship with Cal was special and she wanted to keep it private for now. She couldn't wait until she saw him again. She loved being around him and how he made her feel — emotionally as well as physically. They'd lost so much time that now she wanted to spend every moment she could with Cal.

"How are your wrists?" Emma asked her. "I see they're wrapped."

"Fine. They just throb a little. Agatha wrapped them. I hope you don't mind. I couldn't find you."

"As long as they're taken care of, that's what is important. I was out in the garden earlier, which is why you probably missed me. Will you and Cal be having dinner with Joe and me tonight?"

"No, I don't think so. Cal should rest." She almost choked on those words. Emma knew Cal wasn't so badly hurt that he couldn't eat at the table. "The stairs might be too

much for him." That sounded halfway reasonable, at least and was part of the same excuse she'd used earlier to bathe him.

Emma simply nodded.

"I don't want him to eat alone, so I'll be joining him upstairs. You understand?" Emma could probably see right through her but she doubted her friend would say so.

"Oh sure. It's no problem."

"Without us at dinner, that'll give you and Joe some time alone together." Beth smiled. "That will be nice, don't you think?" All right, so she was being obvious now but she didn't care. She really did believe that Emma and Joe belonged together. A little romantic time alone might help them along.

"Yes, that will be nice."

When that's all her friend said, disappointment cut her enthusiasm. She couldn't tell if Emma was excited at the prospect or not. Seemed Emma wasn't going to confide in her either about her feelings.

Well, she understood, she supposed. New and growing relationships were fragile at best. They'd both have plenty to talk about when each of them felt ready.



## Chapter Thirteen

Emma sat in front of the mirror in her room, fussing over her hair. She couldn't get the style just right.

Would Joe prefer it up or down, she wondered? Down probably. Men usually did. After taking out the pins, she brushed the long black tresses until they shone.

She wished she had one of her fancy dresses with her to wear to dinner tonight. Well, she'd just have to make do.

When Beth had obviously wanted to know her feelings about dining alone with Joe, she'd tried to appear casual and unaffected. Why? She wasn't certain. The truth was her heart was pounding.

She supposed she didn't want to get her hopes up. Just because Joe flirted outrageously with her didn't mean he was interested in anything more than a quick fling.

Ever since he'd carried her to the bed and they'd tried to get each other's clothing off, she'd been in a permanent state of arousal. She craved so much more than a kiss and she knew he did too.

Joe's kisses were more sensual than any she'd ever experienced. Her fantasies about the man were pure decadence.

She stood up and smoothed her dress. Time to go. Though her only hunger as she stepped out into the hallway was for a taste of Joe Jackson, any way she could get him.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Finally.* Beth hadn't thought the day would ever pass. She entered Cal's room with a tray of food. She'd looked forward to seeing him for hours, ever since she'd come up to bathe him earlier. What a sensual experience! She'd been practically useless in her chores, her mind on other, sexier activities. "I brought us dinner."

"I probably could have come down."

"I know. But then what excuse would I have to be up here with you for an extended period of time?" She laughed and gave him a sexy grin. "Besides, it also gives Joe and Emma a chance to have a romantic dinner alone together."

"Romantic? Joe and Emma? I didn't realize anything serious had developed there. He hasn't said anything about it to me. They're involved now?"

"Not yet." But she kept hoping. They were perfect for each other. Besides, Emma needed a good man in her life. Someone she could love and depend on. Now that she and Cal had found their way back to each other, she wanted the same happiness for her

best friend. She believed that Joe could give Emma the kind of love she needed and deserved.

"Meaning?"

"Haven't you seen the way they look at each other?" The whole ranch was already chattering about it.

"I've seen Joe looking at Emma. But men do that. I didn't realize the attraction was mutual. I hadn't noticed Emma paying any extra attention to him."

"She tries to be subtle about it but she practically drools every time he gets near her. I don't see how you could have missed it." The sexual energy between those two was palpable.

"I've been distracted. Drools, huh? Well, good for them. I wish them the best. I hope it works out."

"Me too." She arranged the plates on a table in the corner. "Come on over. You're well enough for a proper sit-down meal."

"Definitely. I'm glad there's a table in here. I've been itching to get out of this bed. I sat in one of the chairs earlier and watched the goings-on outside but I got bored. I need to be doing something." He sat across from her.

"Soon. Don't push yourself." She draped a napkin across her lap. "Are you sure you're not dizzy or anything?" She didn't want him passing out on her. Despite his protests, he'd had a fairly active day. Sexually, at least.

"No, I'm fine. I don't even think my wound is as bad as the last time." He touched the side of his head.

Worry filled her every time she thought about what could have happened to him. "You were passed out a lot longer from what I remember about the first time, how Agatha described things when you got here this time and how far the caves are from the ranch."

"Oh was I?" He shrugged and picked up his fork. "I'm older. Not as resilient, maybe."

"Maybe." As she picked at her fried chicken, she tried to keep her voice light. "Just don't try for three shots to the head. All right?" The light tone didn't ease her worry.

"Believe me, I'll do my best. What have you been up to today?"

"Not as much as usual, since I'm mostly staying in as Joe ordered. I sent a man into town to tell the school teacher that I wouldn't be in to help with the children for a while and asked the hand to go over to Doctor Bray's and pick up that bag of items for Emma. Then I sent another man to check and see if we'd gotten any responses to those telegrams Joe sent and to pick up some supplies, which I finally got stored late this afternoon."

"Were there any responses yet?" He buttered a biscuit.

"Not yet. We'll just have to be patient, I guess. I'm so worried about what might happen." She sighed.

He reached across the table and patted her hand. "Try to keep your mind on other matters. Anything else going on?"

Obviously, he was trying to distract her from her worries. She loved him like crazy for that. "The hands moved a herd of horses to another pasture with more water earlier today. I don't think we're going to have to worry about a drought this year. We've had quite a bit of rain now. Oh, and one of the cows is sick and not giving milk. Emma mixed up some sort of potion. Hopefully, it will work." She popped a bite of chicken into her mouth.

"Why don't we sneak out to the pond after dinner?"

*The pond.* Just the thought made her want him. Their own private romantic getaway. But going there wasn't possible. "Cal, you're not up to that yet, so get it out of your head. It's too far for you to walk and we can't sneak out in a wagon. Not with all the men guarding the grounds."

An exaggerated frown crossed his face. "You're no fun."

She smiled at him. "We can have plenty of fun right here. Nobody is going to be in this part of the house tonight. I left orders that you're not to be disturbed."

"Plenty of fun, huh?" He laughed. "Are you propositioning me?"

"Yes."

His laughter grew louder. "Do you have any idea how much I love you?"

Her heart lurched and she patted her chest. The smile faded from her face and her eyes misted with tears. The second time now he'd told her, since returning. "Why did you never tell me that before?" she asked, her voice low. "Before you left?"

"That I love you?"

She nodded.

A real frown crossed his face this time. "Certainly you knew."

"You never said the words to me. Sometimes I wasn't so sure. I really needed to hear them, Cal."

He set aside his fork. "I'm sorry. I do love you, Beth." He reached across the table and laid his hand over hers. "I always have, since the first moment I set eyes on you that day in town. With all my heart."

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe stared across the table at Emma. In the flickering candlelight, she looked more beautiful than any woman he'd ever known. Her face flawless, her eyes sparkling, the small smile that always looked like she held some special secret. And a seductive voice that could send any man to his knees. The idea of checkers he'd thought up earlier quickly faded from his thoughts.

"You're staring."

"Am I?" He smiled.

"You know, I think Beth did this on purpose."

"Did what?"

"Took Cal his dinner. He's not that badly hurt. I'm sure he could have come down and joined us. They obviously wanted to be alone."

Joe knew Wade and Skylar wouldn't approve of Cal and Beth's private bedroom meetings. He wasn't going to do anything to make things harder on those two though. He knew Cal loved Beth beyond all reason and he approved of them being together. Besides, he'd promised Cal he wouldn't interfere.

In the end, Wade and Skylar would be thrilled too, just not so thrilled about the speed and level of intimacy of their relationship. But who knew? Maybe Cal and Beth would be married by the time Wade and Skylar returned. No plans had been mentioned. Still, he held out hope.

The family would get over any disappointment about missing the ceremony, he was certain. It's not like they couldn't have a second ceremony, if they wanted.

"I'm glad they left us alone. In the candlelight." He'd seen the look Beth gave Emma when she took a tray of fried chicken, biscuits, gravy and corn and left them to head upstairs to Cal. Beth was doing some matchmaking for sure. Not that he was complaining.

"Me too," Emma replied, looking up at him from beneath her lowered lashes.

"Then you don't mind us having this private dinner?" He didn't think so, or hoped not, but needed to ask anyhow.

"No." She looked at him directly now and had spoken without hesitation or shyness. After a moment though, she asked in a more subdued voice, "Are you really glad, Joe?"

Other than her question, the slight quiver of her voice was the only real clue so far that she actually seemed unsure of how he felt. She had to know how he felt. He'd told her that he wanted her. Was that the extent of his need, he wondered? Women needed more, he knew that. He just wasn't certain exactly how much he needed. "More glad than you'll ever know."

Both of them seemed to need the extra reassurance from the other as they tentatively moved forward in their developing relationship. He'd never felt this kind of excitement over a woman. She was different. Special.

Physically, he ached for her. Emotionally, he cared more for her than any other woman. Even more than Beth and Skylar, whom he considered family, he was slowly beginning to realize. He knew Emma had plans to go to medical school in the future though. He didn't want to ruin that opportunity for her.

Hell if he knew what to do about his feelings. "How about some checkers?" he asked, knowing it sounded unappealing, but he felt out of options at this point.

"Checkers? You want to play checkers? I was thinking of maybe taking a walk in the moonlight."

Ah, so tempting. "It's not safe right now to go wandering about after dark, Emma. You know that. Even with me there by your side. Maybe especially with me there by your side," he mumbled at the end, his gaze straying to her breasts.

Emma shifted in her chair. "Well, can't you come up with something more exciting than checkers? I've been sitting around all day. I need to do something active."

He chuckled, his eyes meeting hers. "Oh, I can think up lots of activities to get both of our hearts racing. None of which are a bit proper."

Her mouth opened with some reply but the opportunity passed. Agatha entered the room to clear away the dishes. Emma hid a smile behind her napkin.

"Dessert?" the housekeeper asked.

"Not for me, thank you," Emma replied, lowering the napkin.

"Me either."

Agatha nodded and left the room.

Joe stood and helped Emma from her chair. "We'll play checkers. I have my own rules, which I think you'll like." He winked at her and led her toward the study.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth returned the dinner dishes to the kitchen and now, once again, stood in front of Cal's door. She'd told Agatha she could leave for the night after the dishes were done. That way she didn't need to worry about interruptions. She'd heard Emma and Joe in the study, laughing and talking. The door was closed, so she didn't disturb them.

Her heart picked up its pace and she ran her hands down her skirt. Cal had finally said he loved her – twice. She treasured those words.

If it weren't for Nathan, everything in her life would be perfect right now. But she didn't want to think of Nathan and the havoc he'd caused and still intended to cause all of them. She wanted to think of Cal and tonight.

She knocked and entered the room even before he invited her inside. She made certain to lock the door behind her.

Cal turned from the window. "What took you so long?"

"I didn't want to appear too obvious to anyone watching."

He nodded but then the expression on his face turned quite serious.

"What's wrong?"

His hand brushed his crotch. "Nothing you can't help me with. If you're willing."

Her mouth suddenly felt dry. "I'll help you," she replied, her voice low. "Any way you want."

"Any way?" He slowly started forward, walking toward her.

"Yes." She felt her nipples harden and moisture gathered between her thighs. They'd both known fully well what it meant if she returned after dinner.

He stopped in front of her and his fingers stroked her cheek, her neck, the front of her chest above her breasts. "What if I want to do some really wild and wicked things to your body, Beth?"

She swallowed hard. "Yes...please," she whispered. The groan that came out of his mouth sounded feral and her pulse raced faster than she could ever remember. "Are you well enough?"

"Oh yes. Get on the bed. On your stomach."

"My stomach?" She barely got the words out.

"You heard me."

Yes, she'd heard. After pulling her gaze away from the intensity of his darkly sensual green eyes, she crawled up on the bed and lay down on her stomach without further protest.

He walked up behind her.

"Now what?" She felt a bit vulnerable, not being able to see what he was doing behind her but she trusted him.

"Just relax." He sat beside her and slowly slid his hand up and down her back in a soothing motion. Lower and lower with each pass, his hand descended, until he was rubbing her bottom. "I'm going to lift your skirt, Beth."

"All right." Her voice wobbled but she couldn't help it. She wondered what he'd think about her actions before returning to him tonight. His voice might wobble in a minute. As he lifted her skirt, she felt his body grow tense beside her.

"Damn, Beth! You're not wearing any undergarments."

She looked over her shoulder and smiled. "I know. I took them off for you. Do you mind?"

"You did that before coming back tonight?"

She nodded.

"Because you wanted me to...pleasure you. Sexually."

"Yes," she breathed out in a whisper, aware that he hadn't actually asked a question, but made a statement.

A sexy grin crossed his face. He glanced down at her body then back into her eyes. His hand smacked down on her bare ass.

She gasped then moaned. He'd spanked her! He'd actually spanked her. And...oh my. It felt good. She hadn't expected to experience such an intense sexual reaction to something like that.

Cal continued looking into her eyes. "I think I've got myself a bad girl here. You know what happens to bad girls, right?"

She gulped and shook her head.

"Intense stimulation, until you ache sexually." His hand came down on her ass again.

"Ohhh..." The sting vibrated through her body and the sharp sound filled her ears. When he spanked her a third time, she hung her head and her body started to tremble.

"Are you all right?" His fingers grazed the skin between her legs. "Oh yes. You are. You're really wet. You like me spanking you. Don't you? Tell me."

"Y-Yes." She didn't want to deny it, because she didn't want him to stop.

"Good. I'm enjoying it too. You've got a gorgeous ass." No longer looking into her eyes but staring down at her body, his hand came down on one cheek then the other. Lightly at first, then harder, until she began to moan and squirm.

Just when she didn't think she could take anymore, her butt feeling on fire, he stopped. His fingers massaged her cheeks and she sighed. Slowly, she felt his fingers between her legs again, except this time he gradually entered her, pushing two fingers deep. "Oh..."

"You like my fingers up inside you?"

"Yes...deeper." She spread her legs, bending her knees to the side to open herself wider.

"Sexy." He pulled almost all the way out then pushed back in hard and deep.

"Ah!"

Cal began a slow in and out motion, moving shallow then deep. "One day soon, it will be my cock inside you." He worked a third finger into her, stretching her, filling her.

Her heart lurched. *Oh yes.* She looked forward to feeling his cock in her body. If it felt better than his fingers, she was in for quite a time.

Cal moved his fingers faster, fucking her thoroughly. He couldn't believe how incredibly sexual Beth was. He couldn't have asked for anything better in a woman. Now that he knew how much she enjoyed sex, he intended to introduce her to all sorts of sensual delights.

"Yes, yes, yes," she breathed out in a heavy whisper.

Damn, he wanted his cock in her, but he didn't want to take a chance of getting her pregnant. Not yet. He leaned over her and licked her ass, gliding his tongue over every inch. She wiggled and moaned. *Come on, baby. Climax for me.*

He pushed his fingers inside her deep, hard and fast—demanding a response, knowing she was close. He twisted his wrist, back and forth. With his other hand, he reached under her and thumbed the bud of fleshy nerves between her legs, just the way he knew drove her crazy.

"Cal!" She screamed his name and her whole body tightened. She pressed down and back against his fingers.

He smiled. Beautiful. He continued finger-fucking her until she collapsed on the mattress then he eased out of her. He loved giving her pleasure.

His soaked fingers trailed along the crack of her ass and she once again pushed back against his hand. *Damn*. His pulse kicked up and his cock demanded to be let loose. A demand he couldn't ignore.

Quickly opening his pants, his gaze never left Beth's ass. He rubbed her juices all over his cock, making himself slick. "Beth?"

"Hmm."

"Do you trust me?"

"Mmm-hmm."

He reached for her ass cheeks, massaging and spreading them. "Can you get up on your knees?"

"Hmm?"

"Forget it." He grabbed a couple of pillows and shoved them under her hips, positioning her body at a perfect angle for penetration.

"What are you doing?" she mumbled.

"Getting ready to give us both one hell of a time." Slowly, he circled her ass hole with his moist finger.

"Oh." She jerked, then relaxed. "That's...different. Nice."

After circling her hole, dipping just inside and lubricating it well with her juices, he rubbed his cock against her ass.

She giggled.

Slowly, he pressed along the outside of her asshole.

"What? Are you going to—"

"Yes. I'm going to fuck your ass." He stabbed the tip of his cock against the puckered opening.

"Cal!" Her head whipped around.

"Relax. Having my cock fill your ass will feel great. Trust me."

Beth's fingers curled tightly into the blankets. He wanted to put his cock into her ass! That wasn't even physically possible, she didn't think. He was too big. The act was too decadent. She immediately tightened up against the invasion. She'd thought he'd only been teasing her earlier.

"Relax your muscles. I'll stop if it hurts too much but I really need to be inside you, to feel your body gripping my cock."

*Oh*. She hung her head and tried her best to relax. He wouldn't do anything to harm her. If he said it would feel great, she'd believe him. Unless proven otherwise.

The idea did intrigue her, now that she'd gotten over the initial shock. "All right. Do it. Fuck my ass, Cal."

She heard him growl. At her language? Or in as desperate need as she was?



"You're too damn sexy for your own good." He pushed forward, barely inserting the tip of his cock.

Tight, a bit of a burning sensation, but not really painful. Certainly, he'd go deeper. She wanted to feel his shaft all the way inside her. He groaned and stayed where he was, apparently letting her get used to the feel.

"Don't stop." She wanted this, wanted to surrender to him, to be wanton for him. She pushed back, forcing him a bit deeper. They both groaned this time. "Move inside me, Cal. I need more. Fill me up."

"You are incredible." Cal's fingers curled around her hips and he pushed a little deeper then withdrew. "Oh, you're so tight! The feeling is unbelievable."

She nodded in complete agreement. "Rub me, Cal. Between my legs. I ache." Her body needed to be fulfilled.

He reached between her legs and fingered her while continuing to lightly pump his cock inside her ass.

She couldn't stay still. The need building inside her body became too strong. "Yes! Faster, Cal."

His fingers plucked faster at the bud between her legs and she trembled, right on the edge of another climax.

She undulated her hips, moving against him. "Faster! In my ass."

A low groan spilled from his lips. "Damn, you really want it fast in your ass?"

"Yes!"

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I'll stop you if it hurts. Please!"

"All right." He grabbed her waist and leaned over her. With short, fast strokes his hips slapped against her ass. "Oh fuck, what an incredible feeling. Almost there."

"Me too. Me too. Spank me!"

He froze a moment at her request, then growled, "Hell yes!" He straightened and his hand slapped down on one cheek, then the other, several times. Each smack harder than the last.

"Oh! That stings!" She felt like some sexual slave of old, serving her master.

"Too much?"

"No." She shook her head. "I love it."

"Damn it, you're driving me crazy." He grabbed her hips with both hands and fucked her asshole, using strong and demanding strokes.

"Yeees!" she sobbed. The pleasure-pain she felt drove her need higher.

Missing his fingers between her legs, she reached beneath herself and stroked her own cunt, needing the additional stimulation.

"Are you touching yourself?" he asked, panting out the words.

"Yes, yes!"

"Does it feel good?"

"Yes!" Since their encounter in the cave, she'd done this to herself, stroked herself late at night while lying in bed and fantasizing. Up 'til now, she'd always been slow and gentle with her body. But Cal had showed her how exciting fast and a little rough could be. Damn, but his cock was stretching her asshole to its limit. She felt completely at his sexual mercy and couldn't get enough.

"Ah, Beth!" He exploded in her ass. "Oh...yes!"

Her body shook and a strong climax rattled her world. "Oh-ah! Oh, Cal!"

Their voices intermingled as they shouted out their mutual pleasure. She couldn't have stopped if the entire ranch rushed through the door right now. Every nerve in her body and brain vibrated in ecstasy.

She felt her ass contracting, milking his cock. His warm seed filled her, giving her more pleasure than she'd ever known. Her own juices trickled down the inside of her thighs. "Yes!" After a violent tremor, she finally collapsed.

Cal continued the back and forth stroking off her ass. "Damn, I can't get enough. I can't stop! Take...everything...I've...got. Ah-ah!"

She felt another warm spurt inside her. After a few more strokes he collapsed on top of her, still buried within her soft flesh.

She lay completely exhausted. Tonight was an experience she'd never forget.

Brushing her hair aside, Cal kissed the back of her neck and his tongue gently stroked her flesh. "No one holds my heart and my body like you. I've always loved you, Beth. I'll love you forever."

She smiled. "Forever."

## Chapter Fourteen

"Yes! I get a kiss," Joe announced with a triumphant smile on his face. He leaned forward, a definite twinkle in his eyes. "Make it a good one. I earned it."

Emma also leaned forward across the checker board, but barely pecked him on the cheek. A small smile lingered on her face when she pulled back. That would teach him. He'd *earned* nothing and he knew it.

"That's not quite what I had in mind." He frowned, looking disappointed.

She almost laughed but held back the urge. "That's all you get when you cheat."

His eyes widened. "Cheat! I'm not cheating."

"You distracted me and moved the checkers on the board when I wasn't looking." Not that she really cared if he cheated, given his "reward" rules, but she enjoyed teasing him.

"If you weren't looking, how do you know?"

"I remember the placement." Their light banter back and forth warmed her heart. She loved talking with Joe and just being around him. He made her feel good, safe, loved.

"Hmm. You're one tough lady. I think we're going to have to up the stakes here. Just so things don't get too tame."

"Meaning?"

His eyes grew intense. "Winner gets all."

She gulped and her heart picked up speed. She feared asking, but couldn't help herself. "And that means what exactly?"

"I think you know what that means."

When that's all he said, sexual tension filled the air and silence fell between them. *Oh my. Oh my.* Emma twisted a finger in her long hair, tangling the strands. No man had ever said such things to her. Not in such a seductive manner and voice and with such need and caring in his eyes. "Seems the outcome is the same whoever wins," she whispered.

Joe smiled. "That's the beauty of the bet." He stood and took her hand. "How about a little taste of things to come? An appetizer?" He pulled her into his arms and his mouth took hers slowly and thoroughly.

She whimpered against his lips, pressing her body close. She could feel the hardness of his cock even through their clothes. His body must be quite impressive, she thought, squirming against him until he groaned. Her own body throbbed for much more than a kiss.

Joe pulled back, breathing heavily. "You're making me crazy. Have you ever been with a man, Emma? Intimately?"

She shook her head, not quite certain what response would make him happier. If she had, or hadn't. She wanted to please him above all else.

A loud banging on the study door interrupted them.

"Damn," Joe cursed under his breath. He pulled away. "We'll finish this later."

Emma nodded and held onto the side of one of the bookcases to steady her trembling limbs.

Joe unlocked and opened the door. "Jameson? What is it?"

"Barn's on fire!" As soon as he got the words out, he was gone again.

Fear and concern slammed through Emma. "The barn. Oh no!" She and Joe rushed out of the study.

"Stay inside the house!" Joe ordered as he ran out into the yard.

Emma looked out from the front foyer and saw two men lying on the ground. "They're hurt!" Disregarding Joe's orders, she ran out, needing to help. She watched Joe head toward the smaller of the two barns, while the rest of the men gathered buckets.

One man she tended had inhaled too much smoke. He'd be fine but needed rest and plenty of fresh air. The second man had suffered severe burns. She ordered a wagon brought around and instructed one of the hands to take him into town to the clinic. Her father needed to treat him. She also asked the hand to assure her father that she was safe. She didn't want him rushing out here in a panic to check on her once he heard the news.

"What happened?" Beth rushed up from behind her. "We heard the commotion. How'd the fire start?" She stared at the barn. "Are the animals out?"

"I don't know. I don't know anything right now."

"I've got to help get them out."

She watched Beth run toward the barn. "Beth! No!" When she turned she ran right into Cal, who was also heading toward the barn. "Wait. You shouldn't be out here. You're still weak."

"I'm fine. Where'd Beth go?"

"To help with the animals."

"Damn it!" He brushed past her.

Emma looked around for Joe but she couldn't see him amid all the chaos. She couldn't help but wonder if the fire had been set on purpose. Maybe by Nathan? She shuddered at the thought.

Bucket after bucket of water was tossed at the fire. Other men beat at the flames with moistened blankets.

Emma looked up at the sky. Where was the rain when they needed it? She hoped the ranch's two wells didn't run dry.

Animals were hustled out to the corral or moved to the other barn. The entire area filled with smoke.

Soon, neighbors arrived to help. The grounds were filled with men rushing around, trying to save the structure on fire and prevent the flames from spreading.

She tended a few men with minor burns as they rested, letting others take their place, until they'd recovered enough to help again. Emma caught a glimpse of Joe shouting orders a few times. He never rested, like the others. She only saw Cal once and never saw Beth, which worried her.

"Oh, there she is," Emma whispered, catching sight of her finally. For a moment, she'd feared Beth might have disappeared. She headed toward her friend, wanting to help check over the animals and the rest of the hands and neighbors for trauma and injury.

\* \* \* \* \*

After finally getting the fire put out, the animals calmed down and relocated safely and the injuries treated, Beth said her thanks and goodbyes to the last of the neighbors. She turned and trudged forward beside Cal, so tired she was barely able to shuffle her feet.

Emma and Joe followed behind them as they entered the house. They all looked exhausted. She knew she felt more exhausted than she probably looked, as she imagined the others did too.

Agatha rushed up to them. "Oh my! You all look a fright. Are you all right? Come along into the main gathering room. I've put out coffee and something for you all to eat."

"Get us a bottle of brandy too," Joe instructed. "I think we'll need it. And take a couple of bottles of whisky out to the men. They deserve it. They worked hard tonight."

She nodded and headed back toward the kitchen.

Beth collapsed onto one of the two sofas in the room. Cal plopped down beside her. Emma sat on the other sofa and Joe eased into one of the large, stuffed chairs.

"How many injured?" Cal asked.

"Just two men. Luckily," Emma answered. "Other than some minor burns, that is. I treated those myself."

"How many animals did we lose?" Beth asked Joe.

"One pig, I think. All the mares and cows got out fine. We'll take an official inventory in the morning."

"I'll take another look at the animals then too," Emma replied. "Make sure they made it through the night all right."

"The secondary barn is gone." Joe groaned as he shifted positions. "Totally unusable. It would have been a lot worse though if the fire had been in the main barn. We'll make preparations to rebuild in a few days."

"How did it start? Does anyone know?" Emma reached for the coffee pot and began pouring everyone a cup.

"Too hard to tell tonight." Cal rubbed his head. "We'll study things in the morning. See what we can come up with."

Agatha brought in the bottle of brandy. "I'll lay out night clothing for everyone and turn down the beds and make sure you all have plenty of water and towels to clean up with. Just leave those outfits outside your doors in the hall. I'll launder them tomorrow."

"Thank you, Agatha," Beth said, smiling at the woman as she left.

Joe poured a bit of brandy into everyone's coffee cup. Beth noticed he gave himself and Cal a double dose.

"I kind of hate to bring this up," Emma started, "but has anyone thought that maybe Nathan is behind this?"

Beth's spine stiffened. "Do you think that's really possible?" She looked at Cal, then over at Joe.

Joe shook his head. "He couldn't have gotten that far into the property without someone noticing. I don't think. Though I won't completely discount the possibility. The man is wily. I'll question the men tomorrow. See if maybe anyone saw something suspicious."

Beth nodded, though she barely processed his words. She yawned, feeling totally worn out and completely limp. She took a few gulps of coffee. It had been a long night. All she wanted to do was sleep.

She looked at the cookies and cheese sitting out on a tray but discounted them. Her eyelids felt too heavy to even think about eating.

Everyone else seemed just as tired, for none of them were talking anymore, simply sipping their coffee. Thank goodness they'd all made it through the fire unscathed.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come along, Miss Beth," a soft voice whispered in her ear.

Beth couldn't open her eyes. How much time had passed? Where was she? Still in the main room? She recognized the voice as Agatha's. Probably helping her up to her bedroom.

Shouldn't the woman have left for the night by now? Agatha had her own private cabin just outside the Sinclair property. She wasn't a live-in. The family liked their privacy after dinner. They didn't need permanent staff around the clock.

"You're all right. Just lean on me."

She couldn't do much else. Her feet shuffled along, feeling almost too heavy for her to lift. She couldn't even muster a word of thanks. How she was going to make it up the stairs, she'd never know.

Suddenly, cool air hit her in the face, which revived her enough to be able to crack open her eyes. Outside? Why were they outside?

Someone pushed her and she pitched forward but was unable to do anything to stop herself. She managed to grab hold of something, a blanket it felt like.

She was shoved upward from behind and realized she now lay in the back of a wagon. Had she been hurt? Were they taking her to Doctor Bray? What was going on?

Something covered her, head and all. A moment of panic hit her. She wasn't dead, was she?

The wagon took off, jostling her back and forth. "Cal?" she managed in a low croak, automatically calling to him for help, until she remembered he wasn't with her.

She tried again. "Agatha? What's happening?" She doubted the woman heard her. She barely heard herself.

Her head was beginning to throb. Not dead. Dead people didn't feel pain. She didn't think. She must have been hurt. Not in the fire. She remembered that much. Afterward maybe. Her thoughts jumbled in her head.

She wasn't certain how long or how far they traveled. Time had no concept for her. She smelled water. The wagon stopped. Someone climbed up into the bed next to her. The cover was removed and she breathed in the cool air.

Ow! Someone was slapping her face. A man's hand. With a moan, she tried to push him away but had no strength.

"She's alive," she heard him say.

Of course she was alive. Wait. That voice. Not Cal. Not Joe. Not Doctor Bray.

"I'll take it from here."

*Nathan.* She recognized the tone. Panic, fear, anger—a whole barrel of emotions rolled through her. Though still uncertain exactly what was happening, she realized the danger.

His evil laugh filled the air and that disturbing sound became the last thing she heard. After that her world faded and darkness enveloped her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal's eyes opened. Damn, his head hurt! Where was he? Oh, still in the main room. He sat up and glanced around. Emma lay sprawled on the opposite sofa. Joe snored in one of the chairs. He looked toward the window. Very early morning.

Beth was nowhere to be seen. Probably upstairs sleeping. He coughed a couple of times then held his head. Damn that really hurt. He heard Emma groan and glanced her way. "You awake?"

"I'm not even sure I'm alive." She pushed herself into a sitting position. "My head is killing me."

"Mine too."

"We didn't drink that much brandy."

"Maybe the smoke we inhaled last night is affecting us."

"Maybe." She looked around. Her eyes softened when they landed on Joe. But then, almost immediately, her brow crinkled and her gaze swept the room. "Where's Beth?"

"Upstairs probably."

"I'll go check on her."

Cal nodded. When Emma tried to get up, her eyes rolled back in her head and she collapsed onto the sofa.

"Whoa," he reached out toward her. "Are you all right?"

"Oh goodness." She grabbed the seat cushion. "I got dizzy for a minute." She tried again, struggling to her feet. "I'm all right. I think." She stood more steadily this time and shuffled out of the room.

Cal kicked Joe's boot. "Wake up."

"Huh? Hmm?" Joe's eyes cracked open. "What's going on?"

"It's morning. About."

"Morning?" Joe scratched his chest and yawned. "Did we fall asleep down here?"

"Appears so."

"Damn, my head hurts." With a groan, he swung his boots off the ottoman to the floor. "I'm starved. When's breakfast?"

"It's still too early for Agatha to be here yet. I think we're on our own for now. How can you be hungry when your head hurts?"

"I can always eat." Joe looked toward the window, then the grandfather clock. "Agatha should be here in about an hour. Maybe less. I guess we all slept right through the night."

"I was certainly tired enough. I think Beth was the only one to make it upstairs."

Emma came back into the room, looking more alert now. "I can't find her." Her voice shook.

"Who?" Joe asked with another yawn.

"Beth."

Cal's brain woke up completely at her words and the panicked look on her face. He no longer felt the effects of last night. "Did you check the outhouse?"

"No. I'll go see."

"Wait for us." Joe seemed completely alert now too. He stood and grabbed his hat. "Come on, Cal. Let's wake the men. If you don't find her, Emma, let us know and we'll start an immediate search."



As all three went on their way a sour feeling lodged in Cal's stomach. Something felt more than wrong here. The mysterious fire, them all passing out downstairs and now Beth missing.

He followed Joe out to the set of bunkhouses on the property and waited until Emma caught up with them.

"She's not in the outhouse. I stopped to check the barn, in case she was in there tending the animals. I didn't see her. None of the wagons or buckboards or horses seems to be missing, from what I can tell. But I'm not sure."

"We'll double-check," Joe said.

Quickly, they roused the men and put a search plan into motion.

"I want to help," Emma told them.

"You go back to the house," Cal replied. "In case Beth shows up there. Besides, you'll be safer inside. We don't want you to go missing too."

"But —"

"Emma," Joe interrupted. "Please."

After a slight hesitation, she nodded, resignation in her eyes. "All right."

"If she just wandered out, are there some places you know of she might go on foot?" Joe asked. "Alone, she might have gotten past the guards."

"A few," Cal answered. "Let's get our horses and head on out. Though I can't believe she'd actually leave the property without telling anyone."

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth's eyes popped open and fear gripped her hard. She sat up quickly. Her head hurt and her vision blurred but only for a moment. "Where am I?" No longer in a wagon, for sure.

She stood up from the narrow cot she was on and looked around. No windows. A lantern burned in the corner, giving off the only light. She saw household supplies and some bags and cans of food. A basement?

Vaguely, she remembered being in a wagon and with Nathan. In the pit of her stomach, she knew that hadn't been a dream.

Steps led upward to a door. She climbed up and turned the knob. Locked. Well, that wasn't such a surprise. She banged on the door. "Anyone there!"

Nothing.

She headed back down the stairs. Looking around, she hoped to find an axe or something that would help her get through the door. Or something to defend herself with in case Nathan showed up. She knew he would eventually.

Beth also knew the entire ranch would be out looking for her, which gave her hope. She didn't think she'd been taken far because most of the supplies down here had the local mercantile stamp on them.

Maybe if she studied everything, she could figure out where she was. Someplace remote, no doubt. She didn't hear any noise. But then, without a window, she could be in the middle of town and not know it.

A scraping sound outside the door caught her attention and she looked up the stairs. She grabbed a couple of cans of beans and waited.

The door cracked open and a large shadow loomed in the entrance. With the light behind him, she could only tell it was a man. But not who. Her heart pounded.

"Hello, Elizabeth," the man's voice rumbled.

*Nathan.* She threw a can and hit him in the shin.

"Damn it!" He slammed the door behind him and ambled down the stairs, cursing the entire time.

"Stay away from me!" She threw another can at him and hit him in the temple.

He stumbled backward.

Beth raced toward the stairs and the unlocked door. Just as her foot hit the first step, he grabbed her skirt and tackled her to the floor. She grunted when her head hit the bottom stair. She saw blood and felt woozy, but she didn't pass out.

Nathan scrambled to his feet. He grabbed her arms and threw her back toward the cot. "Try anything like that again and I'll beat you senseless."

She fell to the floor, scraping her hands on a nearby barrel as she tried to catch herself. "Why are you doing this? What do you want?"

"You know what I want. I'm just changing strategy, that's all." He pointed at her. "Roberts wants you? He can pay for you!"

The door opened and a woman stepped through. As she made her way down the stairs, Beth recognized her. Lanelle.

That witch! Her temper flared and she struggled to her feet. Of course. Delia's Whorehouse. That's where she was.

Lanelle stepped over to her with a cup of something. "I've brought you some tea, dear. It will soothe you." She set it down on the barrel. "You're hurt."

Beth practically gagged at the term "dear". Lanelle couldn't care less about soothing anyone, though she thought some small measure of tenderness entered her eyes when she mentioned the injury. Beth touched her head and winced.

"She's fine," Nathan grumbled. "Leave her be. Come on."

Without another word of concern, Lanelle and Nathan went back up the steps and out the door. Beth heard the lock turn, sealing her in.

Certainly if she made enough noise, someone would hear her. Or Nathan might come back and shut her up. The thought made her tremble and she decided to hold her tongue. For now. She sank down onto the cot.

She knew a little about the whorehouse layout. The entrance to the basement was way in the back of the kitchen, off a small supply room. The odds of catching someone in there who would actually help her were probably slim.

She'd never been in the room herself, but she knew whenever one of the girls got sick, Doctor Bray would enter from the kitchen and supposedly linens and such were kept in that small room, according to Emma.

Only the help would come into the room and they might not even think twice about a woman being held down in the basement. Girls disappeared from here all the time and hardly anyone raised an eyebrow. Not even the sheriff, when they'd had one.

But if she yelled her name, certainly someone would help, once they knew who she was and that she was being held against her will. It wasn't as if she were one of the whores put down here for punishment or whatever, as she'd heard rumors of.

Nathan must be planning to take Lanelle with him, after getting the ransom. The woman couldn't very well stay in town now that Beth knew she was in on Nathan's plan and helping him.

Unless of course, Nathan took *her* with him. Then Lanelle could stay and nobody would know about her involvement.

As long as Nathan kept her captive, she wouldn't be able to tell anyone anything.

She reached over and picked up the cup of hot tea. It smelled good. She lifted the cup to her nose and sniffed, then turned it over and let it seep into the dirt floor. She didn't trust those two.

A water barrel and food were stored down here. She'd eat and drink from the supplies, not from what they brought her. She didn't want to end up poisoned or worse.

A scraping at the door caught her attention. She scooted to the edge of the cot. Were they back? She heard a small knock. Someone else! With renewed hope, she jumped up and rushed up the steps. "Is someone out there?" she whispered, afraid to make too much noise in case it was Nathan, teasing her.

Nothing. No answer. No noise at all.

It would be just like Nathan to torture her with false hope. But she preferred to believe someone else might actually be there. Listening.

"Please, if someone is out there, you have to help me. This is Elizabeth Davenport and I'm being held against my will. You need to get a message to anyone on the Sinclair ranch. Please!"

Still nothing. Damn. Maybe she'd imagined the knock, wanting it to be true so badly. She sank to the stoop in front of the door and a tear trickled down her cheek. *Please, someone help me.*

## Chapter Fifteen

Cal plopped down on the sofa. His head hurt from stress and frustration and every muscle in his body ached from exhaustion. Emma sat across from him, looking as tired and forlorn as he felt. Joe entered the room and both their heads turned toward him.

"Anything?" Cal asked, hoping for some word, any word, about Beth. From the look on Joe's face though, Cal didn't anticipate good news.

Joe eased into one of the chairs. "Nothing. We spotted some wagon tracks off the main road near our fence line, but I think that was just one of our supply wagons. Hard to tell with all the traffic we had during the fire. We didn't find anything else unusual or any sign of Beth. I've sent some men to Fox Valley to snoop around and see if maybe Nathan went through there. No telling where they are, or if Beth's even with him."

"She's with him," Cal replied in a weary voice, knowing it in his heart. "Someone had to have seen something. She wouldn't take off with him willingly, that's for certain. I don't understand how he got her out of the house, especially without anyone spotting him."

"Maybe she went outside for a walk and he got her then," Emma suggested.

"Maybe," Joe agreed. "I questioned the hands and the guards on duty. They never saw her. I still think she could have sneaked past them."

"She had no call to do that," Cal said, not believing it for a second. She wouldn't go off without telling anyone, not after everything that happened. Even so, they'd checked the special, private spots she liked to go to be alone—the one's Cal knew about anyhow—just in case.

"The only person to leave the ranch was Agatha, like she does every night. I questioned her after I talked to all the ranch hands. Agatha was the last person besides us to see Beth, when she served our coffee and brandy. Nobody else remembers seeing her, once we doused the fire and we all came into the house."

"Joe," a deep voice called out from the doorway.

They all looked over.

"Jameson?" Joe replied. "Come on in. You have news?"

"Um, not really, but..." He shrugged. "It's nothing probably, just odd."

"What?" Cal asked, willing to listen to anything at this point that might help them.

Jameson pulled out a piece of paper from his pocket. "I was in the smokehouse with, um, a girl I've been seeing. She heard about the fire and brought some homemade cookies out to me."

Cal almost chuckled at the man's blush, except he knew Jameson was also seeing a girl in Fox Valley, or so Nathan had said. Probably another lie. Jameson didn't seem the sort to cheat on a girl.

"I found this on the floor. It looks like a note written to Doctor Bray from Miss Emma. I thought it an odd place to find the paper."

"Let me see." Emma leaned forward and took the note from him. She read it over then looked at Joe. "This is the message I wrote to my father about coming out here to the ranch."

"What was it doing in the smokehouse?" Joe asked, his brow crinkling.

"Maybe your father brought it with him when he came out," Cal suggested, thinking that a logical explanation. "He might have dropped it and the wind carried it into the smokehouse when the door was open. Or maybe it fell from his pocket, stuck to someone's heel and then came off in the smokehouse later."

"I suppose," Emma said.

"Thanks, Jameson," Joe said. "You can go back to work."

"Yes, sir."

Joe leaned forward. "This situation is too odd. Beth knows how dangerous Nathan is. I can't believe she'd put herself in a vulnerable position after everything that's happened."

"She would not go walking around alone after dark," Cal said.

"And if she did," Joe continued, "why didn't the guards see her? The only way they wouldn't have seen her would be if she sneaked off the grounds, purposely avoiding them and there's no reason for her to have done that, like you said. But if someone entered the house and took her out, they'd have been spotted. We would have heard."

"We've been through all this." Cal frowned, his head pounding. His heart broke, knowing he hadn't protected Beth properly. Again. He should have assured her safety. Maybe even taken her away from Elk Valley altogether as soon as he knew for certain that Nathan was up to no good. Even if he'd had to kidnap her to do it.

"I'm just going over it again, trying to get it all straight in my head. We were all exhausted after the fire. Why did we all sleep like the dead right here, like we did? All of us, except her. That feels strange to me. We need to figure out how she left this house and the grounds unnoticed."

Emma sneezed. She held the note to her nose. "Good grief!"

"What?" Joe asked.

"Nathan."

"What about him?"

"He had this note."

Cal snapped to attention. "What do you mean?"

"Smell it."

"Just tell us, Emma," Joe said.

"It has his cologne on it. Every time he got spruced up for Beth—or for any other woman, I suspect—he put on that awful cologne. It always made my nose twitch."

Disappointment rolled through Cal. She was grasping. He certainly wasn't convinced of anything simply from an odor. "Just because it's the same smell doesn't mean it was him. It could have been anyone who wears that cologne. Besides, how would Nathan get the note? It was something you wrote to your father, right? And if Nathan did get hold of it somehow, why would he do anything more than toss it? How come it was found in the smokehouse? It had to have been brought out by your father."

"The cologne is not common. After I complained to Beth about it one time, she told me he sends all the way off to Baltimore for it. But you're right, there's no way Nathan could have gotten hold of the note. Unless..." With wide eyes, she looked at Joe.

He squirmed and wiped a hand down his face. "Oh man."

Cal wondered at her expression and Joe's reaction.

Joe's face took on a concentrated look. "If he had it with him, instead of your father, he had to have been on the property for it to end up in the smokehouse. And the only way..." he hesitated, seeming to gather his thoughts. "The smokehouse..." he whispered. "Damn. Downed fence line. Chicken for dinner, not pork or beef."

"What?" Cal asked, a tingle creeping up his spine.

Joe pushed out of his chair. "I want to find out if there's anything to this. Follow me, but stay out of sight to begin with."

Cal stood up. "What's going on?" Renewed hope grew inside him. Joe seemed to be on to something.

"Come on." Joe held out his hand to Emma and helped her up. "Let me follow this through and see what happens."

Joe almost felt guilty for his thoughts and for what he was planning. But he had to know for certain. Beth's life could be on the line. He stepped into the kitchen, prepared to take a major leap. "Agatha?"

She looked up from the lump of dough she was kneading. "Yes, sir?"

"I know about the smokehouse."

"Excuse me?"

"The smokehouse. Nathan." He waited for her response.

Agatha turned completely white. Her hands began to shake. "Um, you know?"

"Yes, I do."

"Oh, well..." The words, which started haltingly, now spilled from her mouth. "I-I can explain. Really I can. I didn't want to. Truly. He made me. You know I'd never really harm Miss Beth."

*Damn.* Joe's heart pounded. He hadn't wanted to believe she was involved but he remembered her rushing into the smokehouse. Not odd behavior normally. Considering their circumstances though, and the other oddities, everything became suspicious and nobody's actions were beyond questioning. He'd wanted to confront her alone, so maybe she wouldn't feel the need to bolt before telling him anything. And, boy, had she just revealed a mouthful.

"He made you do what?" he questioned, needing details, knowing he'd stumbled onto just the break they needed.

"Help him get Beth, or he'd make sure I was punished if he got caught. That's what he said."

Emma and Cal stepped into the room.

"Where is she?" Cal demanded, his face red in obvious anger. "What did you do?"

Agatha shook her head. "None of you were hurt. Really."

"None of us?" Emma questioned. "What do you mean by that?"

"I just put a little in the coffee to make you sleep."

"Something was in the coffee," Emma repeated. "That's why we were so deeply out of it. What was it?"

"I don't know. Nathan gave it to me. I just did what he asked."

"Where is Beth?" Cal shouted.

Joe stuck out his hand. "Calm down." They wouldn't get anywhere if they scared Agatha.

"The hell I will!"

"Cal," Emma spoke in a soothing voice. "Let Joe find out."

Joe felt grateful for her presence. Emma's words always had a calming effect on others. "All right, Agatha. Let's take this slowly. You met Nathan in the smokehouse, right?"

She nodded. "I got a note from a boy in town, telling me to meet him there. He sneaked over the fence closest to the smokehouse when he knew everyone would be busy elsewhere."

As the former foreman, Nathan was well aware of their schedules. Joe knew that and he should have switched up the hands' routines more. A damn careless mistake on his part. "What did he say to you?"

"He wanted me to drug all of you last night then take Beth to the pond. The one between the Sinclairs' original property line and the old Davenport place. He said he loved Beth and he just wanted to talk to her but nobody would let him near her. Nobody understood how strongly he felt. I swear." Her gaze moved around the room, not really looking at any of them. "That's all there was to it." She glanced toward the back door.

Sounded to Joe like she'd just changed her story. Had she been forced as she'd first said, or had she actually believed Nathan only wanted to talk to Beth and meant her no harm? Or maybe a combination of both?

"You're lying," Emma said.

Agatha's gaze locked with hers. "I am not! Who are you to say I'm lying? You're no better than me! At least I'm respectable. I've never taken a man up to one of the rooms here to do who knows what nasty stuff with, like you! And only a wanton woman would want to doctor men-folk, beyond normal female tending."

Emma gasped.

"I'm respectable, I am. I tell you! More so than most. I deserve much more in this life. Nobody ever appreciated that, except Nathan."

"Enough!" Joe barked. He grabbed Agatha's arm, hardly believing the woman's words and actions. "You *will* tell us where Beth is." He'd sort out the truth behind everyone's involvement and motives later.

She pulled away from him. "I don't know. Nathan didn't tell me where he was taking her."

"Why would you help him?" Cal demanded in a low, barely controlled voice. "The Sinclairs have been good to you, I'm sure."

"Nathan was better to me. I needed money to cover some gambling debts my brother accumulated and Nathan gave it to me. I work like a dog around here and like I said, I deserve more. I deserve to live just as well as all of you. Nathan even said so. All he wanted was some information from time to time. There's no real harm in that. He wanted to marry Miss Beth so he'd have a better life. There's nothing wrong with that either. He promised to take care of me so I wouldn't have to work so hard. He gave me things. He paid attention to me." Her voice rose higher and higher.

He had manipulated her, Joe thought. If Beth's life wasn't in danger, he might even feel some compassion for Agatha, for being taken in by Nathan. He couldn't afford to feel compassion though. Not until Beth was back home, safe and sound.

Emma pulled Joe away. "She's not rational right now. But I do believe her when she says she doesn't know where Beth is. Nathan wouldn't take the chance of telling her."

Cal stepped closer to Agatha. "Do you know how to get in touch with Nathan?"

"No. I swear that's the truth."

Grumbling, he turned and paced to the other side of the kitchen.

She raised her chin and looked over at Joe. "I guess this means I'm fired now too. Just like what you did to poor Nathan. All because that little twit couldn't see she had a good man right in front of her."

Joe shook his head. He'd always believed Agatha loyal to the family. How could he have been so wrong, damn it? Was there anyone they could trust? Anyone who couldn't be bought these days?



Nathan probably did have a hand in starting that fire, or maybe Agatha set it as a way to get them all together afterward, so she could drug them at one time. And also a way to exhaust the hands, so even those on guard duty wouldn't be as alert. A scary thought. Someone could have died.

Whatever the truth, they couldn't change what had occurred. For now, he had no choice. The woman could not remain employed here. "Your guess would be right. You're through working for the Sinclairs. But you're not going anywhere until we find Beth and Nathan. Then you and Nate will be carted off to the nearest district judge and he can decide your future."

Agatha tossed the dough at him and ran for the back door.

"No. Stop!" Emma called out.

Cal took off after her.

Joe dropped the dough he'd caught in mid-air and followed behind. Damn, woman!

\* \* \* \* \*

Nathan limped into Lanelle's room, cursing.

She swung her legs onto the bed and settled back against the pillows. "Don't you knock? I could have been with a customer."

"Then I'd have gotten some free entertainment."

"Funny." She scowled. "You shouldn't be wandering around where people can see you."

"As long as I'm wearing these rags and don't shave, I blend right in with the other male help."

"Not really. You just look like a bum shuffling around. Delia better not see you. She'll boot your butt out the door."

Lanelle would do well to watch her mouth, Nathan thought. He was quickly tiring of her uppity attitude. Anyone who got in his way from now on would pay the consequences.

"What happened to you? Why are you limping?"

"The little bitch kicked me." He sat down on the end of the bed. "That morphine isn't working. She's more ornery than ever. Do you have that ransom note written up yet?"

"The morphine works. She must not be drinking it. Why don't you just stay away from her? There's no reason for you to keep checking on her. She's not getting out of the basement. I've got a boy watching the door."

"A boy? You're trusting some boy? Wait. Is it that one who's down there now? When I saw him outside the room, I thought he was just temporary or something. Watchin' out while the regular guard was in the outhouse. He's barely more than a tot."

"He's older than he looks and he does what I say. Besides, anyone else would ask too many questions. Why do I have to write the blamed ransom note?"

"Because they'll recognize my writing."

Lanelle rolled her eyes. "Like they don't already know you have her."

"They have no proof. As far as anyone is concerned, this is just going to be a random kidnapping."

"Beth will tell them when you let her go."

"Who said I was lettin' her go?"

"You have to. To get the money."

"No, I don't." He didn't have to do anything. "I'll get the money and take off with it *and* her." He'd outsmart them all.

"You're obsessed with that woman. I don't see the attraction."

"She's mine. I was going to give her back and I still might, one day. But not until I've used her all up."

"Why would you want a woman who obviously doesn't want you?"

"It's the thrill of the taming, my dear. Like breakin' a wild filly. I know she'll be one hell of a ride."

Lanelle snorted. "Just because she has big tits doesn't mean she knows how to please a man."

"She's luscious and unused. Something you wouldn't understand."

She threw a pillow at him. "Don't insult me. Cal's probably fucked her already, you know. I doubt she's unused."

"No!" He grabbed Lanelle's foot, stopping just short of crushing her toes. "I've been thinkin' on that. He might have teased her some. Touched her some. But he hasn't fucked her! I will fuck Elizabeth's cunt first. Me!"

Lanelle winced, jerking her foot away. "Fine." Slowly, she pulled her legs up to her chest. "Whatever you say, Nathan. As long as I get my cut of the money."

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth paced back and forth. She'd enjoyed giving Nathan a swift kick in the shin. No way was she submitting to him without a fight.

The man had gone completely delusional. Half the time he was down here, he hadn't even made sense, ranting and raving about his rights and what the world owed him.

She didn't know if he'd lost his mind completely or was just so desperate that he'd temporarily lost touch with reality. She knew Cal and Joe would get the ransom money somehow, no matter how much it turned out to be, but she doubted Nathan intended to really let her go. That would be a form of defeat—giving her back to her family. To Cal.

Somehow, she had to get out of the basement.

Periodically, she tried pounding on the door, just in case anyone was around. She hadn't heard anyone in the outside room since that strange knock. Though people could have come through while she slept.

The only way she could tell day from night was when she heard the low strains of the piano playing. She knew then night had fallen and the whorehouse was doing good business.

Nathan had removed all the cans down here, so she couldn't hit him with them anymore. Too bad. She'd whacked him good on the one visit he'd made to check on her. All she needed was one strong head-shot to knock him out.

She still refused to drink anything he or Lanelle brought her. It was just too strange. They never brought food, only hot tea. She always poured it out. Nathan would come and collect the cup, look at her oddly, then huff off.

Unfortunately, she'd lost track of time and wasn't sure how long she'd been down here. One day. Two. Certainly no longer than that, though it seemed like forever. The air had begun to smell from the chamber pot in the corner and the room felt oppressive.

So often she'd felt like wailing but hadn't broken completely down yet. She had to stay strong and alert.

As long as she was all right and in town, some opportunity had to present itself for escape. Eventually. When that time came, she needed to be ready.

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal wrestled Agatha to the ground. "Hold up!" No way was he letting her go until they had more answers. Even then, she'd pay for her part in Beth's disappearance.

Some of the ranch hands gathered around the scuffle. "Get off her! What are you doing?" Several men pulled him away from her.

"Let me go! Grab her."

"You got no call attackin' a woman," one of the hands argued back, holding him tightly. "I don't care if'n you are the boss's brother."

"Wait!" Joe said, pushing through the crowd. "Let me through. Release Cal. Agatha helped Nathan steal Beth away."

Everyone stared at him with wide eyes and looks of confusion, obviously shocked by Joe's words.

"He paid her off," Joe added, in explanation. "We need to detain her."

As they released him, Cal looked around. "Where did she go?"

Everyone turned and searched.

"Find her!" Joe ordered. "She can't be far."

*Damn it*, Cal cursed to himself. What more could go against them? He headed for his horse. He had to do something before he exploded. And an idea had struck while he was being restrained.

Emma rushed after him. "Where are you going? You shouldn't jostle yourself. After rolling around like that and the stress, you might relapse."

"I'm fine."

A ranch hand raced inside the gate and jumped from his horse. "Telegram from Chicago for you, sir."

Cal grabbed it from the man's hand.

Joe and Emma stood waiting.

"Grandfather contacted some people he knows. Wade, Skylar and Colton will be well protected when they disembark. He has some investigators on the case from the Weberton Detective Agency."

"Good," Joe responded. "One less worry. Now, where are you heading?"

"Town."

"Why?"

"I'm going to talk to Lanelle. She and Nathan were cozy apparently from what you said, Joe. She might know something."

"I'll come with you."

"No. I need to do this myself. She'll be too intimidated if we gang up on her. She always had a soft spot for Wade. Maybe as his brother, she'll tell me something or let something accidentally slip."

"Can we all go into town anyway?" Emma asked Joe. "I want to check on my father and we can question some other people while Cal is with Lanelle."

"I've already questioned folks," Joe said. "Nobody has seen Nathan. And it's not like Beth or him will be strolling through town anywhere now."

"People might be more willing to talk to me. You can be a bit intimidating, especially given your past as a gunfighter." When he frowned, she smiled slightly. "It's the way it is. We know better but some people aren't so willing to come around. You know that. Besides, just because they hadn't seen Nathan before doesn't mean they haven't seen him since you last asked."

"She has a point," Cal said. "I think it's a good idea. We're the only chance Beth has. We have to act. Now."

"All right," Joe agreed. "Let's go."

## **Chapter Sixteen**

When Cal stepped inside Delia's whorehouse the bell above the door chimed, startling him. It sounded much louder than he remembered, or maybe the built-up stress from the last couple of days had him wound too tight. The rest of the place stood quiet and mostly empty at this time of day.

One of the staff, a woman he didn't recognize, met him in the foyer.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked. "We're not open right now. Not officially. Only for our special customers."

"Consider me special. I'd like to speak to Lanelle. It's important."

Her lips pinched together, wrinkling the skin around her mouth, and her brow furrowed, making her look even older than she already appeared.

Cal stood his ground. "Get her. I'm not leaving."

After staring at him a moment, she turned abruptly on her heel. "Wait here. I'll see if she's available. Mister Roberts, isn't it?" she asked over her shoulder.

"Yes. That's right." Being in Chicago the past few years, he'd forgotten how hard it was to remain anonymous in a small town. Though the woman did look slightly familiar to him. He didn't remember her, but she might have worked here years back before he'd left for this grandfather's. Either that or one of the women here had pointed him out to her while he was in town.

He watched the woman go up the stairs then glanced around the establishment. While he waited for her return, he strolled through the main room. It looked about the same as when he'd seen it last. Decorated in shades of orange and green with raunchy pictures on the walls. Gaudy as all hell. He hadn't been here in a long time. And he'd never come to bed a woman.

They did a bustling business from what he still heard and remembered. Missy had worked for Delia before Wade helped her escape and sent her to their grandfather for a better life. A better life...

Because of Missy, all their lives had been turned upside down. So many things had happened that he didn't even know where to place the original blame. He shook his head. No. That wasn't true. He knew. The blame fell squarely on his own shoulders for not listening to his heart.

The woman who'd greeted him moments before leaned over the railing at the top of the stairs. "Come on up. Lanelle will see you."

Cal headed up the stairs. He'd expected her to come down but maybe this would be better. More private.

"Down the hall," the woman directed. "Her door is ajar."

"Thank you." He hoped she knew something about Nathan's whereabouts and would be willing to share the knowledge. He knew she and Beth, as well as Skylar, had never gotten along, but certainly she wouldn't let any harm come to Beth if she could prevent it. Especially if he offered her some financial incentive.

He stopped before a door, which stood cracked open an inch, and knocked lightly.

"Come in."

He stepped inside and saw Lanelle standing in front of a dresser. Her bed was unmade, the sheets and blankets hanging onto the floor. She was dressed only in skimpy white underclothes that did little to hide her plentiful assets. Even so, she held no sexual appeal to him.

"Close the door," she said as soon as he entered.

He clicked the door shut and leaned back against it, making sure she stayed put in the room until he finished with her.

She turned and sashayed in his direction, swinging her hips. "So is this visit for business?" She stopped and stroked his cheek with a fingertip. "Or pleasure?"

"Business."

A pout formed on her face. "Too bad." Her hand drifted down his body and across his crotch. "I'd have loved to compare your assets to your brother's."

Wade had been a customer in the past, prior to marrying Skylar. Cal had never thought much of whoring and always made a point to stay away, unless he had other, specific business to attend to here. He still wasn't quite certain what had or had not gone on between Lanelle and his brother. All he knew for certain was that Skylar had found the two together in one of these rooms late one night after he'd let slip where his brother had gone.

Lanelle squeezed his cock through his pants.

He grabbed her hand but didn't say the angry words on the tip of his tongue. He needed her help and didn't want to ruin his chances at getting the information. His grip around her wrist eased. "My assets wouldn't disappoint, believe me." One half of his mouth hitched into a grin.

"Ooo." She laughed. "How I'd love to get you two alone with me for a threesome."

Not quite his fantasy. "I don't want to play sex games." Not with her. "I need some information, Lanelle."

She frowned and pulled away. "About what?" She returned to the dresser and began brushing her long auburn hair.

"Beth."

She glanced at him in the mirror. "What about her?"

"She's missing."

"So why come here?"

Fairly certain now that she didn't plan to bolt, he strolled around the room. Her reaction seemed odd to him, or rather, her lack of reaction. "You don't sound surprised she's disappeared."

"I'm not. I already heard. News travels fast."

*Apparently.* "I thought you might know something." He approached a small desk in the corner where lots of papers were strewn about.

"Me?" she practically screeched, sounding more than a little outraged. Lanelle rushed over to him and dragged him back the other way. "Why would you think I know anything? Come over here and sit down. Tell me about what happened."

Hmm. Odd. She seemed overly panicked to him. Because she *did* know something? Or was he just being hopeful, feeling desperate? "We think Nathan kidnapped her."

"Kidnapped?" She sat beside him on the bed. "Goodness! What makes you think that? Did you see it happen? Or hear from Nathan?"

"Nobody saw it happen and we haven't heard from him...yet. But we were able to find out the information from what we think is a reliable source. We just need to find out where he took her. I know you and Nathan spent some time together. I thought he might have mentioned something to you or you might know where he'd gone. A special place?"

"No, nothing."

Her eyes seemed a bit too wide for him. Her voice a little too high. He pulled out some money from his shirt pocket. "I'll be happy to pay you for any information."

She eyed the money a long moment then laid her hand over his. "If I hear anything, I'll let you know. You can pay me then."

Lanelle turning down easy money? Something wasn't right here. He actually felt her fingers shaking. Even if she didn't know anything about Nathan, he'd expected her to take the cash and try to make something up. He'd been prepared to ask her a lot of questions about whatever story she told him. Instead, he stuffed the bills away. "All right. I'd appreciate you passing along anything you might hear."

"Of course. I don't want to rush you but I need to get ready for later. Customers will be arriving before too much longer."

Cal figured it still too early but didn't argue with her. Maybe she expected a "special" customer. Maybe even Nathan. He definitely would keep his eye on Lanelle. She knew much more than she was letting on.

He stumbled as she pushed him out the door and clicked the lock behind him.

The bed shook and moved off center as Nathan crawled out from underneath. He'd thought they were going to squash him when they'd sat down. "Is the door locked?" he whispered.

"Yes," Lanelle answered. "You don't need to whisper. He's gone. I heard his boots going down the stairs. Now take that ransom note off the desk and get out of here."

Nathan frowned. "You left it out in the open, you stupid bitch?" That's what he got for dealing with a whore.

"Don't call me that! You should have let me talk to him downstairs."

"I wanted to hear what he had to say. That was too damn close. You should have taken the money he offered." Roberts wasn't stupid, no matter how much he wanted to believe so. Cal wouldn't be fooled for long.

"I didn't have a story to tell him and I couldn't think of one fast enough. I drew a blank, knowing you were under the bed listening. I just wanted him out of here."

Nathan walked over to the desk and picked up the note. "If he'd seen this, it all would have been over with."

"I think he already suspects I know something."

"I know he does. I heard it in his voice. That's why you should have made something up. You're such a stupid whore."

"Damn it, Nathan! Stop calling me stupid. I'm warning you."

He stalked over to her and grabbed her chin. "Don't you *ever* warn me." He pushed her backward, barely restraining himself from slapping her bloody.

Lanelle stumbled against the dresser but caught herself. "Ow! Don't bully me, Nathan." She checked her arm and frowned at a scratch.

"You love it." He smirked.

"I don't love being bruised. What are you going to do now?"

"Nothing. Roberts can suspect all he wants. As long as he can't prove anything."

"Agatha probably told him that you have Beth. Did you ever think of that? He said he had a source. That's proof."

Nathan's stomach twisted. He should have choked the life out of Agatha when he had the chance. "I promised her money to keep her mouth shut." It should have been enough.

"She's weak-willed, Nathan. I wouldn't trust that wench for anything."

"You don't trust anybody." He shoved the piece of paper into his pocket. "I'll have this delivered in a few days. Any faster and they'll know for sure Elizabeth is still close by."

"How are you planning to get her out of here? You said you were going to take her with you, right?"

"I'd hoped to have her hooked on the drug by then. But that doesn't seem to be working. She's not swallowing any of it. And I know her. Even if we remove all the food and water from down in the basement, if she's decided not to accept anything from us, she'll die before changing her mind. I'll have to figure out another way to control her." The drug idea hadn't been as perfect as he'd first thought. His fingers clenched into a tight fist.

Lanelle chewed at her bottom lip and her eyes shifted back and forth.



"What's the matter, Lanelle? Nervous?"

"I'm just worried about what you might do."

"Why? You don't even like Elizabeth." If Lanelle betrayed him, as Agatha might well have done, he'd be in real trouble. Lanelle knew almost everything. Agatha didn't.

Maybe he did need to be nicer to Lanelle. Or maybe he should take care of Lanelle permanently, save himself some money, aggravation and worry that way. He'd think on it.

"I don't want to be involved any deeper than I already am. Just don't tell me anything else about your plans. All right? I couldn't care less what happens to the little bitch in the long run. But I think the less I know, the better. For me."

"Then don't ask me any more questions. Now take off your clothes. I feel like a good hard fuck." Might as well enjoy her cunt while he could. She didn't possess an ounce of common sense in his opinion, but she certainly knew how to fuck a man dry. He opened the front of his pants.

"I want you to leave, Nathan."

"Too bad. I'm fuckin' you." When she raised her chin and looked about to protest, he glared into her eyes. "Who do you think is going to get their way?"

\* \* \* \* \*

On the floor above the clinic, Emma turned to Joe who stood outside her bedroom door, leaning against the entry. "You can come in. It's not like you haven't been in my room before."

"I know. But I doubt your father would approve."

"He's not here and not likely to be back anytime soon. I was hoping to see him but I know Callie Anderson is having a hard pregnancy. I pray the birth goes well for her. I'm glad my father left a note, just in case I stopped back home for some reason, as he said in his message. I want to get my journal, then we can go."

Joe nodded and stepped inside the room.

After she slipped the thin journal into the pocket of the apron covering her dress, she turned around from the desk. "Hmm. That's odd."

"What?" he asked.

"The top of the dresser is open a bit." She walked over and pulled the drawer open wider. "What..." She reached in then quickly pulled her hand back. "Ugh. What in the world?"

Joe came up behind her and looked over her shoulder. She felt him stiffen. "Get away from that thing." With two fingers and a grimace on his face, he pulled out the pair of stained pantalets and tossed them into the small fireplace in the corner. He took a match from his pocket and set them aflame.

Emma lowered herself to her mattress, her legs shaking. "Nathan?"

"No doubt. The vile bastard."

"It still looked moist. Like he'd just put it there not long ago." And it wasn't urine on the garment. She shuddered.

"At least we know he's definitely in the area."

"Do you think he's still in the clinic somewhere?" Her gaze darted around the room and out into the hall.

Joe sat beside her. "No. He wouldn't stick around. I don't want you to give him a second thought. You're coming back to the ranch with me. You'll be safe. Until Nathan is caught, you won't have to worry about him."

She nodded but continued to feel uneasy. She knew Joe was trying to make her feel better but she didn't think, from the tone of his voice, that he felt so certain of his own words. Nathan had definitely taken that note from her room. She knew it now and she felt completely violated by that act, almost as violated as she felt by what he'd done to her undergarment. Almost.

Trembling, she looked toward the now-shuttered window, wondering how long it had been in place. "How does he keep getting in here?"

"I don't know. He's got the devil in him, for sure."

Her fingers brushed across something beneath her pillow. "What is this?" She pulled out a piece of paper and studied the contents. When her bottom lip quivered, she clamped her teeth down over it until her lip hurt.

"Emma? What is it? What's that?"

"He left me a message," she whispered.

"Nathan?"

She nodded.

He reached for the paper but she wouldn't release it. "Let go, Emma."

Her fingers shook so badly she crinkled the message in her hand. "The man is sicker than any of us ever realized." She didn't know how she could come back and live here. She didn't know if she'd ever feel safe here again.

"Let me see."

Reluctantly, she handed him the note.

"Dearest Emma," Joe read aloud, after pressing the paper flat atop his leg. "I left you a present in your dresser drawer. I hope you've found it. A little something of myself." Joe stumbled a bit over the words, but continued. "Soon I'll deposit more of my seed, directly into you next time, right in your own bed." Joe's voice faltered, as if catching in his throat. "Until then, enjoy my gift, little..."

"Slut," Emma finished for him, when he didn't read the rest.

He crumpled the note. "He'll never touch you," Joe said in a low voice that sounded barely under control. "I promise."

She leaned against his shoulder. He moved his arm, wrapping it around her and holding her against his chest. In his arms was the one place she did feel safe.

"We'll get this bastard, Emma. Somehow."

"Why hasn't anyone seen him?"

"He might be wearing a disguise. Or maybe —"

A strong knock from downstairs interrupted them. She tensed.

"Relax," Joe told her. "It's probably Cal."

"Oh, right." She sniffled and pulled away from him, trying to hide her nerves. They stood and hurried down the stairs. She couldn't wait to get out of there. "Be careful."

Joe smiled reassuringly at her. Emma stood back while he pulled open the door. She breathed a sigh of relief when Cal stood outside on the boardwalk.

He stepped into the clinic. "I spoke to Lanelle. I think she's hiding something. Her answers and demeanor seemed very suspicious to me. We need to watch her comings and goings. Did you two find out anything around town?"

"No. No one has seen Nathan since the day I fired him. He's around though and keeping really low," Joe said.

"I think you're right," Cal agreed. "I don't believe he's strayed too far. I feel it in my bones."

Emma was glad that Joe didn't say anything about the note or the pantalets. It all was too vile to share.

"So what do you want to do now?" Joe asked.

"I thought —" A frown crossed his face and he looked down.

That's when Emma saw the small boy with his hand on Cal's leg. She recognized him. He belonged to one of the whores at Delia's, though she never was quite certain which one. She and her pa had treated him once for a stomach virus. Cute lad, actually. Too bad he didn't have a proper family and probably not too much of a future ahead of him either. Normally, he kept out of sight except for occasionally attending school.

"Mister," he pulled on Cal's pants.

"What is it, Peter?" Emma asked.

The boy looked up at her. "I needs to tell a Sinclair person."

Cal crouched beside the boy. "I'm Cal Roberts, Wade Sinclair's brother."

"I knows."

"You have something to tell me?"

The boy nodded. "Miss Beth, the one who helps out at the school, is stuck."

"Stuck?" Cal glanced up at her and Joe.

Emma's heart began to race. Peter knew something about Beth.

"She's stuck in the cellar."

"Where?" Joe asked.

The boy looked up at him. "Over at the whorehouse."

Yes! Beth was right here in town. Emma's pulse raced at the knowledge. "I know where the cellar is," she said. "The entrance is off a little room in the kitchen, in the back. There's no outside entry."

"Are you certain?" Cal asked the boy, excitement in his voice. "Did you see her?"

"I didn't see her, but she talked through the door. I tried to tell Mama, but she shushed me, then said to just keep watch and don't talk to her. But I remembered, Miss Beth said to tell a Sinclair. I tried to open the door, but it's really stuck. I like Miss Beth. She gives me candy sometimes when I reads good."

"Is she all right?" Cal asked.

The boy shrugged.

Cal patted his back. "Thanks for telling us, Peter. You run along back to the...um, home and don't tell anyone else. All right?"

He nodded and took off out of the clinic, disappearing down the boardwalk.

The relief that spread through Cal almost floored him. As he stood, he stepped out the door and his gaze strayed toward Delia's. Beth was being held in the whorehouse. "Let's go get her."

"Wait." Joe grabbed his arm. "We need a plan. Although no one's seen him, Nathan must be close. He's probably keeping an eye on Beth over there. We don't want to mess this up. If we don't get her on the first try, he'll move her and we might never find her again. Also, if we just bust in there, guns smoking, without a plan, Beth could get hurt."

Cal took a deep breath, trying to control his urge to storm the place.

"We need to go in tonight, while they're busy." Joe scratched his chin in thought.

"What if she's moved before then?" Emma asked.

"We'll watch the front and back," Cal said. "Once they get busy, Lanelle will be out of the way. She has to be a part of this. Delia might be in on it too. And who knows how many others. At night, Nathan won't take a chance on coming out of his hole, wherever he is, and risk being seen at the whorehouse. It's too busy and too many people are watching for him. That'll make things easier for us. Emma can go to the back later, once we're ready, and distract anyone who might be in the kitchen. I'll slip inside and get Beth. Joe, you can watch the back door to make sure nobody comes in behind us."

"We'll need someone to cover the front of the kitchen," Emma said. "To keep anyone else from entering. I can do that too, unless there are too many people in the kitchen to begin with. If so, we may have to pick another time to get Beth out. We'll need to stay flexible. We don't want to push a bad position."

"We'll do what we can, unless there's just no way to get to her safely. But it'll look too suspicious for you to be loitering outside in the hall area," Joe said. "And I don't want you accosted. I'll ride back to the ranch and get Jameson. You two watch the back of the whorehouse while I'm gone. If he moves Beth outside of the building, he'll have

to take her out the back. I'll return as fast as I can to cover the front until we're ready to move, just in case Nathan tries to sneak himself in or out that way."

"Let me go back to the ranch," Emma suggested. "Then you and Cal can split up and watch both sides right now."

"Good idea," Cal replied.

"No." Joe shook his head. "If I'm wrong about him being in there and Nathan is out and about instead, I don't want Emma riding around alone."

"I can take a gun."

"Do you know how to use one?" Joe asked her.

"Kind of. You pull the trigger and it fires, right?"

"Funny. Not good enough. You need to know what you're doing."

"Joe's right," Cal agreed. "I wasn't thinking. We don't want you disappearing on us too. We'll watch the back."

"How about I watch the front? I can alert you if anything happens. If I watch right out in the open, it'll deter anyone from doing anything. Nobody would do something to me in the open. Right? Not with possible witnesses around."

"Wrong." Joe's jaw tightened. "Don't let her out of your sight, Cal. I don't want her visible or even in hiding alone. Not as long as Nate is on the loose. Stop pouting and get used to it, Emma. Cal?"

"I've got it covered. Head on out to the ranch. We'll be here when you get back." Cal sympathized with the pout on Emma's face. He wondered if it came from disappointment or anger. Either way, he didn't want her put in any more danger than absolutely necessary. Joe was right. He'd have done the same thing if Beth were out here instead of her.

"Come on. Let's go." He tugged on her arm. "While we're watching, we'll come up with a plan to cover all possibilities." That suggestion seemed to perk her up a little.

His own heart raced in anticipation. Whatever plan they settled on, it had to work. They might not get a second chance.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth removed a few more potatoes from the sack then hefted the remaining load. "Still too heavy." *Damn it.*

Without any cans to use as weapons, she'd needed to find something new to attack Nathan with. Something with bulk.

The potatoes might just work. If she could get the weight right. She needed to be able to swing the sack, but it still had to be heavy enough to do some damage.

She could toss the potatoes separately, but she needed a big punch. Something almost guaranteed to work on the first try.

Aggravation and fear fueled her determination to get out of here and away from that crazy man, whom she'd actually been stupid enough to care for once.

About an hour ago, Nathan had paid her another visit and tried again to get her to drink the tea he'd brought. He had tried forcing it down her throat.

She'd ended up biting his finger, breaking the cup and spilling the liquid everywhere. She knew without a doubt that he'd put something in the tea. Otherwise, he wouldn't have been so adamant about her drinking it.

He'd been desperate and she'd been just as desperate not to cooperate.

Thank goodness she'd refused the drink right from the beginning. Who knew where she might be now if she'd complied. She might not even be alive.

After she'd fought him on the tea, he'd grabbed at her bodice and tried to lift her skirt. She'd kicked him good in the leg and stomped on his foot. By the look on his face, she thought he was going to slap her senseless, but he'd just cursed, mumbled something under his breath and hobbled up the steps.

Next time he came through the door, she was determined to knock *him* senseless and then run like hell.

She tested the bag. Perfect.

With a strip of material, she tied the sack closed, making sure to secure it tightly. She positioned herself and the sack beside the door. At this angle, she'd be out of the line of sight of anyone who opened the door.

Now she just needed to wait.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sometime later, Joe and Jameson crept up beside Cal and Emma in the woods behind the whorehouse. To identify their exact whereabouts, Cal had answered Joe's whistle with one of his own as they'd approached.

"Any movement?" Joe asked. He reached out and squeezed Emma's hand.

"All quiet," Cal replied, so antsy to move that his muscles ached.

They went over their plans, then repositioned themselves and waited for night to fall and the whorehouse to get busy.

Cal's mood steadily worsened while they waited as he thought of Beth being kept captive. No telling what Nathan had done to her. Or was doing to her right at this moment if he was in there with her. If she was at all hurt, he'd hunt that bastard down and kill him with his bare hands.

The hours passed slowly, but finally the time came to move. Jameson went in first, posing as a customer. He planned to slip away and make certain no one entered the kitchen after Emma got inside.

From the trees, Joe guarded the back door so no one could sneak up on them from behind.

Cal waited nearby in the dark, while Emma approached the kitchen and knocked. She turned and shrugged, indicating that no one answered. Maybe luck was with them.

If no one was in the kitchen to begin with, that would be one less worry. The whorehouse didn't provide refreshments to the customers, other than a little booze, so he'd hoped for low kitchen traffic.

Emma turned the knob and stuck her head in. A moment later she waved him forward.

Cal hurried to the door and they both slipped inside. The room was indeed empty. Perfect timing.

Emma peeked out the swinging door to the hall to signal Jameson that they were inside. Cal found the door to the linen area and went inside. He saw another door, presumably the one to the basement, from Emma's description.

He tried to open it but found the door locked and no sight of a key. Not a big problem. Wade had taught him a few tricks after working for a detective agency for many years. "Emma," he whispered from the door. "I need a hairpin."

She took a pin from her hair and handed it over. "Can you get it open?"

"I should be able to."

"Well, hurry. Someone's bound to be back for that tray of shot glasses sitting on the counter."

Music and murmurs of conversation filtered through the door. He knew she was right. Eventually, someone would head for the kitchen. He just hoped Jameson could stop whoever it was.

After a few attempts, the lock clicked open. Great. Now he just hoped Beth was indeed down there. He stepped into the dark. "Be—"

*Ooph.* Something hard hit him in the stomach and he doubled over then dropped to his knees. His rifle clattered to the ground.

A skirt flew past him.

He tried to reach out but all he managed was a weak groan.

"Emma!" he heard Beth exclaim.

She turned toward him. "Cal!" She rushed back and crouched down. "Oh I'm sorry. I didn't know. I thought you were Nathan." She helped him to his feet.

"Let's go," Emma said, urgency in her voice.

"Are you all right?" Cal asked Beth, standing now with his rifle back in hand but still bent over. "He didn't hurt you, did he?" Cal looked her up and down while rubbing his stomach. She'd hit him with a damn sack of potatoes!

"Later, you two," Emma interrupted. "We need to get out of here. You all right, Cal?"

"I'll live." He straightened up the best he could.

Jameson poked his head in. "Lanelle is headed this way."

"Keep her busy." Emma pushed Cal and Beth out the door.

They stumbled to a halt, coming face to face with Nathan, holding a pistol. Cal's first reaction was fear for the women's safety, then he itched to pummel the man, but Nathan's gun stopped him.

Something had gone very wrong. Where was Joe? Cal noticed the worried look on Emma's face as she scanned the nearby woods.

"Going somewhere?" Nathan asked with a smirk on his face.

"The game's over," Cal told him, trying to mask his discomfort. Damn, Beth had whacked him good.

"Is it? Seems like I'm the one holdin' the cards, especially since I have the advantage right now on all of you. Let go of your rifle, Roberts."

Without protest, Cal dropped the rifle, for Nathan had his pistol aimed right at Beth's heart.

"I never meant for everything to get so complicated," Nathan admitted with a scowl on his face. "If you just would have loved me..." he said, staring at Beth. Then he shook his head as if trying to clear his thoughts.

"So now what, Nathan?" she asked.

"I think he's probably out of ideas," Emma said, drawing his attention. "You never had the sense of a mule, Nathan."

Nathan fumed, his face turning red.

Cal tried his hardest to maintain a straight face. The ladies were good at causing a distraction.

A pistol being cocked sounded in the night air.

"Drop the gun, Nathan," Joe said from behind.

Cal saw blood trickling down the side of his head. Nathan must have come up on him in the woods and momentarily knocked him out. Apparently, Joe's head was harder than his own, or else Nathan was losing his touch. So far, the man had foiled them at just about every turn but his luck had finally run out.

Nathan turned toward Joe, whose eyes seemed a bit unfocused. Cal's concern suddenly grew. They might not be free and clear yet. Joe staggered and his pistol dipped. Nathan immediately took advantage before anyone could move. He raised his gun and fired.

"No!" Emma screamed.

Another shot rang out at almost the same moment that Cal rushed forward and tackled Nathan to the ground.

"Cal!" Beth called out.

People ran out from the warehouse and nearby buildings to see what all the commotion was about. Shouts and screams filled the air.



When the dust cleared, Nathan lay on the ground dead. Joe lay on the ground, grimacing in pain. Blood gushed from his leg. Uninjured but shaken, Cal got to his feet with a little help from Beth.

"Let's get him to the clinic," Emma ordered, immediately taking charge over Joe.

"I'm all right. Is he dead? Did I get him?"

Cal and Beth stood looking down into Nathan's lifeless eyes. "Yep, you got him," Cal replied.

"You're damn lucky I didn't get you too, rushing forward like that."

"I was trying to save your ass."

"Well thanks, but I'm pretty good at saving my own ass."

"Enough talk," Emma interrupted. She signaled the men who'd come to help and several of them got Joe up and headed over to the doctor's office.

"We'll be there in a few minutes," Beth called out after them.

Cal glanced toward the kitchen where Jameson stood. "Where's Lanelle?"

"She took off. I lost her in the crowd."

"Alert the undertaker about Nathan then get some men and see if you can find her and Agatha too. Those two women need to pay for their part in this." Cal took Beth's hand in his. "He can't threaten you anymore."

Beth nodded. "Maybe he did just want to be loved."

"No, sweetheart. He wanted money and power and you were a means to that. That's all. Don't ever feel sorry for him. He chose his path. His evil probably ran much deeper than any of us will ever know."

Cal reached down for his rifle. "Now let's go check on Joe."

## Chapter Seventeen

Beth swam in circles around Cal, splashing him and giggling.

He lunged for her and missed the first time, but then captured her in his arms. "Gotcha, my tantalizing beauty!" After nuzzling her neck, he tickled her waist and ribs relentlessly.

She squealed in laughter, feeling the weight of the world had lifted from her shoulders. Nathan was gone. Joe was going to be all right. And she and Cal were together.

At the pond. Their pond. Together for the rest of their lives, she hoped.

What more could she want? She turned in his arms, stopping his tickle attack and kissed him delicately on the lips. When his arms loosened around her, dropping to his sides, she took a step back, grinned and splashed him royally.

"Argh!" Cal wiped the water from his face and laughed. But he didn't retaliate. "All right." He held out his hand to her. "Enough play. Let's wade back to the bank."

"Already?"

"You're such a water lily. Just for a while. I'm a bit hampered in the water for what I want to do. Besides, my fingers are shriveling up. I need to dry out."

She chuckled and took his hand. If what he wanted to do matched what she wanted to do, she had no objections. Her lips lifted into a small smile as she imagined all sorts of carnal possibilities. She still found it amazing how comfortable, not shy, she felt with Cal, even with them both completely naked.

They lay down on a blanket Cal had brought with them.

She so loved it here. The pond was always romantic at night, with the moon and stars twinkling in the sky. Tonight was a bit warmer than usual, which made things perfect.

Beth relaxed on her back, while looking up at Cal, who lay propped on one elbow. His gorgeous green eyes always drew her, as if he saw right into her soul. The fingers of his other hand traced lazy patterns along her stomach, circling her navel, making her body ache to join with his.

"I'm glad Joe is going to be all right. I was worried he might lose his leg," Cal said, a concentrated look on his face.

Pulling her thoughts away from her own needs, she responded to his concerns. "I know. Emma was beside herself. I've never seen her like that. Doctor Bray is so good though. We owe him a big thanks. Joe's not going to like remaining idle while he recovers, but it's much better than the alternative."

"As long as Emma tends him, I think he'll make it through just fine. She has a special touch where he's concerned."

"She'll be moving back home now though. She was getting comfortable at the ranch and being around Joe. And with him hurt, she wants to be there more than ever. But her pa won't hear of it."

"They'll work it out, I'm sure." Cal leaned down and kissed her gently on the lips. "I have something I've been wanting to ask you."

"What's that?" The serious look on his face caused her heart to pound. He appeared uncharacteristically nervous and when he flattened his hand on her stomach, she felt his fingers trembling. She laid her hand over his. "Say it."

"Will you marry me?" He cleared his throat. "I love you more than my own life. I can't live without you, Beth. I want you to be my wife. If you'll have me." He let out a heavy breath. "All right. I said it. I actually said it." He chuckled nervously. "I've been a wreck all day thinking about proposing."

Her heart slammed against her ribs. He'd asked. Oh, how she'd dreamed of this moment for years. Even more so since his return.

"You're a little too quiet," he whispered.

A grin crossed her face. "Sorry. Just...thinking. Yes, Cal Roberts. I'll marry you. I'd love to be your wife."

His whole body sagged. "Oh thank goodness. I love you like crazy, Beth Davenport." His eyes looked misty.

"Beth Roberts," she replied, trying out the name. "Yes." She nodded. "Roberts definitely suits me. I like the sound and the image it brings to my mind."

"Me too." He laid his head on her shoulder and sighed.

Beth felt something moist drip to her skin and she wrapped her arms around him. He could be so sensitive at times. She loved that about him. She needed a strong man in her life but one who also wasn't afraid to show his feelings. Someone she could trust to freely share her feelings with and know he'd never betray her.

She felt like weeping with joy. The man of her dreams. She'd waited so long. They held each other in silence, as if speaking might break the loving spell surrounding them.

This had always been her wish as well as her fate, she realized with total clarity. No other path for her life would have made her happier or more complete.

She shifted and cupped his cheeks, bringing him up for a long, lingering kiss.

When he pulled back, he stared deeply into her eyes. "Sometimes I feel like I don't deserve you. After everything I did—"

"Shh. We both made mistakes. I'm certainly far from innocent in my choices. I might even be guiltier than you in the pain I've caused." When he started to interrupt, she added quickly, "But that's all in the past. Now we're together again, as it was always meant to be."

He smiled. "Yes, as it was always meant to be." His thumb brushed across one of her nipples, causing it to harden.

She arched against his hand, her body coming alive.

Cal's head lowered and he sucked the nipple into his mouth. Damn, he loved this woman more than he thought possible. He'd worried about proposing, worried whether she'd accept. After all the trauma and errors in judgment they'd both made, he feared that maybe she'd want space and time instead of agreeing to a commitment.

And if she had space and time to think, he was terrified that she'd decide not to be with him, that her life might be better off without him. He swore to himself right then that he'd make certain she never regretted the decision to be his wife.

Beth laced her fingers through his hair. Oh yes. He loved feeling her hands on him. She was his anchor in this life. He shifted to suck on her other nipple. She squirmed beneath him, tightening her hold in his hair.

He feathered kisses over her breasts and down her stomach. Her skin tasted fresh and moist and cool. He moved between her legs and she spread her thighs without hesitation. Now no longer touching him, he glanced up at her, wanting the connection of her hands or her eyes.

She was lying flat, her eyes closed. But he wasn't disappointed for she was massaging her breasts, tweaking her own nipples.

So sexy.

He licked the inside of one thigh, then the other. With a sigh, she spread her legs wider. He watched her tug on one nipple, while she lightly twisted the second one. He could watch her all night. But he needed to taste her.

Actually, what he really needed was to plunge his cock inside her! But not yet. Not until they officially wed. He wanted to make their wedding night special and memorable.

He slid his hands beneath her bottom and lightly kissed the silky hair between her thighs. His tongue teased her moist slit until she moaned and whimpered. With a gentle lap, he tasted her cunt.

"Oh yes. That feels good."

His fingers massaged her ass. Damn, his cock hurt so badly. He pulled back and stared down at her body.

Beth opened her eyes. After a moment of tense silence, she asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Do you want me to turn over?"

His heart clenched. She was offering him her ass. To fuck. What a woman! So willing to please him. Of course, he knew she got pleasure from their joinings too.

He stood up. "Just stay there." He moved to straddle her head, facing down her body. He sank to his knees and guided his cock to her mouth. "Suck me."

Beth reached out and circled his shaft with her hand, while taking the tip of him into her mouth. She sucked and licked his cock, taking him a little deeper with each draw of her lips.

"Ah yes." He leaned over her and began kissing her cunt. He loved everything about her body. He spread Beth's wet folds and licked the bud of flesh begging for attention.

Her body bucked and she drew on him like she was starved for cock. She knew exactly how to drive him wild. He nibbled on her sensitive flesh, making her squirm beneath him.

They licked and sucked one another, each following the other's actions. When he sucked, she sucked. When he licked, she licked. They both started slowly and gently, gradually increasing the stimulation until neither of them could remain still or quiet.

Cal pumped his hips, fucking Beth's mouth, needing to get deeper but not wanting to gag her. He moved carefully, testing what she could take in this position.

Her fingers dug into his ass, pulling him closer. She eagerly sucked him deeper, taking everything he offered. And demanding more.

Yes! So much passion! He gave her another inch and his body jerked at the phenomenal sensation.

He teased her hole with his finger and she pushed her hips toward him, letting him know she needed a good fucking. He slipped two fingers up inside her and she went wild, undulating and sucking him harder. With short, fast strokes, he plunged his fingers into her cunt.

With a muffled moan, she took another inch of his shaft.

Damn. That was it. He couldn't take any more. His balls tightened and he was ready to climax.

He nibbled on her bud, nipping lightly, knowing the pleasure-pain drove her crazy. Determined for her to release at the same time he did, he pushed his fingers up into her hard.

They both moaned and groaned, reaching for that ultimate bliss.

Cal's entire system exploded in ecstasy, from his cock to his balls, down to his toes and up to the top of his head. He couldn't believe how much pleasure was shooting through his body. He'd never felt such strong sensations.

Beth's body flushed and spasmed beneath him. Both their bodies shook uncontrollably from the erotic experience until they collapsed in exhaustion onto the blanket.

After Beth released his cock, letting his now limp shaft slip from her mouth, Cal pulled his fingers out of her cunt and rolled off her.

"Oh Cal. That was great," she whispered.

"Yes," he agreed breathlessly. "So great. You're perfect. Everything I've ever wanted or would ever need in a woman, in a wife." He switched positions and gathered her into his arms.

She snuggled into his embrace and he held her against his heart.

After their breathing returned to normal, he covered them both with the blanket while murmuring his love to her.

Soon, she drifted into a deep sleep.

When she awoke, he'd take her into the pond for a leisurely bath and then they'd return home. He stared up at the stars and the moon, knowing he was the luckiest man alive.

## **Chapter Eighteen**

*Six Weeks Later*

Beth rushed through the ranch house, making certain everything was just so, even though they still had plenty of time before the family arrived. So much had happened lately, she seemed in constant motion.

Joe's wounded leg had healed nicely, though he still walked with a bit of a limp. Emma was living back at the clinic again, at her father's insistence, but came out to the ranch to dote over Joe often. Cal had taken over the running of the ranch and was doing a great job of it. He seemed to love the responsibility.

Lanelle and Agatha never had been found. Beth didn't really worry about them too much. She felt they both had been manipulated by Nathan and weren't, on their own, a threat to her life or anyone else whom she loved.

They hadn't replaced Agatha yet. Beth was doing the work now instead of helping out at the schoolhouse. She figured Skylar would want to do the hiring of any new house staff herself.

Each day that passed, she felt more at ease, not needing to worry about Nathan anymore. She would never have wished death on the man...well, maybe she had once or twice. But now all of them could have some peace in their lives.

Today was an important day. Wade, Skylar and Colton were due back. Once they'd docked, they sent a telegram saying they were back in the country, would be home before much longer and that a man who had attempted to shoot Wade in the crowd had been arrested. Because of the undercover protection provided for Wade and family, the man had been subdued without harm to any of them.

Skylar had spotted him first and told Wade, who had alerted the agents. Beth wasn't certain exactly how it all had happened but Skylar knew things sometimes before they took place. Just like their ma. That ability had come in handy more than once for her. Unfortunately Skylar never seemed able to control it, so she'd learned to heed any warnings or feelings she got whenever she got them.

Beth frowned. Too bad she hadn't inherited the same gift. It might have saved her from making a lot of wrong choices in her life. Regardless, all was finally returning to normal and she couldn't be happier. She looked forward to having the rest of the family back home. She and Cal could hardly wait to make the announcement about their wedding.

An arm slipped around her waist from behind. She started, but then immediately relaxed, realizing who it was. "Cal, you scared me." Funny, how he showed up right as she was thinking of him. But then she thought of him almost constantly.

He chuckled. "Sorry. I've missed you."

"We just saw each other at breakfast." Still, she'd missed him too.

"I know, but that was a couple of hours ago. How long until we need to meet the stage?"

"Oh I forgot. Jameson brought out a message from town about an hour ago. After Wade and Skylar came in on the train, they decided to buy a new wagon and they're coming directly to the ranch, so there's no stage to meet. The stage has had so many delays and robberies in the last year that Wade decided to avoid the hassle. They'll still be here today, but not until later. I'm glad we got the message before trekking all the way into town."

"Me too." He turned her around to face him. "Plus it gives us more time alone before they get here. You know once they're back, we'll have to sneak off to be alone."

"Not for long." She smiled.

"No, not for long." He kissed her leisurely. When he pulled back, a sexy smile lingered on his face. "Speaking of being alone..." He took her hand in his and tugged her forward. "Let's go."

She knew what he wanted and she didn't resist. She wanted it too. Wanted him.

They went upstairs and into Cal's room. When he shut the door behind them, her heart began to race. She heard the lock click before he turned toward her.

Beth felt so much love for him. She knew in her heart they'd be together forever. She couldn't wait to raise a family with him. Her heart full, she reached for his shirt buttons and began opening them slowly.

They had plenty of time to enjoy themselves and each other before the rest of the family was due home. Joe was on the other side of the house resting. She had insisted he work small shifts only until completely recovered. The hands were doing their chores and no house staff was around to bother them.

Cal pulled off his shirt while she knelt to undo his belt buckle. His muscular chest, with just a smattering of brown hair leading down in a narrow line toward his cock, made her ache to touch him all over. As she opened his pants, she kissed his stomach, letting her tongue lap lightly at his warm skin.

"Ah...yes." He raked his fingers through her hair.

Releasing him from the constraints of his pants, Beth's fingers massaged his cock then she took him in her mouth. His musky taste filled her senses. A low groan from him traveled down her spine. She loved giving him pleasure.

She could hardly wait to take him into her body—not just her ass, which she had enjoyed, but her cunt. She knew she'd enjoy that connection between them the most. His cock wouldn't penetrate her there for a while yet though.

He wanted to wait until after they married. She loved him even more for that.



Soon after Joe was shot, when he'd taken her to the pond and proposed, she'd felt like they'd come full circle. She didn't know how she could ever love him more than she had that night, but each day her love seemed to grow even fuller for this man.

After a few moments, Cal drew her up and began taking off her clothes. His hands felt so gentle. Every touch so soft. After he'd peeled away the last of her garments, he scooped her up and laid her on the bed then he shucked his pants and climbed up beside her.

"You are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he whispered as his hand cupped one breast. He leaned down and circled the nipple with his tongue.

Beth sighed. She loved the feel of his tongue on her body. He sucked her nipple into his mouth and she thought she'd faint from the pleasure of it.

Cal's fingers eased down her body and between her legs.

She craved so much more than just the touch of his fingers. "I need you, Cal. To fill me up. Please!" She didn't want to wait anymore. She ached for him to completely join his body with hers. They intended to marry soon anyhow. Certainly there would be no harm.

He groaned. "Don't tempt me, Beth. We shouldn't do that yet." He slid one finger up inside her then added a second and finally pushed in a third, stretching her to accommodate him. "Let's wait and make our wedding night extra special."

"Extra special," she whispered. As she nodded, a familiar deep need filled her. "Ah...good. So good." Not exactly what she desired, but she'd take it. His wish for a special night on their wedding melted her heart.

He sat up and pumped his fingers inside her. After a few moments, he leaned over and she felt his tongue tease the sensitive bud of nerves between her thighs. *Oh*. She cried out his name and about came off the bed.

Her back arched and she moaned. She reached out and curled her fingers around his thick cock. When she began stroking him, he grunted and sucked her bud into his mouth.

"Oh!" Her hand gripped him tighter. The faster she stroked him, the harder he plunged his fingers into her cunt, the harder he sucked her. She loved it. "More, more!"

Damn, Cal didn't think he'd ever tire of this woman. She was a dream come true. She filled every emotional and sexual fantasy he'd ever had.

Once they married, he swore he was keeping her in bed for a week. Fucking and loving her until neither of them had the energy to walk or talk.

He covered her hand with his and stroked his cock hard. He was going to spill his seed all over her and had no worries about doing so. She never protested anything sexual. He nibbled on her bud then bit down gently.

"Ah yes! Cal!"

His fingers moved deeply and steadily, fucking her cunt as thoroughly as he could. He lifted his hand from his cock and rolled her onto her side, keeping his fingers inside her. Her hand dropped away from his shaft.

"What?"

"Quiet. Just enjoy." He pushed the fingers of his free hand against her lips. "Suck them." When she opened her mouth, he inserted two fingers. "Get them really wet. Good." He pulled them out and began probing her asshole.

"Cal, oh yes! Do it."

He loved her enthusiasm. Since she'd already taken his cock in her ass, she'd have no problem with his fingers. He pushed one finger deep then worked in a second finger.

Her body trembled.

"You like this?"

"Yes," she whimpered. "Oh yes."

With three fingers up her cunt and two up her ass, he intended to give her the fuck of her life, show her no mercy and not stop until she was completely satiated. He intended to make sure she craved what only he could give her.

Her hips moved wildly.

Oh yes. She definitely loved this kind of fucking. He couldn't wait to discover everything she loved. Their life together would not be boring, sexually or otherwise. "Beg me for it."

"Yes, Cal," she cried out. "I need this. I need you. More."

He stopped moving inside her, knowing she was close to climaxing. Not that he wanted to torture her. But he knew delaying her climax would make it even stronger.

She groaned in disappointment. "No! Don't stop. Please. Fuck me. Fuck me hard."

Cal grinned and his heart pounded like crazy. His beauty could be quite wanton when he got her going. "Surrender to me?"

"Yes, yes. Anything you want."

He moved his fingers again, fucking her cunt almost savagely now, while treating her ass more gently. He knew she loved the intensity. When he finally got his cock between her legs, they'd both probably go through the roof in ecstasy.

"Oh, oh. Yes!"

Now to make sure her body and mind exploded in pleasure. "Come on. Come on, baby. Let go." His fingers fucked her deeply, getting as far inside her as possible.

Beth screeched and her body shook as she climaxed. "Oh-oh..." She made continued sounds of pleasure while her body undulated wildly.

Cal didn't stop until she finally collapsed. Before she got too comfortable, he grabbed the back of her head and pulled her toward his aching cock. He sat back against the pillows. "Suck me good."

Without protest or hesitation, Beth took him into her mouth. She sucked and licked his shaft gently. Her fingers caressed his thighs, squeezing and massaging the muscles.

As he stroked her hair, his body trembled. She'd learned very quickly how to please him with her mouth. Her head bobbed and she sucked harder, her enthusiasm growing.

"Ah yes, Beth." Close to spilling his seed, he thrust his hips toward her and tightened his hold on her head. He knew she'd swallow everything he gave her.

"Mmm, mmm."

The vibration against his cock pushed him over the edge. "Ah!" He spewed down her throat. The pleasure of his climax and watching her suck down his juices was almost too much. "Beth..." Nothing had ever felt as good as being with her. "All of it. Swallow all of it."

With an eagerness that amazed him, she did just that. She pulled away, then leaned forward and licked the tip of his cock. He twitched and moaned at the sensation.

"I love you so much," he whispered, feeling completely exhausted and sucked dry. Literally.

She ran her tongue along her lips. "I love you too. I love everything you give me, Cal. Everything."

He groaned and pulled her up for a long kiss.

\* \* \* \* \*

Joe squirmed on the chair in the corner of his room. He couldn't get comfortable, even though the chair was well padded. Sitting on his ass too long never had been easy on him. As soon as his leg stopped bothering him, he intended to put in a full day's work again.

He set aside the book he'd been trying to read, wanting to improve his piss-poor schooling, and rubbed his achy leg. He missed Emma. She'd come out to see him just yesterday but it had seemed like forever to him. She always made him feel better. She possessed a special touch in relieving sore muscles and often massaged his thigh. He hoped to see her when they went to town to pick up Wade, Skylar and Colton.

Impatient to go, he glanced at his pocket watch. They should be leaving soon. Though the stage usually did come in late, so waiting a bit longer wouldn't be a bad idea, he supposed. As it was, he'd probably have to wait in the wagon. For some reason, his leg pained him more today. He'd be so glad when the family was all together again and they could put the mistakes and problems of the past in the past.

A muffled moan caught his attention. He glanced out the window. When he saw nothing, he shook his head. Must be his imagination.

The moan, such a sexual sound, made his thoughts drift back to Emma again. He'd never expected her to capture his heart so completely. When Doctor Bray had examined him last, the man asked him not to see Emma so much anymore. The request from her father felt like a stab to the heart.

Emma had been accepted into a medical school. She could attend while staying with relatives, Doctor Bray had told him. The news elated him and depressed him at the same time. He felt so proud of Emma for the accomplishment and opportunity, but at the same time he didn't want her to leave Elk Valley...and him.

He couldn't be selfish though. He would never stand in the way of her future. He just never realized how hard it would be to give her up. "Damn," he whispered, feeling like a shattered man inside.

Doctor Bray didn't want their budding relationship to prevent her from furthering her education and starting the career he'd always dreamed of for her. Joe couldn't blame her father for his feelings.

He wasn't certain what Emma wanted or how she even felt about going away to school. Every time he tried to bring up the subject, she skirted the issue. Maybe she was trying to spare his feelings. He didn't know.

Beth's head was in the clouds lately, so trying to talk to her about it proved fruitless. She just kept saying that everything would work out. He wasn't so confident.

All he knew for certain was that if Emma did leave, he'd never be the same.

\* \* \* \* \*

Later that afternoon, the sound of a wagon rolling toward the ranch house and shouts of welcome filled the air.

Cal looked up. "I think they're here." He and Beth jumped up from the sofa where they'd been cuddling and rushed out front. His pulse raced as he wondered what type of welcome he'd get after all these years.

"Welcome home!" Beth said, waving at them, a huge smile on her face.

He remained silent at her side, warily watching Wade's and Skylar's faces.

Skylar jumped down from the wagon and threw herself into his arms. Her long black hair flew in every direction. "Cal!"

Laughing, he caught her. "Skylar. You're as gorgeous and feisty as ever." At least one person was glad to see him.

"I'm so glad you're here," she whispered in his ear. "Welcome home." She stepped back and hugged her sister. "It's good to see the ranch and familiar faces. I've missed everyone so much." She took Colton from Wade, who now stood beside her, staring intently.

Cal felt uncomfortable under his older brother's gaze, but he stood his ground. "Wade," he greeted, barely able to speak, his throat had gone so dry.

After a tense moment of silence, Wade stuck out his hand. When Cal reached to shake it, Wade pulled him into a hug. "About time you came home, brother," he said gruffly, clapping him on the back.

"Uncle Cal?" a little voice called out.

Cal turned to Cal Colton. The small boy, more adorable than he'd ever imagined, smiled up at him. His head of curly black hair and deep blue-green eyes drew one's attention and Cal suspected he'd be quite the lady's man when he got older. "So you're my namesake."

Colton looked up at him with wide eyes then held out his arms.

Cal swallowed hard. He took the boy from Skylar, who snuggled into his arms like it was the most natural thing in the world for him to do. Cal's heart squeezed tightly and he immediately fell in love with the child.

"We told him you'd be here. He's had a long trip," Skylar said. "I think we all need to rest, freshen up, then maybe over dinner, we can catch up."

"Where's Joe and Nathan?" Wade asked, looking around. Most of the other hands had already come out to greet them and lots of chatter filled the air.

"Joe's upstairs," Beth said. "He got shot in the leg while you were gone." When their eyes widened, she hurriedly continued. "He's fine pretty much, just still fighting a limp. It's a long story. We'll explain everything over dinner. I'm sure he's heard the commotion and is probably on his way down. Nathan isn't here. We've got a lot to talk about."

Cal stood by while everyone continued to greet his brother and sister-in-law. He and Beth had barely dressed in time, when Joe had come looking for them, wondering why they hadn't yet left for town. He didn't think the man had been fooled for a minute but he knew Joe would hold his tongue. Joe had returned to his room, then he and Beth had gone downstairs to wait. Cal didn't look forward to relating the whole Nathan fiasco. He'd rather just forget, but Wade and Skylar needed to know what had happened.

It felt so *complete* to finally have the family together again and to feel welcomed by them. A good future lay ahead for them all.

## Chapter Nineteen

### *Three Weeks Later*

The garden looked beautiful, decorated with desert flowers and colorful ribbons. Lanterns lit the entire area. The summer night couldn't have been more perfect for a wedding, Skylar thought.

Beth had always dreamed of an outside wedding, but the weather at this time of year was too hot, at least during the day, so a nighttime ceremony seemed a perfect solution and so romantic. Only a slight breeze blew, just enough to flutter the ribbons. Her sister would be pleased.

Coming up from the side, Wade slipped his arm around her waist and squeezed lightly. "Is this as perfect as it feels?"

Every time he touched her and looked into her eyes, she fell in love with him all over again. She hoped Beth and Cal found as much happiness in their marriage as she and Wade. "I think so."

"Think?" His brow furrowed. "Is something wrong?"

She shrugged. "Not really. Just... The anticipation is getting to me, I guess. Waiting makes me antsy." She hoped that's all it was. Shaking off her unsettled emotions, she smiled. "How's Cal doing?"

"A little impatient but not bad. How's Beth?"

"All atwitter, last time I checked on her, wanting everything to be just so. Emma is with her. I'll go join her in a few minutes and make certain everything is set. Is the cabin finished?"

"Jameson said it's all ready for them to move in. The hands finished up a few last-minute touches earlier today. We also sneaked a few of their things over there already so the place would feel more homey to them tonight. We'll take the rest over tomorrow or the next day. I'll miss having those two in the ranch house."

"Me too. But they need their privacy. Their own place." A cabin had been built where her old homestead used to sit, which was part of the land Cal now owned. Their present to the pair. At the moment, the cabin was quite small but cozy. Perfect for a newly married couple. Over time, they could add on to the place, as needed.

"Still, the house is going to seem quiet. I think we need to work harder on giving Colton a little brother or sister." He nuzzled her hair.

Skylar laughed. "I'm all for that. My body's just not cooperating." She really did want more children and was concerned about not conceiving again.

"It'll happen. Don't worry." His eyes took on a guarded look. "By the way, I'm sorry."

"Sorry?" She arched an eyebrow. "For what?"

Regret crossed his face. "I should have listened to your concerns about Nathan."

She shook her head. "He was smart and fooled a lot of people. I never had any proof against him."

"No, but your feelings are most always right. I still have a problem getting used to that."

She thumped his chest with her fist. "You need to trust me more."

Covering her fist with his hand, he chuckled. "Yes, ma'am. And I do trust you. Completely. It's trusting in things I can't see and verify myself that I have a problem with." He kissed her on the nose. "I better get back to the groom."

She smiled at her husband, knowing he loved her just as much as she loved him, which made her feel secure and happier than she'd ever been in her life. "All right. I have things to do too. I'll see you soon." She kissed Wade's cheek then headed toward the Reverend Samuel Brown, who had just arrived with his sister, the Widow Gatch.

The reverend had married her and Wade several years ago in a simpler ceremony. She was glad he still lived in town so he could marry Beth and Cal too, otherwise they'd have had to wait until a district judge came through town, or a traveling pastor. She knew Cal and Beth wouldn't have liked that.

Without a local authority, no telling how long their wedding would have been delayed, unless they went to a larger town to marry, which Beth wouldn't have wanted to do. She'd always dreamed of a more elaborate ceremony, with all her family and friends in attendance. She'd wanted something magical, which Skylar thought they'd pulled off quite well tonight.

Also, Skylar suspected her sister and Cal had already been intimate. The way they looked at each other and touched each other brought up memories of her and Wade. They had been more intimate than appropriate before their own wedding.

She hadn't told Wade about her suspicions, knowing how protective he was of Beth. Best those two just got hitched. Sooner than later and before they discovered a baby on the way.

\* \* \* \* \*

Beth looked at herself in the full-length mirror. The white dress, the same one Skylar had worn for her wedding, looked beautiful. She'd always loved this gown and had wanted one just as nice. The mercantile hadn't any decent dresses on hand, so Skylar had offered up hers. With a few alterations to the bodice and length, it fit her body like a glove.

She twisted her hands, tangling her fingers. Now that the time was approaching, her nerves had settled in. Good nerves. Excited nerves. But still...nerves.

"Are you ready?" Emma asked her.

"More than ready. How long until we start?" She glanced out the window, but couldn't really see anything, so she couldn't tell how many people had arrived.

"Another twenty minutes."

"I don't know if I'll last that long." She checked her hair in the mirror once more. She'd decided to wear it down, in waves, since she knew Cal preferred it that way.

Emma chuckled. "You'll make it. Why aren't you and Cal going away for a proper honeymoon? After everything you've been through, you certainly deserve a nice trip away."

"We will. Some time later. He's promised to take me to Europe. He said since Skylar went, it was only fair that I get to go too. It's been so long since he's been abroad that he doesn't really remember much about it, so it'll be like the first time again for him too."

"Europe." Emma sighed. "Oh, that will be so romantic. When are you two planning to go? Do you know yet?"

"Not for sure. I only know we don't want to go right now. Not when we all just got back together again."

Emma nodded. "It's too bad Cal and Wade's grandfather couldn't make it to the wedding ceremony tonight."

"Yes, it is. I would love to meet him. But with his broken leg, especially at his age, traveling would have been too rough on him." They'd promised to pay him a visit soon though.

A knock on the door drew their attention.

Beth started, then chuckled and patted her chest. "I guess I'm a little on edge." When her nerves started bothering her, her nerves *really* bothered her. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Nothing could go wrong today. Nathan was dead. Her family was all together and happy. She didn't need to be jumpy.

Emma pulled open the door. "Joe."

"Ah, Emma. You look absolutely gorgeous."

Beth smiled at Emma's pleased twitter and the warm sound in Joe's voice.

"Let me know when you ladies need me. I'll be right outside here. The guests are arriving now. It's a beautiful night. Clear, cool, lots of stars, with just a touch of a breeze."

"Wonderful."

Beth smiled. Joe was going to give her away. She sniffled, wishing her father could have been here to do the honor. She and Skylar didn't even know where he was. Joe had supposedly found him in El Paso at one point, years ago, but then he'd disappeared once again. Obviously, he didn't want anything to do with them anymore, or he'd have returned home long before now. Still, she hoped one day...



Emma clicked the door closed, then handed Beth her bouquet before gathering up her own flower arrangement. "Is there anything else you need before the ceremony starts?"

"No, I think I'm all ready."

\* \* \* \* \*

Cal paced the study. He stopped and looked at the grandfather clock. Then began pacing again.

"You're going to wear a hole in the floor," Wade told him with a chuckle.

"I'm nervous."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just am. Weren't you on your wedding day?"

"No, but then, we didn't have guests and such and it happened pretty quickly and under quite different circumstances, as I'm sure you recall. I think I was more relieved than anything else that Skylar finally accepted my proposal." Wade clapped him on the back. "You'll be all right."

He nodded. His stomach felt tied in knots. He just wanted Beth to be happy and for them to have a long, healthy life together. After so many years of wanting to be together, now that they were actually getting married, it seemed hard to believe the time had finally come.

"When is that breeding stock due in from abroad?" he asked his brother, trying to get his mind on something else. Maybe then he could relax.

"The men docked with the horses a while back. They're due here next week. You're going to help me with the new stallions, right?"

"Sure. When do we start?" He looked back at the clock again.

"The ceremony?"

Cal nodded. So much for relaxing and getting his mind on something else. No way was he breathing easier until he and Beth said "I do". Not even the possibility of strengthening their herd of breeding stock, in which he held a large financial interest, was enough to hold his attention.

"In about fifteen minutes. Skylar is greeting the guests. The reverend has arrived, so don't worry. Everything will go without a hitch. We'll head out in about ten minutes and wait for Beth to come down the aisle."

"Who's playing the piano?"

"Susan. The doors from the music room will be open, so the sound should carry well. Don't worry."

"Right. Do you have the ring?" he asked in a panic, feeling his pockets.

"Yes. I have it. Too bad things didn't work out with Colton. I guess the little guy is still too young to grasp the concept of ring bearer. If he wasn't the curious sort, he

probably wouldn't run off halfway down the aisle, chasing after anything that moves. And with all the people, as soon as he sees someone he knows, he'd be off."

Cal laughed. "I know that Skylar tried teaching him to walk the aisle all the way down. That's all right. Who's looking after Colton now?"

"Jameson is entertaining him. He'll bring Colton in to Skylar right before the ceremony starts so he doesn't get too fussy. He won't miss anything important. Now relax."

\* \* \* \* \*

Hidden out of sight of the guests, Beth watched Emma head slowly down the aisle as the romantic sounds of piano music filled the air. Cal looked so handsome and eager standing beside Wade and Reverend Brown. All her friends were seated around the garden.

Such a perfect night. Such a perfect memory for when they were old and gray, hopefully with a ton of children and grandchildren at their sides.

She couldn't see Skylar and Colton but knew they'd be sitting toward the front somewhere. She'd wanted her sister to stand beside her, along with Emma, but in the end they'd decided it better for Skylar to stay with Colton and be available to handle any last-minute problems, as their ma would have if she'd lived to see this day. *I'm getting married, Mama*, she thought, a small snuffle escaping her.

Beth's nerves hit a high point. Her legs felt weak and trembling. This was really it. She squeezed Joe's arm, who stood ready to escort her down the aisle.

"Are you all right?" he asked her. "You sure that you're ready to do this?"

She'd never been so certain of anything in her life. "Yes. I'm very sure." She smiled up at Joe. "I love him." Her feelings for Cal had grown deeper than she'd ever believed possible. She couldn't imagine her life without him now.

Joe smiled back and patted her hand. "Cal's a good man. He'll make you happy. And if he doesn't, he'll answer to me."

She chuckled at the protective tone in his voice. "It is a little scary though. Everything will change." She looked forward to the adventure, but at the same time, she knew her past life was over. Emotions tumbled through her and she had a hard time sorting them all out.

"It'll be a good change."

"Yes." She nodded. "It will be." She believed that with all her heart. The music suddenly changed and her stomach tightened. "It's time." In just a few minutes, she'd finally be Cal Roberts' wife.

\* \* \* \* \*

Skylar squirmed in her chair. Beth looked beautiful. Joe had escorted her down the aisle and then taken his seat. Emma looked beautiful at Beth's side. Cal looked handsome. Wade looked absolutely gorgeous at his side. When he winked at her, she smiled and her pulse jumped.

Still, something bothered her. As she listened to Reverend Brown conducting the ceremony, she looked around nervously.

Colton tugged on her sleeve.

She glanced down at him and saw a familiar pout on his face. She'd seen that look before. "You feel it too?" she asked him.

He nodded.

She'd recently discovered that Colton had inherited her gift. Only in the past four or five months had he shown signs. She hadn't told Wade yet.

Her own visions mostly came as dreams, but if strong enough, she sometimes experienced the odd feelings and images when awake. Her son seemed even more sensitive about such things than she.

"Where? Do you know?" she whispered to him.

Colton scrunched up his little face and looked around. "Blonde lady," he whispered, pointing toward the back.

Skylar really couldn't see who he meant from where she sat up front. If she got up, it might look odd. But then, as long as she had Colton, people would probably assume he was getting antsy and wriggling around too much. As discreetly as possible, she rose and strolled toward the back, bouncing Colton slightly as she walked, as if comforting him.

Finally, she saw the "blonde lady" and almost choked. She looked toward the front and noticed Wade's eyes on her. He knew something was up. She could tell by the look on his face. But at his angle, he wouldn't be able to see the woman. And as Cal's best man he certainly couldn't leave to find out what was going on. At least no one else seemed to have noticed.

Joe ambled up behind her. "What's going on?"

All right, so one other person had noticed. "See the blonde woman in the back row on the aisle seat? About Beth's age?" she whispered. "I need you to get her out of here, quickly and quietly."

"Why?"

"I'll explain later. I'm going to give Colton back over to Jameson and then I'll join you." She was determined to let nothing ruin her sister's wedding.

Joe didn't know what was going on but he'd do whatever Skylar asked of him. He slowly maneuvered behind the blonde. He didn't recognize her. She was in the outside chair in the very last row, so getting her shouldn't be a problem. He hoped. He didn't want to disrupt the ceremony.

After a quick glance toward the front to make certain nobody was paying attention to him, he slipped his hand over her mouth and whispered in her ear. "Don't move. Don't fight. You're coming with me." He grabbed her arm and pulled her up. Just as she started to protest, he dragged her out of the garden area and away from the guests.

"What are you doing?" she practically screeched as he continued to move her farther away from the guests. "Who are you?"

When Skylar stepped into view the blonde-haired woman quieted immediately.

Joe watched the interaction between the two women with interest, wondering about their history.

"Melissa," Skylar greeted.

Melissa? Joe practically choked. Missy? Cal's first wife. What the hell was she doing here? He glanced from woman to woman. She had to be here to cause trouble. He couldn't think of any other reason for her presence. How had she found out about the wedding anyhow? Certainly Cal's grandfather wouldn't have told her.

"Skylar. It's been a long time."

"Not long enough. What are you doing here?"

"Visiting."

"Oh right. You were just in the area and decided to stop by, I suppose. You weren't invited. Now what do you want?"

"I wanted to see Cal. I thought maybe we could work things out. But when I arrived, the ceremony had already begun. I had no idea it was his wedding day until I saw him up front with the preacher. He certainly didn't waste any time getting remarried."

Joe wasn't so sure he believed her story. The timing seemed suspect to him. Too coincidental.

"He's always loved my sister."

"Yes, I'm well aware of that. I never could live up to the memory of Miss Beth Davenport, no matter how hard I tried."

Her voice sounded full of spite, instead of regret, which alerted Joe that she definitely meant trouble.

"Then why bother coming here if you knew how he felt?"

"He told me once, even if he did return to Elk Valley, she'd probably never take him back. I got curious. I figured if she broke his heart again, he might want to try once more with me."

"After you lied to him and got pregnant with another man's child? Doubtful. Cal's a good man. If you hadn't done that he probably wouldn't have abandoned the marriage. He would have tried to make it work. But without trust—"

"We had our problems, Skylar. All marriages do."

"Not those types of problems. He's happy now. He never really loved you, Missy. He was lonely and needed someone. I think you know that. I can't say I'm sorry it didn't work out between you two, so I won't pretend I am, though I do think it's too bad that both of you had to go through a marriage that didn't stand a chance of lasting. I want you to leave now."

"Just like that? Basically hello and get out? I deserve more than to be swept under the rug like a piece of dirt!"

"What makes you think so?"

Missy blanched, as if not expecting that response and not knowing how to reply to it. After a moment, she seemed to regain her composure. "I'm out of money. I don't have a place to live. Cal's grandfather threw me out long ago and living in the city is expensive. I can't go back to Delia's or any other whorehouse. I won't."

"And?"

*Here it comes*, Joe thought. He saw the calculating look in Missy's eyes.

"And I'll make everyone's life miserable if I don't get my way."

Joe frowned. He'd seen that particular look before from many a gunfighter and con man. She wasn't issuing an idle threat.

"You weren't worth saving. I don't even know why Wade bothered."

Joe touched Skylar's shoulder. Making this woman mad probably wasn't the best approach for a good outcome.

"Because I look like the oh-so-precious Beth." Missy raised her chin. "You know, he wanted to fuck me that night. Probably so he could pretend he was sticking his cock into her."

"You filthy—" Skylar started forward but Joe stopped her.

"He wanted a three-way with me and Lanelle."

"That's it! Get out before I strangle you with my bare hands."

Missy stepped back. Her bottom lip started to tremble. "I-I'm sorry. That all just slipped out. I didn't mean any of it. Please, Skylar. I can't go back to whoring, to that life." She shook her head.

Real or an act? Joe had to wonder. His instincts told him that her words had been very carefully planned to see exactly what she could get.

The look on Skylar's face softened and her body relaxed, but only slightly. "Fine. I'll give you some money just to get rid of you. But I want you to leave town. If I ever see you around here again, I'm the one who'll make your life miserable. Watch her, Joe. I'll be back."

"No." He tugged on Missy's arm. "She'll come with me into the house. I'll get the money. You go back and watch your sister and Cal get married. You shouldn't miss the ceremony because of her."

Missy snorted.

After a slight hesitation, Skylar nodded and disappeared back into the garden.

"Come on," Joe said, pulling Missy forward. "Let's get this settled." He hoped money *would* settle this. The last thing Cal and Beth needed was more upheaval in their lives.

## Chapter Twenty

Beth laughed as Cal carried her over the threshold of the cabin. "You don't have to carry me, Cal." Though she loved the gesture.

"Of course I do. It's tradition."

She glanced around at the interior. "Oh my. It's absolutely beautiful." This was the first she'd seen of the cabin since the rebuilding. She had known about the work being done but Cal had wanted her to wait until tonight to see it all finished, as well as what they'd done to the outside structures.

"You really like it?"

She nodded, momentarily speechless as she looked around in awe. Yellow-flowered curtains draped the windows. The rest of the inside was decorated in deep greens and light browns. A sofa sat in front of the fireplace, along with a large padded chair off to the side. A desk sat in one corner with a partially filled bookcase nearby. A grandfather clock stood next to the door on one side. On the other side, a row of coat pegs had been mounted to the wall.

Cal let out a heavy breath. "I'm so glad you're pleased. We really had to work fast to get it all done on time. I thought the ranch hands did a fine job when I saw it the other day and had hoped you would like it. Skylar, Wade and I all worked on the design."

"Oh I do. I love it." Low-flamed lanterns lit the interior, making the inside feel cozy and romantic. She instantly felt at home. "Our own place. I can hardly believe it." Once she brought over a few paintings and figurines from her room at the ranch house, this place would really seem complete.

He set her down. "It's just one bedroom right now but there's plenty of room off the back to expand. The kitchen is to the side there, so it'll be more toward the center of the house."

"I have to explore." She hugged him tightly then rushed off to look around. Her home. *Theirs*. She couldn't be more proud. She'd add her own personal touches over time but she loved the place just as it was.

When they'd arrived, she'd noticed a garden ready for planting, a corral and a place for her to hang laundry. They'd put their wagon in the rebuilt barn, which she couldn't wait to fill with animals. Also, from there they could easily walk to *their* pond, which they now owned. The Roberts' land. She loved the sound of that.

The hands had totally rebuilt everything on the homestead and it all reminded her so much of when she was younger and her home was new. Happy times with Skylar and their ma and pa.

Cal followed her through the cabin, but she noticed he gave her a wide berth, allowing her to *ooh* and *ahh* over everything. Until they got to the bedroom, then he rested his hands lightly on her shoulders.

"Oh my," she whispered. The room looked so comfortable and inviting.

A huge bed dominated the center, decorated with lots of pillows and the prettiest cream-colored bedding she'd ever seen. A small table sat on either side with a lantern on each, flames flickering low. A chair sat nearby. Two chests of drawers were located off to the side, one for each of them. A dresser with a large mirror lined the opposite wall. She saw a few personal items of hers that someone must have brought over from the ranch house.

From behind, Cal's arms slipped around her waist. "Is it all right?"

She leaned back against him. "It's gorgeous. Like a fantasy. I might never leave this room."

"Sounds good to me," he whispered in her ear.

She giggled as his warm breath tickled her skin. "I'm so happy, Cal." She turned in his arms. "This is everything I've wanted for as long as I can remember."

"You're everything I've wanted for as long as I can remember."

His eyes shone with all his feelings and she almost melted in his arms. He always knew the perfect thing to say. She loved him so much. "Prepare the bed while I get ready?"

"Sure. I'll take care of it." Cal watched his wife out of the corner of his eye as he tugged loose his tie. *Wife*. He liked the sound of that because it was Beth.

She seemed fidgety all of a sudden, walking back and forth, not really focusing on anything. As if unsure of what to do or where to go. Funny thing was, he felt the same. Like this was their first time together.

Beth pulled the decorative pillows off the bed and set them in the nearby chair. Then she pulled down the covers of the bed.

He chuckled. "I thought you wanted me to take care of the bed."

When she glanced up at him, she smiled tentatively. "I did ask, didn't I? I'm all turned around and not thinking clearly. It's been a long day."

Somehow, he felt it was more than that. He took his best guess. "Are you as nervous as I am?"

As soon as the question left his mouth, her whole body seemed to relax. "Yes!" She sighed. "Why is that?"

He shrugged and came toward her, glad they both felt the same. "It's more real now." He looked around the room. "Our own place." His fingertips slid down her arm, pausing at her hand. He interlocked their fingers. "Official. After so many years, I'd feared this would never be our future."



"Me too."

A knock on the front door drew their attention.

Cal frowned. "Who in tarnation could that be?" He looked toward the door. "I can't believe someone would actually come calling this late, knowing it's our wedding night." He started to step away from Beth.

She gripped his hand. "Be careful, Cal. With everything that we've been through, I don't trust hardly anything or anyone these days."

"Don't worry." He pulled away from her and walked out into the main room of the cabin. He grabbed the rifle from above the fireplace. Wade must have brought it by earlier in the day, which he appreciated. His own mind had definitely been on other things. He approached the door. "Who is it?"

Nobody answered.

He reached for the handle.

"Cal," Beth whispered from the door of the bedroom. "Don't open it."

He smiled at her. "It'll be fine." He doubted some night monster was about to jump out at him. Wild animals didn't generally knock and unless Nathan had returned to haunt them, they were safe from the undead. He chuckled under his breath.

"At least look out the window."

"All right." Cal pulled the curtain aside and peered outside. "I don't see anything. It was most likely just Wade dropping off something. Or someone trying to be funny. You know how the hands get when someone marries." He still remembered the pranks they used to play on newlyweds on their wedding night—banging on cans outside the bedroom window, whooping, leaving "surprise" packages on the stoop. That's probably all it was.

He pulled open the door and stepped out.

When he didn't immediately come back in and she could no longer see him through the door, Beth's heart jumped. "Cal?" she whispered urgently. He didn't answer her and she felt close to panic. "If this is a joke, it's not funny." She crept toward the door.

As she approached, she picked up a heavy paperweight from the desk. She glanced out the door. "Cal?" she whispered, more softly this time. He still didn't respond and she couldn't see him.

Now full-fledged panic set in. She thought about running out the side door in the kitchen and going to get help but by the time she got back with someone, if she was even able to get away, it could be too late for Cal. He might need help *now*. She stepped out onto the porch.

The night air felt eerie to her. Almost too still.

"Cal, please answer me." Her voice shook but she couldn't control it. She glanced toward the barn. The door was closed. The corral looked empty. Everything appeared in place and quiet. He couldn't have just disappeared.

She stepped off the porch and felt someone nearby. That feeling where you *know* someone's watching. And she didn't think it was Cal. "Show yourself! I know you're out here."

Her fear quickly turned to anger and her fingers tightened around the paperweight. How dare someone do this to them after all they've been through!

Like an apparition, a woman glided out of the shadows and into the moonlight. Beth gasped. No! She couldn't believe this was happening, especially on her wedding night.

"Surprise, Mrs. Roberts."

"Melissa. What the hell are you doing back in New Mexico? Where's Cal? Did you do something to him?" She hadn't heard a gunshot. Nor had she heard Cal call out in pain. Her stomach clenched. The woman had to have done something to him or he'd be here by her side. She felt like attacking Missy but held herself back, needing to get some answers from the woman.

"They thought to pay me off and I'd just disappear," Missy answered, venom in her voice. "If not for you, Cal could have loved me. If his mind hadn't always been on you, hadn't always been comparing me to you, I wouldn't have strayed, looking for the real love he should have been able to give to me."

Beth didn't know what she'd meant by "pay me off" and didn't care to ask. A more important question lingered. "Where...is...Cal?" Missy didn't look armed. Beth hadn't heard a struggle. Where the hell had her husband gone?

"He went down like a rock after I lured him off the porch and around to the side of the cabin."

Beth's heart squeezed tightly. She glanced toward the far side of the structure. No moonlight would reach that side. Whatever Missy had done to him, he probably hadn't even seen it coming. She started forward. She had to help him!

"Stay right there!" Missy ordered.

"Or what?" Beth still didn't see a weapon and she'd had about enough. She stomped forward and threw the paperweight at Missy, hitting her right in the nose and sending her to the ground, wailing in pain.

Her heart pounding, Beth ran around the side of the cabin and almost stumbled over Cal on the ground. She crouched down. "Cal!" She felt his heart beating and the rise and fall of his chest. He was alive!

Something hit her hard from the side and she rolled to the ground. Missy had come around and was now on top of her, blood streaming out of her nose. The two struggled, throwing punches and slaps, screaming and wrestling on the ground.

Melissa pulled a knife out of her dress pocket. No! She *was* armed. Beth grabbed her wrist, trying to get her to drop the weapon. She saw Cal's rifle on the ground but couldn't get to it.

"I'll kill you, you bitch!" Missy screamed. "Then Cal will be mine."

"You're insane!" Beth smacked her hard but it seemed to have little effect.

The sound of a rider approaching filled the night air. Then a shout. A moment later someone grabbed Missy off her.

Beth scrambled to her feet. "Wade!"

"Let go of me!" Missy shouted, flailing the knife.

"Watch out!" Beth screamed, fear for Wade's safety rolling through her. Though he had a pistol strapped to his hip, she reached for Cal's rifle.

Wade pushed Missy away but he didn't reach for his weapon. Beth's heart lurched when Missy lunged for him. Before Beth could aim the rifle, Wade punched the woman in the jaw, sending her to the ground, unconscious.

Beth gasped, then relaxed, letting out a tight breath. She lowered the rifle.

"Sorry about that." Wade's brow furrowed. "I hate having to hit a woman." He glanced toward Cal on the ground. "Is he all right?"

Beth dropped the rifle and scrambled over to her husband, who was now struggling to sit up. "Are you all right?" she asked him.

"Hellfire." He shook his head, as if trying to clear his thoughts. "I can't believe Melissa came all the way back to Elk Valley. She got me with chloroform, I think." He rubbed his brow. "Something covered my nose and mouth. I tried to get her off me, but she'd jumped up and latched on from behind with an arm around my neck. I vaguely remember finally flinging her off but then everything went black. I passed out pretty fast." He glanced up. "Wade, what are you doing over here? How'd you know to come?"

"Skylar asked me to ride over and make certain everything was all right. She said Melissa showed up at the wedding."

"She was at the wedding?" Cal questioned.

Wade nodded. "Looking for either you or money. Joe paid her off and had one of the hands escort her back into town. I guess he should have stayed with her until she boarded the next stage."

"Skylar knew something was wrong? That Melissa was out here?" Beth asked, wondering if Skylar's abilities of prediction were strengthening.

"No. It was Colton. He wouldn't stop crying until Skylar promised him that I'd come out and check on his Aunt Beth and Uncle Cal."

Colton? Beth had always felt the boy was special. She'd seen something in his eyes ever since the day he was born. Her little hero. They all exchanged knowing glances.

Wade cleared his throat. "Well..." He leaned over and hefted Melissa over his shoulder. "Don't worry. I'll lock this little troublemaker up in the jailhouse until the district judge comes through."

"You need help with her?" Cal asked, getting to his feet with Beth's assistance.

"No. But I will need to borrow a wagon and some rope in case she comes around before we get there."

"In the barn," Beth told him. She wiped at the dirt on her wedding dress. Blood streaked the bodice. Totally ruined. She felt like weeping.

Cal wrapped his arm tightly around her. "Are you all right?"

"I guess." Colton had apparently inherited Skylar's abilities to know the future, unless he was just being fussy. But from the look Wade had given them, she figured the former more likely.

Maybe the ability passed down to the firstborn of each generation. Whatever the reason for Colton's actions, she was grateful. Melissa could have killed her. The woman apparently hadn't wanted Cal dead or she'd have stabbed him right off. Or maybe she'd planned to kill him later, for Beth couldn't believe that Missy would actually think she could get Cal to love her after she'd attacked both of them. She picked up the rifle and handed it back to him.

"Thanks."

With a frown, she brushed at the skirt of her dress. "My wedding gown is ruined." She sniffled. She'd hoped to save the garment for the next female family member who married, hoping she or Skylar might have a daughter in the future. Minor considering what they'd just been through but it gave her something else to focus on.

"I'm sorry. Let's go inside. Wade can handle things from here."

She nodded.

Cal glanced toward the barn where Wade was loading a now-bound Missy into the wagon. "Let's consider this finally an end to both of our past lives and a beginning to our new lives together."

"Our new lives together," she repeated, thinking those words the best ever spoken in her life.

\* \* \* \* \*

With a sigh, Beth relaxed against the mattress. Finally, she and Cal were alone. After everything that had happened today, she should feel exhausted. Instead, she felt invigorated. Stronger somehow, as if they'd gone through some test of their love and survived.

Cal smiled down at her as he stroked her arm and one bare breast. "Are you sure you're all right? Not too tired?"

Her fingers trailed down his chest. She loved the feel of his warm flesh. "I'm not too tired. I'm very settled."

"Settled?" His brow furrowed. "Is that good?"

"That's the best. I feel like I've come home...to you."

"I thought you might be mad at me for Missy showing up here. That maybe you'd think I telegraphed her about the wedding. I couldn't believe it when I saw her."

"I was angry at her. Not you. I would never believe you contacted her again for any reason, without telling me. You asked me to promise to always trust you. I do trust you, Cal. We've been through hell and back to be together. Even down to our wedding night." She lightly kissed his lips. "Nothing can pull us apart now."

"Nothing," he repeated, his voice husky. He leaned down and took her lips in a searing kiss.

She tangled her fingers in his hair and touched her tongue to his, pulling a low groan out of him. Every inch of his body that pressed against hers excited her senses.

His fingers massaged her breasts, stimulating her nipples to hard peaks.

Beth rubbed her foot along his leg and pressed her hips up toward him. She needed him, needed to join with her husband. Now. She pulled her lips from his. "Make love to me, Cal."

"Oh yes. Definitely my pleasure and most ardent desire, sweetheart. I've been looking forward to this for such a long time." His hand slid down her body and between her legs. "Mmm, nice and wet."

She spread her thighs in invitation. "I want you so much. I need to feel you inside me." She reached for his cock, as always amazed at its length and thickness. And so hard. For her. The thought of his shaft finally penetrating her sex, holding him deeply inside her, made her tremble.

Cal moved between her thighs and positioned himself. The tip of his cock teased her.

Both of them breathed heavily, having waited so long for this moment. When he eased his cock inside her cunt, she sighed at the exquisite feeling of his shaft sliding deep.

"Ah, Beth..." He groaned, pushing all the way inside her, giving her every inch.

She gripped his shoulders hard. "Yes!" She wrapped her arms and legs around him, which pulled him even deeper. "Oh..."

Cal moved his hips slowly, pulling almost all the way out and pushing back deeply. "You're so tight," he ground out. "So perfect. Your body feels incredible."

Beth moved with him in exact rhythm, as if they'd been made for loving each other. "I never want this feeling to end." Pleasure coursed through her body, building, spreading, heading toward a climax she knew she'd never forget.

"Look at me," Cal whispered as he stroked her hair.

Their eyes locked and she almost felt as if their souls touched.

"I love you," he said, his voice rough and deep.

So much love and tenderness shone in his eyes. She almost cried. "I love you too." Her thighs squeezed his hips and he groaned.

He touched her hands, moving them to either side of her head, interlacing their fingers. His hips moved faster, harder. His face turned serious, his look demanding.

"Yes!" she encouraged, feeling the heat inside her rise.

"Beth..." he groaned, his gaze never leaving hers. "Ah...oh yes."

With each hard thrust of his hips, she felt his pleasure grow, along with her own. She moved sensually beneath him, urging him on. "Don't stop. Oh please." She felt right on the edge.

"So close. I'm going to...oh!" His body tightened. "Ah...Beth!"

His eyes dilated and she felt him climax inside her. Her body spasmed and she cried out from the pleasure of it. "Cal! Y-Yes!" Her back arched and something special, something beyond the physical pleasure, joined them together as one.

No matter how many years they spent together, she'd never forget this wondrous night. After several long moments of ecstasy, they both collapsed.

Cal rolled off her and gathered her against his side. "That was fantastic," he whispered, breathing heavily.

"Better than fantastic," she agreed, knowing she was a part of him now. She also knew that in her heart he'd always be a part of her. Forever.

## **Epilogue**

*Two months later*

Beth swam toward the far end of the pond. The water swirling around her naked body felt so decadent. Cal swam next to her, a huge satisfied smile on his face. They'd just made love right there in the water.

Truly wanton. And quite exciting.

The days were cooling off now. Soon they wouldn't be able to swim here anymore until spring. She'd miss coming but knew they'd return as soon as the weather permitted.

They'd both settled into married life quite nicely. Everything seemed perfect.

Well, most everything. A couple of weeks earlier Emma had headed off to medical school. She missed her best friend fiercely.

"How's Joe?" she asked Cal, who still worked part-time at the ranch for Wade and saw Joe more than she did. Emotionally, she knew he must be hurting.

"Quiet. Except when he gets riled, which is too often lately." They stood in the pond and wrapped their arms around each other. "Do you think Emma will be back for more than an occasional visit?"

"I don't know. She has family and friends here. And Joe. But sometimes the city changes people." When a pained look crossed Cal's face, she stroked his cheek in understanding. "And some people find their way back home because their hearts can't do without their true loves."

"That's right." He kissed her palm. "Have I told you lately how much I love you?"

"Not since this morning."

He smiled. "Remind me to tell you more often. Have you decided whether you're going back to helping out at the school?"

"Um, I thought I'd wait another month and see."

"Another month?"

She grinned. "I think... I think I might be expecting."

A shocked look crossed his face, then his eyes lit up and a huge smile curled his lips. "A baby?"

"I'm not for sure yet."

"A baby," he repeated. He kissed her quickly and hard, then more gently, letting his lips linger. When he pulled back, his eyes looked hopeful. Tender. Caring. "A baby. I can't believe it." He squeezed her waist. "This is great!"

"Now don't get too excited. I might be wrong." Her symptoms pointed toward pregnancy but a lot had happened the last couple of months and it might just be her body adjusting to the changes.

"Have you been to see Doctor Bray?"

"I've talked to him but he hasn't examined me yet. He said to give it a couple of more weeks or so, then we can be certain."

Cal grabbed her hand and led her toward the edge of the pond. "Come on."

"What? Where?"

"I've got to get some planning started. New designs. We're going to need to add on to the cabin. And we'll need baby clothes. Maybe Skylar still has some things from Colton, so you won't have to hand make as much. Unless you want to, of course."

She laughed. "There's plenty of time, Cal."

"I'm too excited to wait. Wade and Joe will want to help out."

"Well, don't say anything to them until we know for sure."

They both dried off and dressed, then headed back to the cabin, chattering about the possibility of a baby the entire way. When they entered the clearing and walked through the gate, they saw Skylar outside on the porch.

"Skylar!" Beth called out.

Her sister turned and smiled. "Hello, you two, I was wondering where you'd gone off to."

"We were at the pond, taking a dip," Cal told her. "Good to see you. Did you come out alone for a visit?" He looked around. "Or is Wade roaming around here somewhere?"

"It's just me and I'm only here for a short visit. Colton wanted me to bring something out to Beth. One of his old toys. I don't know why and he wouldn't tell me." She chuckled. "He's getting quite stubborn and fusses terribly when he doesn't get his way. I'm hoping it's just a stage and he'll grow out of it soon or he's going to turn into quite a handful."

Beth and Cal laughed. "What did he want you to bring me?" Beth asked.

Skylar held up a small yellow and white object. "This."

Unable to speak for a moment, Beth stood staring in shock. She swallowed past the lump in her throat. "A rattle," she whispered, barely able to get the words out. She took the beautiful little toy from Skylar, holding it gently. When she glanced at Cal, he appeared as shocked as she was.

"Why in the world he'd want to give you this, I have no idea," Skylar said. "But I've learned, at the moment anyhow, it's easier to comply than to ask too many questions of him or ignore what he wants. He's inherited his father's determination."

"And his mother's talents," Beth whispered, too low for anyone but herself to hear. She stared down at the rattle then held it close to her heart.



Cal squeezed her waist and she turned her head. Their eyes locked and they smiled at each other. Beth's heart and spirit felt fuller than she'd ever believed possible.

"What do you think it means?" Skylar asked, with a small smile on her face, her eyes looking almost too innocent.

Beth suspected her sister knew exactly what was going on. "I think it means a happy future," she answered with a genuine smile of her own.

Her life had turned out better than any fairy tale romance and she prayed her and Cal's happily-ever-after lasted forever.

## About the Author

Ruth D. Kerce got hooked on writing in the fifth grade when she won a short story contest—a romance, of course. And she's been writing romance ever since.

She writes several subgenres of romance—historical, contemporary, and futuristic. Her books are available online in many internet bookstores. Her short stories and articles are available on several websites. She has won or placed in writing contests and hopes to continue to write exciting tales for years to come.

Ruth welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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