

BENTRIDGE MAGIC



“No, I do not care for a drink. What I would like is some space,” Gabby hissed without looking up from the book she’d been trying to read for the last half-hour or more. Every time she tried to read someone interrupted her. Normally she might be flattered by the attention but this was going to be her last few free minutes before she left on assignment and all she wanted to do was relax. She had spent the last three days at the hotel in Los Angeles and was due to fly out to the Bahamas shortly.

“Oh, darlin’ I’d love to share that space with you,” a deep seductive drawl said as the man sat down on the chaise next to her.

At these words her head snapped up. She found herself staring into the most gorgeous green eyes she’d ever seen on a man or woman. They were made even more mesmerizing by a thick head of black hair. But he was a man and she’d been pestered all afternoon. As she glared at him his lips parted in a smile that probably would have melted a lesser woman, but Gabby had reached her limit.

“I am not your darlin’,” she said with as much cool contempt as she could muster. “If you’ll take a stroll around the pool, I’m sure you will be able to find someone willing to share *her* space with you. As you can see, I’m trying to read.” With this she turned to resume reading.

“Well, you see, I did have a look and you’re the only one who took my fancy. I guess you’re stuck with me,” he said his smile broader. Reid wasn’t sure why seeing her sitting there alone had pulled on him. She wasn’t beautiful, not like the usual women in his life. But she was really cute with that thick mane of strawberry blond hair. And she

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had deep chocolate brown eyes. Now that had surprised him. He would have guessed they would have been blue or maybe even green like his own. But they were the deepest brown he'd ever seen. And they were so expressive. This made him wonder what they'd be like when she made love.

"Well unfancy me and go check out the bar. Then you can get a drink to cool yourself down while you're at it." Once again she tried to read but out of the corner of her eye she could see his long legs...long well shaped legs going by the way the material that clung lovingly to him. And he was wearing a business suit of all things. He'd removed the jacket and had it lying across his thighs.

"Can't do that darlin'. It wouldn't be gallant of me to leave such a lovely lady all by herself. You need a chaperon to protect you from unwanted attentions," Reid said grinning at her. She really was adorable. He felt a stirring that he hadn't experienced in a time. Maybe it was because she wasn't falling all over him. "Besides who will put the suntan lotion on your back? Can't do it yourself!"

Gabby almost choked. "Your attentions are unwanted mister! So who will protect me from you? And I do not need lotion put on anywhere and certainly not by you," she snapped. Looking at her watch she realized that it was time to get ready to leave for the airport. Fine. She'd read on the plane. Closing her book, she threw her legs over the side of the chaise and stood picking up her toweling robe, shoving her arms into it with undue force.

He stood at the same time but stepped back to give her some room. She was shorter than he'd have guessed looking at her slender legs as she'd reclined on the chaise. She seemed almost fragile looking, her bones small and delicate. Reid threw his jacket over his shoulder holding it with two fingers. "Have dinner with me later. Once you get to know me, you'll wonder how you ever did without me in your life."

"I got along fine without you before and I will in the future," she told him taking a step forward, making him step back as she pushed on his chest to make him get out of her way. Gabby hadn't realized that they were standing so close to the side of the pool until he wobbled and began clawing at the air before losing the battle with gravity. He splashed into the pool clothes and all. His suit jacket floated away as he sank to the bottom. Then it too began to sink.

Gabby gasped, then started to laugh just as he surfaced looking around for his jacket. He wasn't smiling anymore! She took this as a signal for a hasty retreat as she turned and fled back into the hotel and up to her room. Once safely there she quickly showered and changed into a pair of jeans and a pale green pullover shirt. After packing the rest of her belongings, she hastened downstairs, checked out and left for the airport to catch her flight to Florida and ultimately the Bahamas. Her last thoughts about the man at the pool as she drove away from the hotel were dismissive. He was too big and reminded her too much of her older brothers. So it was probably just as well that their paths would never cross again.

Reid was so angry by the time he located his jacket and climbed out of the pool that it was a wonder that the heat from his fury didn't dry him immediately. He waved away the helping hand from one of the waiters who couldn't resist the urge to smile as he returned to his station. Reid twisted his ruined jacket to wring out as much water as possible before sloshing across the terrace and up to his suite.

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He marched straight into the bathroom where he peeled off his sodden clothing before getting into the shower. He did feel somewhat better after he was clean and dry once again. But he still had an urge to wring her pretty little neck. No woman had ever walked away from him like that. And no one, man or woman, had ever shoved him into a pool. In his present state of mind he refused to acknowledge the fact that he had been standing precariously close to the edge of the pool in the first place. When she'd placed her small hand on his chest and pushed, he'd automatically stepped back and met thin air. The feel of her hand on his chest had done something to his heart rate, but he refused to give that any further thought.

So it was a bit disconcerting to find himself, a short time later, at the front desk in the lobby trying to find out what room she was occupying. He didn't know her name and that naturally turned out to be a real problem. This was Los Angeles and the city was teeming with beautiful blondes of all shapes and sizes. He shrugged off his disappointment, if that's what it was, and decided he'd just keep looking around to see if he could locate her. He was meeting Stan for an early business dinner in the dinning room so he might catch sight of her there.

Just as he turned around he caught sight of Stan striding across the lobby. Reid went to greet his friend and accounting manager. "Stan, glad you could make it on such short notice," he said holding out his hand.

"Hey, you saved me from having to eat one of Anna's meals," Stan said grinning up at Reid. Stan was a head shorter than Reid and getting a little thicker around the middle the last year or so. Stan's father had been a business colleague of Jason McAllister, Reid's father, so they'd known each other for years. It wasn't until about ten years ago that he and Stan got to be close friends.

Reid grinned in response. "Must be the housekeepers night off," he guessed correctly. Stan's wife, Anna, was a warm wonderful woman whom Reid adored. But she couldn't cook worth a damn. Her family had learned to live with this little quirk in an otherwise intelligent talented woman. She designed jewelry in a studio that Stan had built for her. She ran a very profitable business. But put her in the kitchen with perfectly good food and a cookbook and it spelled disaster.

"Got it in one. The kids both managed to be going out tonight so I was going to have to suffer through the meal alone. You know, now that I think about it, those two always seem to have something planned for Mrs. Behr's days off," Stan laughed.

"I always said those two were smart kids. Was Anna upset about your deserting her? You should have brought her along. I don't get to see enough of her," Reid stated steering Stan towards the dinning room.

"She hadn't invaded the kitchen yet so it's no problem. She has a project that she wants to work on, so you're probably doing her a favor."

"As long as I'm not causing any problems by dragging you away like this," Reid commented as they were shown to their table. The conversation was of a general nature as they looked over the menu and gave their orders. As soon as the waiter left, Reid got down to business.

"Stan, I want to put you in charge of the Los Angeles office." He grinned at the stunned look on Stan's face. He'd been giving this a lot of thought and knew that his friend was the right man for the job. Stan already knew everything about the business from every angle and was good with the employees.

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“Me! Why? I know you’re looking for another property to buy, but I’d assumed that you’d be commuting from your new ranch.” Stan was thunderstruck. He liked what he did and was good at it. This was a promotion that he’d never considered and frankly was astounded that Reid was suggesting it.

“You because you’re good and you’re honest. The ‘why’ is easy. I’m tired of the city. The only time I really feel alive is when I’m at the ranch in Montana, out in the fresh air, away from so many people and all the buildings and concrete,” Reid told him waving a hand at their surroundings. That was only part of it. But he wasn’t ready to put anymore into words mainly because he didn’t know how to explain it. At this point he didn’t know if he was sure himself.

“Well, I’m speechless,” Stan stammered.

“Just say you’ll take the job. I’ll still have a hand in the major decision making process, but for the most part, the daily running of the business will be up to you.” Reid had been thinking about this move for a long time now. He knew his mother would be pleased. She had been after him for some time now about working too hard. He suspected it was more that she was afraid he would end up like his father, all business with no time for family or fun. Maybe that was what was missing from his life. He never had any fun anymore.

“Yes, I’d love the position,” Stan said firmly extending his hand across the table.

Reid clasped the other man’s hand in his large one. “You’ve taken a big load off my shoulders by accepting. How do you think Anna will take the news?”

“You mean after she finishes ravishing me? If I know my love, she’ll warn me about long hours and encourage me to take Mrs. Blackworth to my new office. She’s been my secretary for over fifteen years now and she and Anna have a code or some special connection that we men aren’t privy to. I do get your old office don’t I?” Stan lifted his brows in speculation and grinned.

Reid laughed. “Only if I get to use it if I’m in town. And you and your entire family will get an all expense paid vacation to my new ranch, wherever it may be.” Now he could really get serious about looking for a new home. He’d looked at three properties already but they just didn’t pull at him; they didn’t feel like home.

Their food arrived so conversation was sporadic as they ate. After a short time Stan noticed Reid looking around the dinning room. “Looking for someone,” he asked between bites of his steak.

“Hmmm? Oh no, not really,” Reid replied somewhat abashed as he quickly took a bit of steak.

Stan could read the expression on his friend’s face. “Yeah, right. Want to tell me another one?” Something was up with Reid and Stan was at a loss. Good God, if it was a woman he sure as hell hoped she was nothing like Marla. He didn’t want to have to go through anything like the job that bitch did on Reid five years ago.

“Well if you must know, I was wondering if someone was going to be down here tonight. I have a few words to say to this person.”

“Okay. Man or woman?”

Reid glared but it lacked power. “Woman, if you must know.”

At that moment the waiter arrived to serve their coffee. He recognized Reid immediately. “I hope you had no ill effects from your fall into the pool, Mr. McAllister?” the waiter questioned as he tried to keep from smiling.

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Reid groaned. "I'm fine, thank you," he said quietly without looking at Stan. He knew what would come next and wasn't disappointed.

"You *fell* into the swimming pool?" Stan almost choked. Oh, this was good! Wait until he got home to tell Anna.

"To be accurate, I was pushed. And I really don't want to discuss it," Reid glared.

"Hey friend, you don't tell me that and expect me to say forget it. No way! Come on, what happened?" Then Stan's face lit up with understanding. "Some woman pushed you into the pool! Oh I love it!" His face spit into a wide grin that expanded into a robust laugh. "Hope you were wearing your new swim trunks."

"You're not going to give in until you hear all the details, are you? Okay. I was not dressed for swimming. I was still in my suit." And he went on to explain what had happened. When he was finished, Stan was all but lying on the floor laughing.

"Anna will love this. Apparently there is one woman out there who doesn't pant or faint at the feet of the very eligible and alluring Reid McAllister. Maybe we'll have a romance on our hands?" Stan couldn't help but needle his friend.

"Don't count on it! She's a short little thing. She's kind of cute, but not someone I'd be seriously interested in," Reid stated in his defense.

"Right. Then why are you looking for her? And don't tell me it's just to read her the riot act. That's not your style. You're a lover, not a fighter." Stan pushed. "There must have been something about her that attracted you over to her in the first place."

"Let's just say I have a few choice words for the lady. And if I never see her again it won't be the end of the world. Now, do you want to hear about my search for a new home?" Reid wasn't sure why he was reluctant to talk about the incident at the pool, but he was pretty sure it wasn't because of any embarrassment. It had to do with that bloody woman. If he'd had time to think as he was falling backwards he'd have grabbed hold of her and taken her in with him. It wasn't much, but it would have soothed his battered ego just a little.

Stan tried to gain control as he wiped the moisture from his eyes. If Reid didn't want to talk now, he'd give him a break. But he wouldn't forget and he sincerely hoped that this woman did show up. "I know that you've looked at several properties in the last couple of weeks. Do you have anything else lined up?"

"I saw two in New Mexico and one in Utah, but they weren't what I'm looking for. Oh, they were impressive, but they just didn't feel right," Reid tried to explain. "Monday I leave for Wyoming. There's a ranch there that sounds promising."

"I vote for Wyoming. The kids would love a trip to Yellowstone National Park. And we could combine a trip there and a visit to your new empire."

"Hardly an empire," Reid laughed. "Just a secluded area away from the crazy hustle and mayhem of city life. No more business luncheons to endure and no more business suits to wear unless I'm forced into it." The word suit brought forth the picture of her in that lavender swimsuit, her creamy tanned body so luscious reclining on the chaise lounge. He shook his head impatiently. This was nuts!

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CHAPTER 2

Reid pulled his truck to a smooth stop in front of his new home. He climbed out, and walked around to look at the house. He really liked the old ranch house, but that hadn't been the deciding factor in his buying this property in Wyoming. It had been a combination of the land, rich and fertile for cattle and the crops he wanted to grow, and the people he'd met in the nearest town thirty miles south. They had been warm and friendly, almost eager to have him become a part of their community. Bentrige was a small town even as small towns went. But to Reid, who had spent a great amount of time in big cities, it drew him like a magnet.

He sighed now as he looked at the house. It was too bad it had to go. His first thought had been to completely renovate it. But after the estimates and reports on the work that would have to be done, it was better in the long run to tear it down and start fresh. This old house would need new electrical wiring, all new plumbing, and an entire new roof to say nothing of the work needed on the inside.

"Hey, boss man, glad to see you made it."

Reid turned to see his ranch foreman striding towards him. He'd met Cody Brown several times over the past two weeks and had yet to see the older man without a smile on his face. Reid's own smile was automatic as he held out his hand. "Made it here with time to spare. And you don't know how happy I am that I won't have to be leaving for quite a while."

"Well I'm sure glad that you're gonna' be here when they tear down that house. Flo is still going on about missing the old home." Florence was Cody's wife who worked

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as cook for the men. Reid had tasted her cooking and understood why the same hands had been working here for so long. If she ever left, they would probably follow her.

"The construction crew should be here sometime late tomorrow morning. By this time next week they'll be working on the new house. Hope that doesn't upset Flo too much," Reid said arching a brow at Cody.

"Nah, she just has a sentimental streak about a yard wide. Once she sees the new place, she'll love it even more than this old dump. It should have been retired ten years ago," Cody said and then grimaced. This was his new boss he was talking to.

Reid laughed. "Well, as long as I'm not going to get into a range war about replacing the old house, that's what matters." He started walking towards the front door. He'd been through the house several times now and just wanted one more last look. The former owners hadn't lived there for almost three years and, while Flo had dusted and swept each week, it still had a musty unoccupied smell.

The rose print wallpaper in the front hall had faded as well as the hardwood floors. The small living room off to the right had only one piece of furniture and the dining room to the left was vacant. Straight-ahead was the kitchen which he knew had been striped bare and off the back of that was a bedroom. Three more empty bedrooms and the bathroom were upstairs.

Cody had followed Reid into the house. "The only furniture left in the house is that desk in the living room," he told Reid. "I'll get it moved over to our house first thing in the morning. Appreciate your giving it to Flo. She always liked that desk."

"It's a nice old piece and needs someone who will take care of it. Glad to know it's going to a good home."

"We fixed up the second bunk house for you so you can put your things in there when you're ready. Flo said to tell you that you can take your meals with us or she'll make up a tray and bring it to you."

"Cody, I don't expect Flo to cook for me. Is there a stove in the bunk house?" Reid asked.

"Well, sure there's an old stove. But do you know how to cook?" he asked looking surprised that someone like Reid would even consider such an idea.

"I can cook. Nothing fancy, but I'll survive. Not that I wouldn't appreciate one of Flo's meals from time to time," Reid said remembering her apple pie. And her pot roast was the best he'd ever eaten. "Okay, maybe more than one meal," he amended.

Cody chuckled. "Didn't think you'd turn down her cookin'. After you get settled in, Tom Stoner would like you to call him. Said it wasn't important, just wanted to be sure you arrived safely. Now, I got some chores to attend to before supper. We eat at six on the spot, so be there or Flo will come looking for you," Cody said as he turned to leave.

"What's for supper?"

"Smells like roast chicken and her special biscuits."

"I'll be early," Reid laughed as he followed Cody outside. He'd get settled get a shower and call Tom before supper.

A week later, Reid was comfortably settled into the bunkhouse. It wasn't elegant but it felt more like home than anyplace he'd lived in a very long time. He'd shipped his

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personal items from his apartment in Los Angeles and the few he had at the ranch in Montana. They'd arrived yesterday and were being stored in the tractor barn.

The day after he'd arrived, he'd met Tom Stoner in town for lunch. Reid had met Tom on his first trip to Bentrige and liked him on sight. Since then he'd met his wife and family. Tom and his wife Fran had three boys and a little girl. She was a little angel and it was plain that she had her daddy wrapped around her little finger. Reid didn't envy Tom when Brie reached her teenage years. She was going to have the young guys flocking to her door in droves.

Reid had also met two of the other Stoner brothers, Sam and Nathan. There was another brother, Wade, and a sister who he hadn't seen yet. But he and Tom had run into Tom's parents yesterday in town. T. J. Stoner was a big man, still lean and rugged and Reid knew that he had to be in his sixties but sure didn't look it. And Amanda Stoner was a gracious attractive woman. When she'd learned that he was new to the area, she insisted that he come to dinner on Sunday with the rest of the family.

It turned out that T.J. and Amanda were his closest neighbors. Now as he pulled up in front of their house, he whistled. That was some house! It was a sprawling two-story log house that he guessed must have about fifteen rooms. It was similar to the one he had planned. This gave him a chance to see what his new house would look like and how it would compliment the countryside.

Reid rang the bell and less than a minute later Amanda answered the door. "Come in Reid. I'm so glad you could come for supper."

"Thank you for having me."

"Supper won't be for another twenty minutes. The men are out in the back with the kids. It's baseball season and they're practicing with the boys."

As they turned to go towards the back of the house, a small old woman came around the corner. Reid didn't think she could be even five feet tall. The top of her head only reached the middle of his chest. Her hair was snow white and she appeared so fragile that her bones might snap at the lightest tap.

She craned her neck up to look at him. "Who are you?" she demanded in a surprisingly strong voice.

"Aunt Frieda, this is Reid McAllister. Reid this is my aunt, Frieda Hartman," Amanda said smiling at the older woman.

Before Reid could acknowledge the introduction, a bony hand reached up to grab the bottom of his tie. One quick jerk and he was face to face with this tiny woman. "Come down here, youngster, where I can get a good look at you. You're built just like the rest of the male redwoods around here. Person can get a stiff neck trying to talk to you." Her tone was gruff but Reid noted the twinkle in her gray eyes.

"Yes, ma'am," he said trying to keep a grin at bay. He bent over a little more to accommodate her. He was a bit disconcerted as she stared deeply into his eyes. It was as if she were reading his soul.

"You the one who bought the old Putnam place?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Good. It's about time someone took that property and made something of it. You're not married," she said. "I can see it in your eyes."

"No, I've never married," Reid said not sure where this conversation was going.

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Aunt Frieda smiled. "Interesting. I think you'll do just fine." And with that parting shot, she turned to retrace her steps back down the hallway.

Reid straightened. *Do fine for what?* he wondered.

"She quite a character, isn't she?" Amanda asked smiling fondly as her aunt walked away.

"I bet she was really something in her younger days," Reid laughed. He liked her. She was direct and said what she thought.

Amanda laughed. "Oh, she was that and more. She's never married but has had a long list of suitors. She says that the only man she ever considered giving up her freedom for died in a plane accident. Aunt Frieda was a nurse for fifty years and loved every moment of it. She's ninety-two now and just as feisty as she was when I was a child. Please forgive her directness. At her age she feels she's earned the right to say and do pretty much what she pleases."

"She's a formidable little thing," Reid admitted with a grin. "And there's nothing to forgive. I like her. I have a feeling you'll always know where you stand with her."

"This is true," Amanda agreed as she led him through the house into the kitchen where the aroma of something cooking set his stomach rumbling. A woman of uncertain age with gray hair stood at the stove. "Ida, this is Reid McAllister. This is Ida Mayer, our housekeeper and the best cook in the state of Wyoming," Amanda said beaming fondly at the other woman.

"Hope you brought your appetite, young man," Ida said her blue eyes dancing with pride.

"Something sure smells wonderful. I've been looking forward to this all day," Reid told her truthfully. He'd eaten his own cooking the last two days and was in dire need of a reprieve.

Amanda opened the door that led out to a wood deck. "Thomas! Reid is here," she called out.

"Hey Reid! Come on over here," Tom said waving. "How about helping out here. You throw the ball while I work with Kyle on his batting stance."

"You got it," Reid said. He'd always loved sports and did pretty well in high school and college. But he hadn't seemed to have had much time the last few years to watch many games let alone go to one. Baseball and football were his favorites but he was good at basketball too. "Do you play on a team Kyle?" he asked the nine-year-old.

"Yes, sir. We're the Bobcats," he said grinning. Our uniforms are green and white. And they're great!"

"I bet they are," Reid said smiling. "What position do you play?"

"Short stop or catcher. I really like catching."

"But what we need to concentrate on now is batting," his father laughed. "Once we straighten out his hitting, he'll be slamming them over the fence. Now they tend to go straight up in the air, don't they?" Tom said ruffling the boy's hair.

"But next Saturday I'm going to hit a home run. That's why I have to practice."

"Okay, champ," Reid said. "Show me your stance."

They spent the next twenty minutes hitting balls. Tom worked with Kyle while Reid threw to him. Wade Stoner arrived with his family and joined in the practice session. By the time Amanda called them in for supper, Reid could see an improvement in the boy's swing already. Kyle was a determined little boy and it showed.

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Supper was a warm but noisy time. And Reid loved it. It was apparent that these people cared deeply about each other. The kids were well mannered and obviously knew they were loved, especially by their grandparents. Reid had never had a brother or sister and felt a twinge of regret at having missed out on something. For that matter, he'd never really had a father. Not like the type of father that Tom and Wade seemed to be to their kids. His father, Jason McAllister, had been too wrapped up in his work to have any time for his son, or his wife.

Reid mentally shook himself to get out of that rut as little Brie placed her hand on his arm.

Mr. McAllister, are you married?" she asked seriously, her big brown eyes earnest.

"No, Brie, I'm not," Reid said behind a smile. She was adorable. He had no doubt that Tom and Fran were going to have their hands full when she grew up. Brie was a real little charmer. He was already under her spell.

"Good! Then can you marry me? You're nice," she said adoration shining in her eyes.

Reid grinned. "Well, sugar, I'm kind of old and by the time you're old enough to get married, you might just want someone younger." Her big brown eyes reminded him of someone else.

Brie cocked her head to one side to study him. She placed a forefinger against her cheek in concentration. "Yes, you're pretty old. What's a hunk? Mommy and Aunt Kate said you're one of them."

"Brie, I think that's enough," her mother, Fran, said hoping that her face didn't match the red shirt she was wearing. Why was it that kids couldn't hear you when you told them to clean up their rooms or to take a bath, but they sure could hear private conversations and repeat them word for word. Her daughter wasn't called 'little big ears' for nothing.

"But what does it mean?" Brie pursued stubbornly.

"It means that he's handsome," Tom stated then hid a smile behind his hand.

"Oh! I guess you are one then. Hey, Aunt Gabby's kind of old too. And she's not married either. You could marry her, then you'd be my uncle. I'd like that!" Brie didn't usually warm up to strangers quickly, but she'd taken an immediate shine to Reid. It was obvious that he cared for children and they recognized this.

"I don't think your Aunt Gabby would like you arranging a marriage for her, princess," Tom told his daughter.

"Why not? She doesn't have a boyfriend. And if she married Mr. McAllister, she'd have to stay home with us." She turned to face Reid. "Oh, she's so pretty and really really nice. Come on, I'll show you her picture." They were done with supper and just sitting around the table so Brie had no qualms about slipping out of her chair.

"She sounds fascinating," Reid acknowledged with a grin.

Brie took this as agreement as she clasped one of his large hands with both of hers.

"Oh, she's terrific," young Kyle chimed in. "She helped us build our tree house and takes us down to the river fishing when she's home. She even baits her own hook!"

This was said with such awe that Reid had to laugh. "This paragon of virtue I've got to see," he said letting himself be pulled out of the chair.

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Brie led him down the hall to the formal living room. Reid hadn't seen this room before. On the wall to the left hung a large arrangement of eight by ten pictures. He recognized T. J. and Amanda, Tom and Fran and Wade and Kate. The others must be Sam and his wife and Nathan.

Then his eyes lit on one to the far right and he froze. By God, it was her! He hadn't been able to find her at the hotel before he'd checked out and thought he'd never see her again. But she kept creeping into his thoughts at the oddest moments, much to his aggravation. Now, here was her family! Now he could find out all about the woman who had made such an impression on him to the extent that he hadn't been able to get even remotely interested in any other woman. And several had shown an obvious interest in the short time he'd been in Bentrige.

"That's her there," Brie said pointing to the picture that had captivated Reid. "Isn't she pretty?" Reid could only stare. It was the picture of a beautiful young woman wearing a sea green sequined evening gown that clung lovingly to her soft curves. The dress had short sleeves and a high mandarin collar, but to Reid, it was the sexiest gown he'd ever seen. Her strawberry blond hair was piled high in an elaborate style with soft curls dangling by her ears.

Kyle came to stand by Reid's side. "Aunt Gabby doesn't usually dress up like that. Grandma made her do it when they had their pictures taken last Christmas."

Reid shifted his attention to the picture above Gabby's. It was Amanda. He didn't know her exact age but knew that she had to be close to sixty. She was a strikingly beautiful woman with a complexion that showed very little age. Her hair was medium brown streaked with gray. Her gray-green eyes were as bright and as warm as her smile. It was apparent that Gabby took after her mother in looks and stature.

Reid glanced down at Kyle. "What does Aunt Gabby usually wear?" he asked intrigued to learn all he could.

"Oh, you know...jeans and shirts," Kyle said as if it were something everyone should be aware of. "You can't ride or climb trees in a dress."

"She climbs trees?" Reid asked openly smiling now.

"Course she does. And she can whistle real good too," Kyle said with pride.

Apparently Aunt Gabby was a treasure trove of talents. Reid smiled. He couldn't wait to finally meet this woman who climbs trees and knows how to fish. As Reid stood studying the picture, Tom came to stand by his side handing him a cup of coffee.

"All the kids think the sun rises and sets with their Aunt Gabby," Tom said taking a sip of his own coffee. "Whenever she's home, they all want to spend every minute over here."

"She doesn't live here then?" Reid asked hoping to learn more.

"Yes and no. She has a room here but she travels a lot so she's gone more than in residence. She's a writer and photographer so we never know where or what she's up to a lot of the time. Mom and dad worry about her traveling like that all alone. But the shrimp is so stubborn that no one can talk any sense into her." Secretly Tom wished that she'd fine someone and settle down and get married. But then he didn't know if that would keep her in one place or not.

Reid smiled as Tom described his sister as a shrimp. He remembered how small she was standing in front of him and acknowledged that the name suited her. He didn't know if he should own up to Tom that he'd met Gabby very briefly in Los Angeles. He

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didn't know when she was due home, and he didn't want her aware of his presence until he was face to face with her. But he couldn't lie and pretend he didn't know her.

The kids went up to the loft to play computer games. Tom, Wade and Reid went out onto the deck to finish their coffee. After they were seated, Reid cleared his throat. "I have a confession to make. I didn't know it until Brie took me to see the pictures, but I met your sister in Los Angeles."

The two brothers exchanged looks. "You met her but you didn't know her name?" Wade asked frowning.

"We weren't exactly introduced," Reid admitted reluctantly. He went on to give a brief description of their encounter. Then he waited for their reactions.

Wade hooted with laughter followed by Tom's chuckle. "That's our Gabby," Wade managed to say. "She might be a shrimp but she's feisty as hell."

"I can't wait to see her face when she finally meets you," Tom said laughing. "You actually fell into the pool?"

"Fully clothed," Reid said smiling. He could laugh about it now, especially with the object of his thoughts eventually coming home. "When do you expect her home again?"

"Sometime the end of next month, I think. She's usually home for the summer. She spends a lot of time with the kids and some time up at her cabin," Wade told him. "I think we should keep this information just between the three of us. It isn't often we can get one up on her. And this is too good a chance to pass up."

"You're right," Tom agreed. "But we've got to be there when she finally meets him. I owe her for the time she set me up as a dance instructor at the PTA spring festival."

"She sounds fascinating!" Reid said smiling as he sat back to enjoy his coffee.

Before Tom could agree, Fran came out handing him a cordless phone. "Tom, Susan Barnes is on the phone for you."

"Hi, Sue. What's up?"

Tom's expression changed to one of concern. "Is he okay?"

The others looked at each other noting that obviously something was wrong. After a few minutes, Tom turned off the phone.

"Something wrong?" Wade asked worriedly.

"Dan Barnes broke his leg this afternoon. Sue says he'll be laid up for at least two months," Tom said shaking his head. "He's in the clinic but should be home tomorrow afternoon if all goes well."

"Doesn't he run the barber shop in town?" Reid asked.

"Yes, that's him. Luckily he has old Harry still working for him. At least he'll be able to keep the shop open," Wade said. "We can go by to see him in the morning and see if there's anything we can do to help."

"Good idea," Tom agreed. "But we have another issue to address. The Bobcats will need a new coach. Those kids have worked hard and we can't disappoint them half way through the season."

Wade rubbed his chin with the palm of his hand. Then he looked at Reid and smiled. "You did real good earlier working with the boys. How'd you like to coach a baseball team?"

"Me?" Reid asked in surprise.

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“Sure, why not? Like Wade said, you did great this afternoon. The kids really liked you and you seemed to enjoy it,” Tom said.

“Well, I guess I never thought about anything like that,” Reid said somewhat taken aback. He really had enjoyed working with the boys. And he loved baseball. He’d never spent that much time around kids before but found himself drawn to these kids more and more as time went by.

“Look, the boys already know you. And Kyle and the others are a great group of kids,” Wade said seeing Reid’s hesitation.

Reid ran a hand through his hair. “Okay, why not! Will someone be able to introduce me to the other members of the team and their parents?”

“Consider it done,” Tom said grinning. “Wade and I’ll be glad to help get you settled in. I’ll give Sue a call and tell her. She said that Dan was more upset about disappointing the boys than he was about his own pain.”

Wade slapped Reid on the back. “Welcome to Bentrige little league, Coach McAllister.”

Reid grinned and it felt good!

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CHAPTER 3

Two months and what seemed like two thousand miles later, Gabby was going home for an extended stay at her parent's ranch. She was more tired than she'd been in a long time and was in desperate need to recharge her batteries. Ida's cooking was something she was looking forward to on this trip home. Ida Mayer had been her mother's housekeeper for as long as Gabby could remember and the kitchen was the one room in the house that she claimed as solely hers. Ida loved to cook and, since all her brothers loved to eat, Ida had been in seventh heaven while the boys had been growing up. Now Sam was the only brother still living at the ranch, and she sometimes wondered if he was reluctant to leave Ida's meals behind if he got his own place. Gabby smiled as her plane made a descent to the landing field below. When Sam and Sierra got married, they'd be getting a place in town but she'd bet any amount of money that they'd be making a trip to the ranch on Sundays for dinner.

Gabby looked out the small window. They were almost on the ground and she was relieved. She didn't like flying all that much. Unfortunately her work made it necessary that she spend quite a bit of time in the air. It was bad enough on large planes, but these smaller ones really made her uncomfortable. It would be good to have her feet on the ground again. She'd flown into Douglas to get this flight straight to Bentrige. Someone was suppose to meet her but she didn't know whom to expect on this trip home.

After the plane came to a standstill, she disembarked stretching cramped muscles. When she heard her name being called she looked around to see her mother waving from behind the gate. Behind her stood her brother, Wade. He was big man like their father and towered over their mother. Gabby ran to the gate throwing herself into her mother's

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arms. "Gosh it's so good to see you again," Gabby said hugging her mother. Then she looked at Amanda closely. "You look great! What have you done?"

Amanda laughed. "I got my hair cut. See?" she said proudly showing off her new short head of curls. "It's taken me twenty years to get your father to agree to my trying something different with my hair. Long hair was fine when I was your age, but now I wanted something totally different."

"Well it looks terrific, mom," she said kissing her mother on the cheek.

"I got my hair cut too," a deep voice boomed. "Do I get a kiss too?"

"Wade! You look wonderful as usual. And you're wearing a sports jacket!" Gabby exclaimed. Her brothers were not ones to dress up for many occasions and they usually complained the entire time that they were in 'fancy duds' as they called them. She found herself lifted off the ground in a giant bear hug which she returned along with a kiss on his cheek.

"Yeah, well, mom made me wear it. She said that if we wouldn't let her drive over here alone to get you then the least I could do was put on a jacket. But it comes off before I get back into the car," he stated trying to sound outraged but failing miserably.

Gabby laughed. It was a running joke in their family that Amanda had no sense of direction and could get lost in a closet. And since all the Stoner men were overly protective of their women, Amanda was never at a loss for someone to drive her if she had to go further than town or to somewhere unknown to her.

"We can talk about our appearance later. Right now I want to get Gabby home. Everyone is coming over for dinner tonight so you might want to rest up a bit," Amanda told her daughter.

"I can't wait to see everyone, especially my new niece. How is Christa doing?" she asked her older brother.

"She is the prettiest little thing you've ever seen and sleeps straight through the night. Something that Kate and I thoroughly appreciate. It took James and Jeremy six to eight months to start sleeping like that," Wade said with a grin.

"And they're big boys just like their daddy," Amanda added. "They needed more food than little Christa. Now you know what you and your brothers put me through when you were babies." Amanda doted on her growing family and everyone knew it. She was already working on a full sized quilt for Christa's bed when she was old enough for a regular one. Each one of the grandchildren had a hand made quilt from their Grandma Stoner. She made ones for each of her children too. Gabby kept hers on a quilt rack in her room at the ranch and used it on really cold nights when she was home.

"Well I can't wait to see everyone," Gabby said laughing. "I've got presents for all the kids. I sure hope I got their sizes right. The boys are getting so big it's getting hard to know what they like."

"I'm sure that anything from Aunt Gabby will be just what they want," Wade laughed. "You're super woman as far as they're concerned. We've tried to tell them that you're a little on the short side for that but they won't listen."

Gabby looked at her mother who was grinning. "I told you those boys were smarter than their fathers."

Amanda held up her hands. "I'm not getting involved in this battle. What I would like to do is get your luggage and get home." This she directed at her son.

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"Yes, ma'am," Wade said hurrying his two charges forward. "Gabby, the van is just outside in the first row. Let me have your baggage tickets and you and mom get settle while I get your gear."

"There's two suitcases and one dress bag. And be careful with the suitcases. That's where all the presents are."

"Only two suitcases? If you shop like mom, I would have thought you'd have at least three or four," Wade said taking the tickets.

"Yes, well, they're pretty heavy so you might want to get a cart. You're getting kind of up there in years big brother and I wouldn't want you to strain yourself," Gabby teased. She was the baby and they wouldn't let her forget it. Now she could get back at them because they were in their thirties. Heck, Tom was already forty but he looked great. All of her brothers were tall, muscular and good-looking.

"Keep it up kiddo, walking isn't crowded," Wade told her with a mock scowl before leaving to retrieve her things.

Later that day as Gabby unpacked her luggage she reflected on the past several months and all the traveling involved. It had been fun and thrilling in the beginning, but after five years, the magic seemed to have dulled. One hotel room looked just like all the rest, and even if the restaurant food was good, there was nothing like home cooking. And being with her family!

Gabby missed her nieces and nephews the most. They were growing up so fast and she'd missed out on a great deal by being away so much. Christa was already three months old and she hadn't seen her since she was born. Babies change so quickly and Gabby was missing that.

The last two months Gabby had spent either on a science vessel or at a science institute doing a paper for a well-known scientific magazine. While at sea, she'd been able to do some diving and had taken some great underwater pictures for a photo book on sea life that she'd been working on for five years now. She'd managed some pretty deep dives so these latest pictures were spectacular. Now she had to get it all organized and the rest of the text written. Gabby hoped to go up to her cabin for a week or so to work on that project. The magazine article she had sent off before she'd boarded the plane for home.

To date, Gabby had written five novels that had all done very well. And her head was full of ideas for other stories. Maybe now was the time to settle back home and concentrate on the writing that she loved so much. She could still do the photography but it would be local subjects. At the most she could take two or three trips a year. Her reverie was interrupted when Aunt Frieda entered Gabby's room.

"I was beginning to think that you'd forgotten where home was, child," Frieda said pursing her lips.

"Aunt Frieda," Gabby said gently hugging the old woman. "I could never forget any of you or Bentrige. I haven't been gone that long."

"Oh yes you have," Frieda said sitting in the chair by the window. "And here you are twenty-six years old and no babies of your own."

"I don't have a husband, Aunt Frieda. And why should I get married anyway. You didn't!"

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"No, I didn't! Never saw any need to chain myself down to a man after Roy died. And I didn't have any great urge to procreate. But you're not me, child. You have a lot of love to give to a man and children. And don't tell me that you don't like kids because the little ones in this family have you wrapped around their little fingers."

Gabby ignored that last part. "Well, I haven't met anyone who hasn't bored me to tears in weeks or come on like they were doing me a favor by asking me out. Maybe I should call John Murphy and see if he's going to be in town this summer," Gabby said thoughtfully. She and John had gone to school together and were good friends. He was a singer and dancer who worked in New York and she was proud of his success.

"Oh, that young pup! He's too soft for you. You need someone strong who knows his own mind. Someone who you can't bully around."

"Aunt Frieda, I do not bully people," Gabby asserted.

Frieda chuckled. "Child, you are smart as a whip and stubborn as a mule. You need a firm hand to keep you in line." Frieda smiled at the look of outrage on Gabby's face.

"I have a father and four big interfering brothers. The last thing I need is another bossy man in my life!" Gabby had grown up with four overbearing brothers. When she was sixteen and went out on her first date, Wade had actually gone along as chaperon. What a fun date that had been! Any young man who showed any interest in her had been given a lecture by at least one of the male members in her family. No, if she ever got romantically involved, it would be with a gentle intelligent man. And if he was not a large man, that was fine with her.

"You'd trample any soft easy-going man, Gabrielle. And he'd bore you to tears inside a month," Frieda snorted.

"Well, easy-going would be a nice change from pushy and overbearing," Gabby insisted.

Frieda started to get out of the chair. Gabby went to her to help her up. Frieda patted her arm. "You're a good girl, Gabrielle. I have a feeling that what you think you want and what you'll choose may be two different things. We'll see." And with that cryptic she left the room.

During dinner that night Gabby's attention was completely dominated by her nieces and nephews. The older boys were eager to tell her about their projects and what they'd been doing while she'd been away. The younger ones all wanted to be by her side or sit on her lap. So dinner was an informal meal served outside on the patio at her parent's home. Her father, T.J. Stoner, grilled his famous steaks while Ida and Amanda saw to the preparations of the baked potatoes, corn on the cob and other mouth-watering dishes. Dessert was Ida's coconut cream cake. It stood at least eight inches tall and was loved by all in the family, especially the men.

"Aunt Gabby will you come to our baseball game next Wednesday night?" eleven-year old Sam asked as they ate dessert. "We're playing the Colts and we're gonna' beat them so bad," he bragged. He was getting to that awkward age where he was all arms and legs. Since he was on the slim side he resembled a toothpick with arms. But Gabby thought he was adorable with his black hair and deep brown eyes. Of all of her nephews, Sam was the ultimate athlete. He loved playing no matter what the game. And he was good! But then his father, Tom, practiced with him almost daily and was the one

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who took him to his games and practices, although he never interfered with the coaches. Sam was a good student too but, his heart was on the playing field.

"You bet I'll be there! But don't get too cocky about winning, Sam. My softball team did that once and we ended up losing by such a large margin that all we wanted to do was cry," she admonished him. "The other team had been second from the bottom so we thought since we were in first place that we were far better than them. But it doesn't always work out that way. Everyone has an off day, so even the best players can have a time when they're not playing as good as they should. But it's no reflection on the player because these things happen sometimes." Gabby didn't know about the other players that day but she'd learned a good lesson. Never take anything for granted.

"Yeah, well...we're in first place and we've never lost a game," he bragged.

"And you'll probably win Wednesday night, just don't go around telling everyone that you're going to win before you actually accomplish that goal. Okay?"

Sam thought about it for a moment. "Okay. As long as you're there."

"Kyle, when is your game?" Gabby asked the nine-year old. Like his older brother he was just starting into a gawky stage. His hair was a medium brown but he had the same deep brown eyes as his older brother. Where Sam was outgoing and physical, Kyle tended to be more reserved. He liked sports but his first love was books. When the chores were all done and he had free time, he could usually be found with his nose in a book somewhere around the house. He already had two bookcases filled with books of all kinds in his bedroom. And wouldn't part with any of them even though three shelves were devoted to picture books.

"My game is this Saturday at ten in the morning. You're gonna' be there aren't you?" he asked eagerly.

"You couldn't keep me away. What position are you playing this year?"

"Catcher...coach McAllister says I'm the best he's seen in a long time," Kyle told her beaming. "He's great!"

"Yeah," six years old James joined in. "Know what he did?"

"No, what?" Gabby asked wondering who this man was because the name wasn't familiar.

"He gave me two books on whales. And he knows all about them and sharks and dolphins. Maybe even more than you," James said with apparent awe.

"I asked him to marry me," little Brie piped up. At six years old she was a small version of her twin brother Franklin. Both had black hair and deep green eyes. Brie was on the small side like her mother but Franklin was going to be tall like his father.

"Who is this McAllister?" Gabby asked really curious now. Apparently he had won over all the children in her family. She was particularly protective towards her family and this man was an unknown quantity no matter how much awe he seemed to inspire in the children.

"His name is Reid McAllister and he bought the old Putnam spread about two months ago. Real likeable guy and loves the kids. We needed a coach when Dan Barnes broke his leg and Reid stepped in to help," Tom told her. He couldn't wait to see her face when she finally met him.

"Really knows cattle and horses too," her father said between bites of cake. "Cody has nothing but praise for the man."

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"His wife must be proud of him," Gabby snorted. She was suspicious of anyone who could foster such devotion in only a couple of months.

"He's not married, Aunt Gabby. That's why I asked him to marry me so he wouldn't be alone," Brie announced.

"Sorry pumpkin, I forgot. But why would a single man buy that property with the lovely big old house?" Gabby had loved that house. She'd gone to school with the Putnam's daughter and they'd had many a slumber party there.

The silence around the table suddenly became deafening. Everyone looked at Amanda leaving it to her to tell Gabby. "The house wasn't the main reason he bought the property, Gabby. He liked the land and Bentrige."

"And?" Gabby asked with narrowed eyes. Why did she feel that she wasn't going to like what came next? The fact that her mother was doing the telling spoke volumes.

"Reid had planned to refurbish the old house. But upon a thorough going over, it was determined that the repairs would just be too extensive. He's had it torn down and is building a new one. And Gabby, it's going to be beautiful! You should see..."

"He just went in and tore down that beautiful house?" Gabby shrieked. "It was a landmark. That house had been there as long as I can remember."

"Gabby," T.J. said quietly. "The house was Reid's property and from what he told us, I would have done the same thing in his position. Old doesn't always mean good. That house was over fifty years old and made of wood. To correct all the structural problems alone would have meant almost striping it back to the foundation. And your mother's right, the new place is going to be something special. It's going to blend in with the country just fine."

"Well I just hope he doesn't buy any property *in* Bentrige or he'd probably tear down those landmark buildings," Gabby said not able to give this Reid credit for anything. "If he's torn down the house, where is he living?"

"They fixed up one of the bunk houses for now. He's pretty comfortable there. And Florence makes sure that he eats well," Wade told her grinning. Reid had gone to Los Angeles on business but he was due back this evening. He had said he would stop by for coffee before he went home. Wade glanced at his watch. It was almost seven so he should be arriving any time now. This was going to be so good!

"You can see loneliness in his eyes," Frieda said looking directly at Gabby.

"Aunt Frieda, what a thing to say," Amanda said softly.

"I told him he could marry Aunt Gabby, then he'd be Uncle Reid," Brie announced.

Gabby almost choked on her sip of tea. "Please tell me you didn't, Brie?"

"Why not?"

"Yeah, why not?" little James asked. "We think it would great to have him be our uncle."

"Because, because..." Gabby faltered. She glared at Tom and Wade. "They're your children. You could give me a little help here!"

Wade shrugged. "Reid's a great guy. You could do a lot worse."

"She probably has," Tom said poking his brother in the ribs. Just then the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Gabby said. She'd grab at any excuse to get out of the room for a minute. Marry Reid indeed! She didn't particularly want to get married at all! And she

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most certainly was not going to marry some man just to give her nieces and nephews an uncle. No matter how much they seemed to like him.

As soon as Gabby left the room, Wade and Tom pushed back their chairs and quietly followed her out to the foyer.

When Gabby opened the door, she stood frozen to the spot. “You!” she gasped looking at the tall tanned man filling the doorway. He was dressed in a suit but had removed the tie and carried his jacket over his arm.

Reid’s grin was a bit crooked as he looked down at the woman who had tormented his thoughts for the last few months. “Hi darlin’,” he drawled. “Want to go for a swim? I’m all dressed for one.”

Gabby heard laughter from behind her and jerked around to see Wade and Tom standing just a few feet away. “You knew!” she hissed. Then she turned to Reid. “You told them, didn’t you?”

He stepped past her into the foyer. “Once I discovered who you were, I couldn’t just pretend that I hadn’t met you.”

“You didn’t meet me,” she reminded him.

“That we had an encounter then,” Reid laughed.

Wade was wiping tears from his eyes. “I can’t believe that you actually pushed him into the pool!”

“I did not push him. He fell,” she stated haughtily.

“She pushed me.”

“You fell!”

Reid shook his head. “As I recall you put your hand in the middle of my chest and pushed. And a very nice little hand it was too.”

Gabby gave him a scathing look. “As if I could move anyone as big as you. You’re a klutz and fell. And...and you tore down that beautiful old house!”

Before Reid could continue, Amanda called from the dining room. “Who is it Gabby?”

“Twinkle toes,” she called out before turning on her heels and stomping back down the hall.

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CHAPTER 4

Reid's eyes widened in mock hurt. "Twinkle toes? I've been told I'm light on my feet but I'm not that good," he said shrugging. His two friends were almost doubled over laughing.

Tom was the first to regain some measure of control. He wiped at his eyes with the back of his hand. "I think we should warn you that she just found out about the old Putnam house being torn down. And she's not too happy about it."

"Liked the old place, did she?"

"Gabby is a pushover for anything old or very young. Carolyn Putnam was a good friend from school so she spent a lot of time over there," Tom said slapping Reid on the back.

"She'll come around when she sees the new place. Come on, let's get you some coffee and some of Ida's coconut cream cake," Wade said turning to go.

When they entered the dining room, Gabby was sitting at the table but she didn't look up. *Wade and Tom are going to pay for this*, she thought to herself. She didn't know when or how, but she'd get even somehow. And him! *Why did he have to show up in her backyard?*

"Reid!" Brie squealed in glee as she scooted off her chair to run to him.

He scooped her up into his arms. "How are you, sugar? You being good for Aunt Gabby?"

"Of course I am." Then Brie spoke in a loud whisper. "I told her she should marry you, but I don't think she liked it very much."

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"I'm wounded," Reid said trying to sound heartbroken. At this Gabby finally looked up.

"I sincerely doubt that Mr. McAllister. If you'll excuse me, I'll help Ida clean up." She stood gathering up a stack of dishes before disappearing into the kitchen.

As she walked past him, he said loud enough for only her to hear, "coward."

Gabby dropped the dishes into the sink and then turned on the hot water. She began scraping the plates to ready them for the dishwasher. This was her family, not his. How dare he come in and take over like this? Her hands worked feverishly on the dishes.

Ida came to stand by her side after taking Reid his coffee and cake. "You keep rubbing that plate like that and you'll rub the pattern completely off it. What's got you into such a snit?"

"Him!" she said jerking her head towards the door.

"There's quite a number of *hims* out there. Care to narrow it down to the one with a name?"

"Reid McAllister. The jerk! Thinks he can just waltz in here and make himself right at home." Gabby finished the last dish in the sink and placed it into the dishwasher.

"You don't even know him," Ida said shaking her head.

"I met him once and believe me that was enough. The man thinks he's the world's gift to women and we should all faint at his feet," Gabby muttered sarcastically.

Ida laughed. "If I was thirty years younger I wouldn't mind being in his arms. That's some man there."

"Ida!" Gabby gasped.

"I'm old but I'm not dead, girl. My eyes aren't what they used to be, but I see well enough to recognize a handsome man when I see one. And he seems a right nice one too. There are some in town who'd love to get to know him better. He's become good friends with your family so you have one up on them others. My advice is to take advantage of that."

"I am not the least interested in that man. And why does everyone think I need one in my life anyway?"

"Maybe because you need an anchor."

Gabby snorted. "I'm not a ship."

"You travel all over the world, put into port once in a while and then you're off again. Take a look around, Gabby. Maybe what you're looking for is right in your own backyard," Ida said as she turned to leave the room.

Since she considered Reid to be her parent's guest Gabby had no qualms about quietly letting herself out of the back door to go down to the stables. Walking around the building she saw a form silhouetted in the field just ahead. Gabby leaned against the fence and whistled. The horse's ears perked up before she turned to trot over to the fence. Pegasus snorted as Gabby reached out to scratch behind her ears. She'd had this horse for seven years and loved her dearly.

"Pegasus, my love. I've missed you!" Gabby put her arms around the horse's neck leaning into her for comfort. "Tomorrow we'll go for a long quiet ride." The horse snickered as if she understood. They stood that way for some time each welcoming the touching embrace.



Suddenly Pegasus snorted and backed away. Gabby quickly turned to see Reid approaching. Great! "Do you have to sneak up on people?" she snapped uncomfortable being out her alone with him.

Ignoring her question, he walked up to the fence placing one foot on the bottom rung. "Beautiful horse you have there." He held out his hand. Pegasus stepped back then shifted to the side.

To Gabby's utter astonishment, her horse slowly moved forward to brush against the outstretched hand.

"Good girl," he said running his hand down her nose.

Pegasus had the nerve to stand there apparently enjoying Reid's attentions. "Traitor!" Gabby muttered under her breath. It was bad enough that her entire family had been won over by McAllister. But now her horse had gone over to the enemy also.

Reid looked down at Gabby recognizing the mutinous expression on her face. She was even prettier than he'd remembered and he was drawn to her, as he hadn't been to any woman in a long time. He had a feeling that life would never be dull with Gabby around. He sighed. "Look Gabby, I know that you and I got off to a bad start. Why don't we forget the past and begin again?" Reid asked softly.

Gabby just looked at him for long seconds. It was true that they hadn't met under the best circumstances. And now he was in Bentrige to stay so there would be no avoiding him as time went by. "Okay, but only because my family thinks the world of you," she amended.

"Hey, I'm a nice guy," Reid said smiling.

"I'll reserve judgement on that," she countered. But she'd seen him with her family and how the kids reacted to him. He just wasn't her type and the sooner everyone realized and accepted the fact the happier she'd be.

"Brie thinks we should get married."

Gabby rolled her eyes. "She's only six years old. And any more talk like that and our truce will be over before it's barely begun."

"Okay," he said raising his hands in front of his chest. "But tell me this. Putting aside that I came on to you like a real jerk that day in LA, what do you have against me?" Reid really had to know why she was so hostile towards him.

"It's nothing personal, McAllister. It may sound silly but...you're just too big."

Reid blinked. "What the hell has my size got to do with anything? That's only a chance of nature and genetics. Besides that's all relative. I could say that you're too small. Your father and brothers are all big men. Do you hold that against them too?"

"Of course not," Gabby snapped. "I love them. And I do not wish to pursue this conversation. Do you want to be friends or not?"

Reid felt a tightening in his gut. He wanted a hell of a lot more from this strawberry blond spitfire, but he would take it one small step at a time. He held out his hand. "Friends?"

Gabby stuck out her hand and found it swallowed up by his much larger one. An unfamiliar tingling sensation surged up her arm. Her eyes widened in surprise. She looked up into Reid's green eyes and saw her own surprise reflected there. Gabby felt herself being pulled forward as Reid's other arm went around her shoulders. Before she could object his head lowered and his mouth covered hers. Her first instinct was to pull away, but at the touch of his mouth on hers all resolve fell away. His arms held her

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against his long hard body but she instinctively knew that he'd have let her move away if that had been her wish. She loved the smell of his cologne and the feel of his body pressed against her tender curves.

His lips moved feather-light over hers. His tongue traced the gentle line of her bottom lip. When her lips parted he opened his mouth to deepen the kiss. He was on fire! There was so much undeveloped passion in this one small package. He hadn't meant to kiss her tonight. He really hadn't. But just the touch of her hand in his had sent all good intentions out the window.

Gabby flattened her hands against his chest feeling the rapid thudding of his heart. *Was her own heart beating like that?* she wondered absently. She'd naturally been kissed before but never had it made her feel this way. She felt an ache deep inside that demanded satisfaction. She pressed closer to Reid.

The sound of pounding feet brought Reid back to his senses. He raised his head but didn't relinquish his hold on Gabby.

She looked up at him, a bemused expression shining in her deep brown eyes. Then she too heard someone approaching. Reluctantly she stepped back just as eleven-year-old Sam rounded the corner of the stable.

"Aunt Gabby! Grandma said to tell you that John Murphy is on the phone," he said in a rush as he slid to a stop by her side. He was almost as tall as his aunt and couldn't wait until he topped her in height.

Gabby looked up at Reid. "I...I have to go." She fled back towards the house. What had come over her? She'd practically thrown herself into his arms. If Sam hadn't arrived when he did, who knows what would have happened. She would make certain that she was never alone with Reid McAllister again. Oh, but could that man kiss!

Reid and Sam followed her at a slower pace back to the house. Gabby was no where to be seen so he assumed that she was taking the call somewhere private. He found Amanda and the others in the great room where he said his good-byes. Wade got up to follow him out. "I'll walk you to your car."

Once outside, Reid had to ask the question that had bothered him all the way back from the stables. "Who is John Murphy?" He hadn't met anyone by that name although there was a family called Murphy who ran the local feed store.

"He's a guy Gabby went to school with. He lives in New York now but tries to get home for a couple of weeks every summer," Wade told Reid with a knowing smile. Reid had sounded a bit jealous there. He'd have to keep an eye on this development.

"They're pretty close then?"

"Never thought about it before. They're good friends. He's a singer and dancer. Doing pretty well from what we hear. He's probably home now and wants Gabby to help put on the town shows."

"Town shows?" Reid asked intrigued.

"We have some pretty talented people in Bentrige. So, during that latter part of June and July they put on shows in the park in town. You've seen the huge gazebo with the stadium type seating around the one side haven't you?" Wade asked.

Reid thought for a moment. "Guess I have, but I never gave it any thought before. What kind of shows do they put on?"

"Musicals with lots of singing and dancing. Even the audience can get up and dance some of the time. We have a large number of Irish settlers in the area so one show

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centers on Irish or Celtic music. You should feel right at home with that music. The others are whatever they want. Sometimes it's strictly dancing for everyone. It's a lot of fun. Gabby is one of their main singers and dancers. She might be little but can she belt out a song! And can she dance. She started dancing lessons when she was three years old because mom said it was the only way that she could think of to channel all that energy."

"So this Murphy is in the shows with her?" Reid asked not sure why he felt threatened by this faceless man.

"Sure. A lot of the kids participate too. Everyone has a great time. The last show of the season is a cook out. We usually have a side of beef, roast hog and plenty of fried chicken. Everyone brings covered dishes so there's plenty of food to go around."

Reid liked the sound of that. He'd heard about small towns where the people were close neighbors, but he'd never thought to be a part of something like this. "When's the first show?"

"Well, if John's home, I wouldn't be surprised to see it posted for next Friday."

"Let me know as soon as you know something definite. I wouldn't miss this for anything," Reid said smiling. And he wanted to meet this John Murphy. Why did he have the feeling that he wasn't a big man? He'd find out soon enough. Reid held out his hand to Wade. "Talk to you later in the week."

Wade watched Reid's car until it was out of sight. He smiled. Something told him that his little sister was in for quite a time with Reid McAllister. Maybe he was the man who could ground her and keep her out of trouble. *Or maybe out of danger would be a better way to phrase it*, he amended to himself.

Back in the house the object of their thoughts was still on the phone with John. He and Gabby had gone all through school together. John had had a crush on her at one time, but that had progressed into a deep friendship. She was delighted with his call. He was calling from his parent's home in Bentrige. "I just got in a little while ago," he told her. "I've got some great ideas for the shows this summer and I'm anxious to get together with you to set up rehearsals. Hope the local band has kept up their practice sessions over the winter."

"Are you kidding? They play at every opportunity. Why don't I meet you at the café for breakfast in the morning and we can formulate our schedules. I'll call Sierra and Devra and Bill Larkin. And you can call Doc Shanahan and Millie Price. If they can join us, all the better," she said grinning. How she loved this part of summer! She already had an idea for Brie and Franklin and hoped that John could help. Once they decided on the summer schedule, they'd set up a meeting with Bob and Karen Reynolds who maintained the costumes, Wade who handled the electronics for the recorded music, and Griff Palmer who was in charge of the band.

"Sounds like a plan to me," John laughed. "I'm looking forward to seeing you and hearing all about your travels."

"I hope you brought some pictures from your current show? We're all so proud of you," Gabby told him sincerely.

"I brought some pictures of the show and someone else. But I'll tell you all about her over breakfast. See you at eight?" John asked.

Gabby was intrigued. "Eight it is." She replaced the receiver and grinned. So John had met someone! Maybe next summer he would bring her home with him to meet

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the family. And she'd have to meet the town's people too. Gabby wondered if she'd be as readily accepted as Reid McAllister had been. On the heels of that thought came another. "I wonder if he can sing?" Then she shrugged her slender shoulders and went back downstairs to rejoin her family for a while before turning in for the night.

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CHAPTER 5

Gabby and John worked closely for the next few days getting a show ready for Friday night in the park. They had decided it was going to be Irish music with some singing and plenty of dancing by everyone. The band would play, but Wade had arranged for some pre-recorded music so everyone could participate in the dancing. Irish reels were a favorite with everyone, even the kids.

Gabby had been so busy that she hadn't had much time to think about Reid McAllister and his new place in the Bentrige. But memories of that kiss kept creeping into her thoughts during quiet moments.

She was in town today to have lunch with Devra and Sierra. As she rounded the corner next to the Mustang Café, she literally ran into all four of her brothers *and* Reid.

"Hey, Shrimp, where you off to in such a hurry?" Wade asked taking her arm to steady her.

She stood in the circle of men and all she met at eye level was a sea of broad muscled chests. She tipped her head back to look up into Wade's face. "You guys are big enough to form a wall, do you realize that?" she said laughing.

Reid was grinning. Gabby was wearing jeans, a pink tee shirt and boots that looked comfortably worn. He hadn't seen her since that night at her parent's house but she hadn't been far from his thoughts. "She sure is a little thing. But nice on the eyes!"

Tom chuckled as Gabby glared at Reid. "Mom and Dad ran out of building material by the time they got around to making Gabby."

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Reid looked her up and down. "Yeah, but what they used sure turned out pretty special. You know what they say about nice things coming in small packages?"

"Nice!" all four brothers echoed.

"Yes, nice!" Gabby snapped. "I might be smaller than you but mom and dad gave me the brains in this family."

"Sassy, bossy and stubborn are the words I'd use," Sam said goading his sister even more.

"Hey, I think she's perfect just the way she is," Reid said laying an arm around her shoulders. She barely reached his shoulder but she felt as if she'd been made just for him.

Gabby shrugged away from Reid's arm. "I can take care of myself McAllister. My brothers might not be too high on the IQ scale, but they mean well. Where are you guys off to anyway?"

"We'll talk about this lack of respect for your elders later, squirt," Tom said trying to sound annoyed. "We're going to be late for a meeting at the town hall if we don't get going. See you later, Reid. Don't forget the league managers meeting tonight at my place."

"Be there at seven," Reid assured him.

"Don't let me keep you," Gabby said smiling as her four brothers continued down the street. When Reid didn't move away Gabby turned to face him. "Don't you have somewhere to go?"

"I'm in no hurry. You know, seeing you standing close to all your brothers like that makes it really plain that you *are* the runt in the family." He could see those deep brown eyes take on an added shine. It was almost as if he could see steam begin to form as it started to rise to the surface. Reid had never deliberately taunted a woman before, but with Gabby, well, it just seemed natural. He grinned down at her.

"I refuse to get into another discussion on this subject again. If you'll excuse me, I have a luncheon engagement." She had to get away from Reid. The man was too handsome by far and he rattled her just by being near.

"Yup, runt of the litter, piglet," Reid laughed. "They saved the best for the last."

"Don't you ever call me that!" Gabby hissed.

"Hey, I said you were the best! Who are you having lunch with?" If it were with this Murphy, he would invite himself along no matter what she said.

Gabby just glared at him for long seconds. "Not that it's any of your business but I'm meeting my sister-in-law Devra and Sierra. Now why don't you go away and annoy someone else, McAllister," she said shaking her fist at him.

Reid grabbed her wrist placing a kiss on her knuckles. "See you later, piglet!" He stepped around her heading for the feed store. After that parting shot it was best to get out of the way fast. He didn't turn around, but he could hear her muttering to herself as she stomped toward the café several stores away.

He continued down the street to the Murphy Feed store with a stupid grin on his face. Florence had mentioned this morning that she needed chicken feed, so he grabbed at the opportunity to finally meet this wonderful John he'd heard so much about. He'd already met Grace and David Murphy. They were friendly and sincerely welcomed him to Bentrige. For some reason he hadn't been able to get the picture of Gabby and a faceless John out of his thoughts. And it was annoying him no end.

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Now as he entered the store he noted a young slender man standing behind the counter off to the right. He was talking to Grace. When she heard Reid enter the store, she turned around.

“Good morning, Reid. What can we do for you today?” Grace was of average height and slender. She wasn’t a pretty woman but her smile was warm and welcoming.

“Morning! Florence needs chicken feed,” he said looking at the young man.

“I don’t think you’ve met our son yet, have you? Reid this is John. He’s in town for a couple of weeks on vacation. John, this is Reid McAllister. He’s the one who bought the Putnam place.”

John didn’t hesitate as he held out his hand. “Good to finally meet you,” he said with a smile. “Gabby has mentioned you from time to time.”

Reid couldn’t help but smile. “Nothing good I presume? I seem to rub her the wrong way most of the time.” John was of average height, about five foot eight or nine and slender. He was good looking with dark blond hair and blue eyes. Reid could see why Gabby liked him. He was a lot smaller than her brothers.

At this John laughed. “You could say that. She’s the prickliest when it’s something she really cares about. Keep that in mind.”

Right then and there, Reid decided that he liked John Murphy. He didn’t know if there was a hidden message in that last part, but he would take it to heart. They talked a little while longer and John helped him load the feed onto the back of Reid’s truck. By the time he was driving back to the ranch, Reid couldn’t find one thing to dislike about John Murphy. And if he couldn’t, presumably neither could Gabby. He didn’t know if that was bad or good. Damn woman kept him in a constant state of unrest, mentally and physically!

Gabby slid into the booth across from Sierra and Devra, folded her hands in front of her on the table and glared.

“What has you in such a snit?” Devra asked. She and Nathan had been married just a year now and were expecting their first child in five months. Gabby and Devra had grown up together and were best friends.

“That Reid McAllister! He’s such a jerk! Do you know what he calls me? No...never mind that,” Gabby amended. If anyone found out that he called he piglet, she’d kill him on the spot!

“That’s one handsome man,” Sierra said raising her eyebrows. She taught Latin and English at the high school in Bentrige. She’d moved there from Florida about three years ago. Gabby had met her through Devra shortly after. Sierra Jennings was now engaged to Sam Stoner and their wedding was set for October. Gabby couldn’t be happier for them.

“He tore down the Putnam house,” Gabby stated as if that were a major crime that required dire punishment.

“Give it a rest, Gabby. That old place should have been torn down years ago. You’re the only one who liked it anyway,” Devra said sipping her iced tea. She eyed her friend closely. “Word has it that you met him in Los Angeles. What gives?”

“We did not meet. He came on to me and then we parted,” Gabby said giving a mini version of their encounter.

“Yeah, he parted into the pool from what I heard,” Sierra laughed.

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"Is this story all over town?" Gabby groaned.

"Of course. Reid's being a real good sport about it too. Not many men could take the ribbing he's getting about being pushed into a swimming pool by a woman."

"I'll get even with Tom and Wade somehow," Gabby growled. She could just picture her brothers howling with laughter each time that they told the story to someone. But that was fine. She had all summer to get even.

Devra and Sierra looked at each other. "Me thinks the lady is reacting quite strongly," her sister-in-law teased. "Does he get your heart racing too?"

"He does nothing of the sort," Gabby denied, then spoiled it all by blushing.

"He does!" Devra laughed slapping the table with her hand.

"Reid McAllister is the last person in the world I want to get involved with. He's too big, too bossy and too...too domineering! Now can we please change the subject? Our show is tomorrow night."

The other two women grinned at each other but allowed the conversation to be channeled towards Friday night. After lunch they went see Wade to check on the sound system to be sure everything was ready.

Just before seven Friday evening, Reid parked his truck next to T.J.'s car. Down the row he saw Cody's dusty jeep and smiled. He could just picture Cody and Florence dancing. He'd been looking forward to this all week. When he reached the back of the seating area he looked out over the scene before him.

It looked like something out of a fantasy from long ago when life was so much simpler. Just ahead was the gazebo. It was a large green and brown one. It must be at least thirty feet in diameter with steps leading down to the wooden stage. Wade told him this was also used for dancing. Stadium seating had been installed into the small incline overlooking the stage and gazebo. Beautiful green grass surrounded the area on the other three sides. In the far-left corner of the park was the biggest barbecue Reid had ever seen. Picnic tables were scattered all around the lush grassy area. Off to the far right he could see a well-equipped playground for the kids. His musings about this picturesque setting were interrupted when he heard his name being called.

"Reid, over here," Amanda called as she waved at him. She and T.J. were sitting in the middle in the front row. "We saved a seat for you."

He made his way down to them, giving Amanda a kiss on the cheek and shaking hands with T.J. "I've been looking forward to this all week." For the next ten minutes they greeted friends and the rest of the family who all crowded into the seats around them.

At seven the town band filed into the gazebo wearing their forest green button down shirts with a white wolf on the back and the words 'THE WILD PACK' embroidered in white. Reid grinned. He recognized Griff Palmer on the banjo and John Clark on the guitar. He checked out the huge speakers on either side of the gazebo and knew that they were for the pre-recorded music.

Reid looked over to his left and saw her. Gabby was wearing a simple short green dress with green tights and black shoes. God but she had great legs! John stood by her side wearing tight fitting black pants and a green shirt the same color as Gabby's dress. Why this bothered him, he had no idea. They were surrounded by a group of teenagers in similar dress.

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A hush fell over the audience as the band began to play. The opening number was a foot-stomping rendition of ‘Mountain Dew’. Reid soon found himself tapping to the music and clapping along with everyone else. Some of the kids around Gabby broke into a little dance. After several more Irish songs they began ‘If You’re Irish’. T.J. took Amanda’s hand and pulled her to her feet as they joined some other couples in a rollicking Irish dance. He noticed that even the smaller children were dancing. Devra sang two songs and he was impressed. She had a lovely voice.

After several more songs by the band, they put down their instruments as music from the large speakers filled the air. That’s when Gabby and John entered center stage dancing to ‘Reel Around the Sun’. The others in the dance group joined them in short order as the dance progressed. Reid couldn’t take his eyes off of Gabby. They were doing a rendition of ‘Riverdance’. And were they good! Gabby was graceful and vibrant. You could tell she was enjoying herself by the wide smile on her face. His heart raced as he watched her dance, her long hair swinging as she moved. Her face was lit with laughter and happiness. Reid felt a tightening in his gut. How he would love to see that look on her face with her lying under him! He shook his head. T. J. and Amanda were sitting next to him and here he was lusting after their daughter.

Reid took a moment to look at the other dancers recognizing Sierra on the other side of John. He wondered why Devra wasn’t dancing, then realized it might be because she was pregnant. She was only four months along but she was already beginning to show. And that dance was pretty strenuous.

The music had been going on for a little over an hour when Griff called for an intermission. Everyone stood and began to mingle so Reid went to see if he could locate Gabby. He found her off to one side drinking some water. “You look pretty good out there, piglet,” he said loud enough for her ears only as he came up behind her.

“How would you like to wear this water, McAllister? If you don’t stop calling me that, I’ll punch you so hard I’ll knock you into next week!” she glared at him.

“Everyone has pet names. My mother used to call me pumpkin,” he told her grinning. She was so easy to rile. And those brown eyes simmered when she was angry.

Gabby almost choked on her water. She laughed. “Pumpkin? You? Pumpkins are full of seeds not...”

“Watch it woman! There are children around here,” Reid laughed. He restrained the urge to lean down and give her a quick kiss. “I came to ask you to save me a dance later,” he told her with a broad smile.

“You dance?”

“Of course. I’m not in John’s class but I can hold my own,” Reid boasted. He didn’t mention that Florence had been giving him lessons every afternoon for the last week. He’d always enjoyed dancing but Irish jigs had somehow eluded his experience. Until now that is.

She glanced down to his feet and grinned. “This should be interesting. How anyone can maneuver around on size thirteen gunboats is beyond me.”

“How’d you know I wear a size thirteen?”

“That’s what my brothers wear except for Nathan; he only wears a twelve.”

Now it was Reid’s turn to look down at her feet daintily shod in her black tap shoes. “Well, we’d look pretty silly prancing around on something the size of those little things you call feet.”

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The picture this conjured up was so funny that Gabby burst out laughing drawing the attention of several people in their vicinity. "I'll wear a ballet dress if you will," Gabby challenged.

"I think the men wear tights," Reid reminded her grinning.

She gulped. The very thought of this man in ballet tights did weird things to her heart rate. Reid had more muscle than most men even dream about. And she would bet that there wasn't a spare ounce of fat on the man. This thought quickly led to another of him in a pool, but not with clothes on. "Is it getting a little warm tonight?" she asked off-handedly fanning herself with her hand.

"Hopefully it might get warmer later on," Reid said as he dipped his head to give her a quick kiss. "See you later for that dance or two, piglet" he said softly before hurrying back to his seat.

Tom watched Reid and Gabby with a thoughtful look on his face. He smiled.

"What's so funny?" Fran asked seeing his expression.

He nodded towards Gabby and Reid. "I have a feeling that Gabby may have met her match." Just then Reid kissed her before turning to walk back in their direction. Reid was a good man and Gabby could do a lot worse.

Fran saw the outraged look on Gabby's face. "From the look on her face, I don't know if that kiss was good or bad."

"Maybe it was too good. Like *my* kisses, wife," Wade said planting a kiss on her parted lips. They'd been married almost thirteen years and he adored his Fran more each year. She wore her long blond hair in a braid down her back and her green eyes twinkled with mischief.

"Watch it, husband, or you might find yourself sleeping on the floor." It was an idle threat and they both knew it. Fran adored her big bull of a husband and couldn't rest unless he was in the bed next to her. Just then Reid joined them. "What's with you and Gabby?" she asked ignoring Tom when he rolled his eyes.

"Just a little chat. She's saving a dance for me," he told her with a wide smile.

"Right. You kiss every woman who saves you a dance?" Tom asked trying to goad Reid into giving them some idea about what was going on. It didn't work.

"If they'll let me," Reid said laughing as he went to side beside Amanda.

The rest of the evening was devoted to dancing. Anyone and everyone could come up on the stage or stand in the aisles to dance. Reid sat watching Gabby for about fifteen minutes. She danced with John, then switched partners several times. Reid went to stand by the side of the stage and when the current number ended he was quick to get to Gabby's side. "I believe this dance is mine," he said giving a low bow.

"All right, but just this one," she told him with a look that plainly said that she didn't trust him. When the music resumed, Reid took her in his arms as the Irish reel began. It was fast and fun.

Gabby was amazed at how light on his feet Reid was for being such a large man. Maybe *twinkle toes* had been an appropriate name for him after all. When the next dance began it felt only natural when Reid took her hand to begin.

After that only one man tried to claim her for a dance, but after seeing Reid's scowl, he excused himself to find another partner. Reid found himself enjoying himself more than he could ever remember. The last two dances of the night were slow and romantic. Reid pulled Gabby close to his long length as they moved in step. He rested

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his chin on the top of her head. She felt so good in his arms that he didn't want the evening to end.

For her part, Gabby was a mass of contradictions. Her mind told her that Reid was holding her much too close, but her body told her to shut up and enjoy it. Her head was pressed against his broad chest where she could hear the steady beat of his heart. His arms were draped around her; his hands locked behind her waist holding her molded his body. Wherever their bodies touched, she felt on fire. A heaviness seemed to engulf her as his masculine scent and nearness overcame any defenses she'd erected against this romance thing.

As the last dance ended, they reluctantly pulled apart. When Reid looked down into her eyes they held a dreamy far off look. He had never wanted to kiss any woman as much as he wanted to haul Gabby into his arms at that moment and kiss her senseless. Before he could do anything so foolish in the middle of the dancing area, Wade slapped him on the back.

"You two look pretty good out there. You and John did a good job with the show, sis," Wade told her with genuine pride in his voice. "Can't wait until next Saturday. What's the theme of that show?"

"The forties music as if you didn't know," Gabby laughed. "If you'll excuse me I need to see John before we leave. Thanks for the dance," she told Reid before hurrying away.

"Did I break something up here?" Wade asked innocently. He was well aware of the growing attraction Reid had for his sister. He hadn't thought that Gabby liked Reid, until tonight when they'd spend so much time dancing. Now he didn't know what to think. And with Gabby that made it all the more confusing. You never knew what she would get up to next.

"No not at all," Reid lied.

"Good. We'll see you Tuesday night for poker at my place," Wade said grinning as he slapped Reid on the back again.

Reid was aching on the drive back to his ranch and it had nothing to do with exertion. It had to do with one beautiful pint-sized woman with strawberry blond hair and big brown eyes. He took a long cold shower before going to bed, but sleep remained elusive as he relived the feel of Gabby in his arms, the scent of her hair and the warmth of her smile and laughter.

He ran his hands over his face then got up and took another cold shower. This time he finally managed to fall asleep with the promise that he would find a way to be alone with her. It seemed that they were always being interrupted. And he wanted her all to himself just once. Well, maybe more than once. But it would be a start.

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CHAPTER 6

The next afternoon Reid had been out checking on some fences and was just about to head in when he spotted Gabby on Pegasus in the distance. She was headed towards a crop of trees this side of the river. He patted his horse. “Dorado, how would you like to go meet a very special lady?” He moved his horse forward. He would finally have Gabby all to himself. There wouldn’t be anyone out here to get in their way. The only problem was that he didn’t know how the lady would like this chance meeting.

Evidently Gabby had been lost in her own world because she hadn’t heard Reid approach until he was almost next to her. He dismounted, then tied his horse next to Pegasus. Suddenly her mouth felt dry. He was wearing black jeans, a red long sleeve shirt, a black vest and black boots. Sierra was right. Reid was one handsome man. She’d been about to sit down on the ground under the pine trees when he arrived. This was her special place where she could come to think and be alone with only the sky and the sound of the river and the wind in the trees for company.

“I saw you from the ridge,” Reid explained indicating the ridge behind him. “You way out here all by yourself?”

“No, Pegasus is with me,” Gabby almost snapped. Reid had not been far from her thoughts since the dance. Everywhere she looked there seemed to be something that reminded her of him. Or how it felt being held so close to his warm hard body.

“I’m surprised that your dad lets you ride this far alone,” he said in genuine concern.

“Reid, I grew up here. I know this land as well as dad and my brothers. I couldn’t get lost out here if I tried,” she said with a bright smile.

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"Point taken," he conceded. "Any fish in that little stream?"

"Never had any luck here, but further upstream there's a real good spot where the river curves around a big bolder. What are you doing out here?"

"I was checking some fences that Cody was concerned about. He was right. We'll have to go out tomorrow and get them replaced before they go down completely." It was warm standing in the sun so Reid walked the few feet to the stand of pine trees. He reclined on the bed of pine needles patting the ground next to him.

Gabby eyed him warily.

"Come sit and talk to me?"

"Why?"

"Because we don't know that much about each other. Oh, your brothers have told me some things but I'd like to talk with you. Tell me about your childhood...anything." She was wearing tight jeans, a long sleeve checkered shirt and boots. Her hair was in a long braid down her back with loose strands caressing her cheeks. Her only makeup was a touch of lipstick. But she was enchanting with her creamy flawless complexion and deep brown eyes.

Gabby cautiously walked to his side and sat down on the bed of pine needles. "What about your childhood? Were you raised on a ranch too?" When he didn't answer she looked over her right shoulder. He was looking up at the trees. Then he turned to look at her and she saw a look of regret? Or longing?

"No," he said slowly. "I grew up in Los Angeles with summers in New York or Connecticut. I liked the time we spent in Connecticut best because we were in the country there, away from the noise and crowds of the city."

"Did you and your dad fish there? Dad and Tom brought me up here to fish when I was about five years old. I caught this little trout but to me it was a monster of a fish. And I was heartbroken when dad made me put it back. He told me that it was too small and had to grow up." Gabby smiled at the fond memory.

"My father was nothing like T.J. His business was all consuming. And he was a city boy. He'd never had a fishing rod in his hand in his life. I doubt if he had any interest in fish until they were prepared to perfection on a plate in front of him. I asked him to take me once. So he had the gardener take me. Even in the country he spent more time on the phone than he did with us.

Gabby could hear the hurt in his voice. "How did you get into ranching?"

"Over summer break in college the first year I took a job on a ranch in Utah. It was done more to spite my father than any great yearning to work. But it turned out to be a good decision. I loved it...the horses, the open country...everything about it. When I turned twenty-five I came into a trust fund and invested it in a ranch in Montana. By then I was out of school and working with my father. I'd spend as much time as I could at the ranch. My father didn't like it, but it was my life. He lived his the way he wanted. Now it was my turn to do the same."

"Has he come to terms with your decision?"

"He died four years ago. That's when I took over the company. And no, he never did like my 'cowboy ways' as he called them." Reid would never forget the look on his father's face the day he came straight from the airport to the office. He was wearing jeans and boots. The withering look Jason McAllister had given his son that day would have wilted flowers. Apparently the man didn't matter, only the clothes.

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“What about your mother?”

“She’s great,” Reid said fondly. “She’s always been there for me, going to school functions and my games. How she put up with my father all those years is beyond me!”

“Maybe she loved him,” Gabby said with a little shrug. She wouldn’t want to put up with a life like that but who knows about someone else. Reid looked at her, started to say something then obviously changed his mind. “Any brothers or sisters?” she asked to fill the void in the conversation.

“No, I’m an only child. I never gave it much thought until I saw your family and how close you are and how supportive. Maybe I did miss out on something after all,” Reid said lying back with his hands behind his head.

Gabby turned around to face him. “Believe me, having brothers is not all fun and games. They all thought that they had the right to tell me what to do. They still do for that matter,” Gabby said frowning.

At this Reid smiled. “Yeah, but they do it because they love you. You know, the code of the west where men protect their women.”

“Well I grew up with six people, no eight counting Ida and Aunt Frieda, telling me what to do and when to do it. Tom and Wade were the worst ones. If any boy showed an interest in me, one of them was sure to give him a good talking to. He had to get their approval before I could go out with him.”

“Why do I have the feeling that you sneaked out from time to time without them knowing?” Reid asked with a grin.

Gabby laughed. “I did put one over on them once in a while. Once I took the distributor off of Tom’s car so he couldn’t follow me.”

“Did he make you put it back on?” Reid wanted to know shaking his head.

“How did you know that? He said that since I removed it, I could put it back the way I found it. Of course I couldn’t do it. The only thing I know about cars is where to put the gas. It was pure luck that let me get the distributor,” Gabby laughed remembering the look on Tom’s face when she’d returned home later that night. “I got grounded for two weeks for that little stunt. Boy was dad angry. But it was worth it. Devra and I met two boys at the movie theater. Afterwards we went to the café for something to eat. Where’s your mother now?” she asked completely changing the subject.

“When I talked to her last week she was in Hawaii. She bought a house there after father died. She comes back once a year to the house in Connecticut for a month or so.”

“Not to Los Angeles?”

“She sold the house there. I had a large apartment so she could stay with me if she visited. I’d never realized it but she never had liked living there. But that was where father was located so that’s where she lived.” Reid hadn’t batted an eye when she’d told him she was selling the family home. He hadn’t lived there since he was eighteen and it held no fond memories for him. His mother had actually seemed relieved when it sold.

“I don’t know what I’d do if mom and dad sold their home,” Gabby said staring at the river. “There are so many memories in that house. I love it; we all do.”

“Then why do you spend so much time away from Bentrige?” Reid asked quietly.

Gabby was quiet for several minutes, then she turned to face him once again. “My work requires that I travel. And maybe it’s to prove that I can do what I want and

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not have anyone breathing down my neck. There was so much that I wanted to see around the world.”

“Have you seen a lot?” Reid asked wondering if she knew how vulnerable she sounded at that moment. “Enough to be ready to stay awhile?”

“I’m here for the summer,” she hedged not comfortable with the direction this conversation was taking.

“Afraid, piglet?” Reid asked his eyes hooded.

“I told you not to call me that,” she snapped reaching forward to punch him in the ribs. Reid grabbed hold of her wrist toppling her onto his broad chest. One large hand cupped the back of her head guiding it as his mouth lifted to hers.

Gabby found herself lying on top of him, every inch of her body plastered to his. She was ready to bolt when his mouth covered hers. Then all coherent thought fled. This was no light-teasing kiss. This was hunger and longing as he coached her lips apart. She sighed into his mouth as he deepened the kiss. Reid’s hands cupped her firm bottom pressing her closer against his pelvis. Gabby felt an unfamiliar urge to arch closer to his male hardness.

Her firm little bottom just filled his hands as Reid held her against him. He was on fire. In one lithe movement he rolled over so that he was lying partly on top of her. Her eyes were dark with an unfocused look as he lowered his mouth to hers. “Gabby,” he groaned against her parted lips. “Darlin’ do you have any idea what you’re doing to me?” he grated hoarsely. He cupped the side of her face in his large hand as he lowered his mouth to hers once more. When his hand traced a path to her small firm breast she arched up off the ground. He slowly undid the buttons on her shirt, pulling it open to reveal the soft green bra that did nothing to conceal the soft swell of her breasts. Dipping his head he trailed kisses across each delectable offering.

If Reid was on fire, Gabby was burning up. No one had ever touched her like this because she’d never met anyone who attracted her on such an emotional level before. All Reid had to do was touch her for Gabby to become mindless. One of his long legs lay heavily across both of hers. She ached for something more but wasn’t quite sure what that something was. But when his hand went lower to cup the apex at her thighs, she tensed as some sanity returned. “Please, Reid,” she whispered moving her head to the side to avoid his lips. “I...I...”

He groaned but withdrew slightly. He rested his forehead against hers. “I didn’t plan for this to happen, Gabby. I thought we could just talk.” When she didn’t answer, he slowly re-buttoned her shirt. “When we make love it won’t be under a tree on the hard ground. It will be in a nice wide bed with...” Reid began.

Gabby slapped his hand away re-doing the last button herself. “We are not going to make love, McAllister!” she hissed. “This was an accident and it won’t happen again.”

“Oh, piglet, do you know that your eyes turn into shining pools of dark chocolate when you get mad?” His large hand lovingly cupped one side of her face.

Without giving it any thought, Gabby swung her leg back and kicked him on the shin. “I told you not to call me that!” she flung over her shoulder as she turned and ran for Pegasus. In seconds she was galloping away.

Reid leaned down to rub his leg but he was smiling. “You may try to fool yourself piglet, but you wanted me as much as I want you.” He mounted Dorado turning to follow Gabby, not to catch up to her, but just to make sure that she got headed home



okay. “Dorado, one day soon I’m going to teach that lady what making love is all about. Great, now she has me talking to my horse. That woman is driving me crazy!” he muttered shaking his head.

Gabby road fast and furious for several minutes before she realized that she wasn’t being pursued. She slowed Pegasus to a trot not sure if she was relieved or disappointed. Why did it have to be Reid McAllister who made her come alive? Why did it have to be only his touch that sent all common sense flying out the window? She sat up straighter in the saddle. Maybe this had happened today because of what he’d told her about his childhood and his father. Maybe it was because she’d felt sorry for him.

“Try again, Gabby,” she muttered aloud. Unfortunately that wouldn’t explain her reaction to his first kisses earlier last week. She did not want to get romantically involved with him. She really didn’t! So, the only thing to do was to stay out of his way. She only had six more weeks until she had to leave for the expedition. And if she had to be in his company, she’d just be sure that there were a lot of other people around. Under no circumstances could she be alone with him again. With this plan in hand Gabby returned home.

Tuesday night at the poker game at Tom’s house Reid was not playing well. He hadn’t seen Gabby since she’d ridden off in such a huff. He’d called her twice but she hadn’t been home and had not returned his calls.

The poker game had been in session for about an hour when Tom was called to the phone. His face was grim when he returned to the table in his den.

“What’s up? You look like you’re ready to kill someone,” Sam asked frowning.

“Your sister!” Tom said as he sat down.

“Why is she *our* sister when she’s in trouble? So what’s Gabby up to now?” Nathan asked not knowing if he really wanted to know.

“She’s down at the Wagon Wheel Inn playing a set with the Mountain Top Boys,” Tom gritted out. He knew the owner of the inn and it wasn’t a bad place. It was just that Gabby was so pretty, and some of the guys that drank there were unknowns to him.

Reid frowned. He’d seen the place but had never been inside. “It looks like a pretty good place to me.”

“Oh it’s not that so much as some of the cowhands who show up from time to time. Guys not from the Bentrige area. They can get kind of rowdy,” Sam told him. “Mom and dad don’t really like her to go there at night. But, she’s an adult so they can’t stop her. Not when she gets an idea into that pretty head of hers.”

Reid threw his cards down on the table. “Well I say that we go get her!” He stood. “You’re her brothers! Are you just going to sit there?” If anyone made a pass at her he’d string the guy up by his toes!

Wade and Tom shared a look. “Why not?” Tom said pushing his chair back. “I’ll tell Fran where we’re going.”

The others got up to follow them out. “She’s not going to like this,” Nathan said laughing. “She’s known those guys in the band for years. They wouldn’t let anything happen to her.”

“Maybe not, but we’ll all rest easier knowing that she’s home safe and sound,” Sam said remembering the other times they had gone storming off to get her back. It had taken a full week for her to even acknowledge that they were alive. Like his other

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brothers he didn't really think she was in any danger. Now it was Reid's reaction that interested him. Definitely something there to watch. He liked Reid and didn't know if he wished his sister on him or not. Life would certainly never be dull, that was for sure.

When they got to the Wagon Wheel, they were shown to a table along the side but with a good view of the band. Reid dropped down into the chair with a thud, his mouth open. Gabby was in the center of the players pounding away on the drums. She was wearing bib overalls with a white shirt underneath. Her long ponytail bounced to the rhythm as she played. She was singing the 'Timber I'm Falling In Love' with the band as backup. And she was good! And obviously having the time of her life.

Tom ordered a round of beers that they sipped as the music played. Couples got up to dance but it was the drummer who had riveted Reid's attention. *Her smile could light up the night sky*, Reid thought as he watched her. He'd seen many women parading around in skimpy dresses or shorts, but he didn't think he'd ever seen anyone as sexy as Gabby looked in those bib overalls. He shook his head as he took a sip of beer. He might as well admit it to himself; that little spitfire had hooked him good and she hadn't even thrown out any bait. He had jumped into this boat all by himself. Oh, but what a way to go!

When the set was over, they watched as Gabby was apparently saying good night to the rest of the band. She left through the side entrance. As if on cue, all five men stood and strode to the front door. They caught up to her some distance from her car.

"Mom and dad need to put a short leash on you, squirt," Wade boomed as they surrounded her.

Gabby groaned. "I am perfectly capable of taking care of myself. What are you guys doing here anyway? And don't tell me it's just to listen to me sing," she said her eyes narrowed.

"It's not safe for you to be out at night in places like this," Tom said jumping into the fray. "How many times do we have to tell you? If you want to come here, just let one of us know so we can be here with you."

"Your brother's right, this..." Reid began.

"Back off, McAllister," Gabby snapped. "This doesn't concern you!"

"Well it does now, piglet! Your little stunt broke up a perfectly good poker game. And that's when I got invited to this little coffee-klatch." Did she have any idea how vulnerable she left herself coming alone at night like this? It was dark and the lighting in the parking lot wasn't all that good.

"Don't call me that! Or do you want another kick?" Gabby glared tilting her head back to look up at Reid.

"Lady you don't need a leash, you need a keeper. And I pity the poor sucker who lands that job," Reid snapped back.

Neither noticed the knowing looks and resulting smiles that passed between her brothers. "Piglet?" they mouthed looking at each other

"Piglet?" Tom snickered then broke into full-fledged belly holding laughter. Sam, Wade and Nathan were quick to follow suit.

"Yeah, she's the runt of the litter," Reid said staring down at her furious expression. "She's quick on the getaway and hard to catch."

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"Thanks a lot, McAllister! Now I'll never hear the end of that one. Why don't you just go home and tear down some more buildings?" she said pushing past them to continue to her car.

"I'll ride with her to be sure she gets home okay," Reid said looking at Tom. "I can get Cody to come and get me from there. I'll pick up my car at your place tomorrow."

"It's your hide. She's not in a good mood."

"You might want to do the driving. In her present mood she might just drive you off the road somewhere," Nathan warned with a grin.

"Excellent suggestion," Reid said as he turned to catch up with Gabby. He caught up to her just as she'd unlocked her car. He reached out to snatch the keys from her hand. "I'll drive, darlin'."

"You'll do no such thing. Give me my keys." She reached for them but he held them over his head, way out of her reach.

"Gabby, just get into the car. I'm driving and there's nothing that you can do to change that fact," Reid said quietly. He wasn't going to argue with her. For once she was going to do as she was told.

Without another word she stomped around the car, climbed in slamming the door. She sat ramrod straight with her arms folded across her breasts.

Reid opened his door and tried to get in but the seat was pulled all the way forward so that he banged his knee. "How the hell can you see to drive?" he muttered as he pulled the seat all the way back so that he could sit with his legs straight out in front.

"I see quite well, thank you," she said stiffly. Inside she was laughing. Served him right for kidnapping her like this. Hope he has a bruise tomorrow.

Reid started the car and they pulled out of the parking lot. Neither spoke on the ride out of town. When they came to the intersection where they should have turned left to go to the Stoner ranch, Reid turned right.

"You missed the turn, McAllister," Gabby took delight in telling him. But it was short lived.

"No I didn't. We're going to stop at my place first. There's something there that I want you to see."

"I don't think so. You turn this car around right now or I'll tell my brothers."

"Tell them, piglet. I just want to show you the plans for the new house. Then maybe you'll get off my case about the old house." Reid had wanted to show her the plans for sometime now. For some reason he wanted her to like the home he was building.

"I am not on your case. I simply liked that old house. It had character and a lot of memories."

"And I think that once you've seen the plans for the new place, you'll like it even more. No harm in looking, is there?" The more he thought about bringing her home the more he wondered if it had been such a bright idea. They would be quite alone in the bunkhouse. Well, he was committed now. He couldn't turn around and take her home without seeing the plans. And he really did want her approval. This house was going to be special and so was she.

"Sounds like a case of 'come up and see my etchings' if you ask me," she snapped.



“Would you feel safer if we stopped and got Cody or Florence to come with us?”

Gabby sighed. Did she want to disturb their night? It was almost eleven and she knew that they went to bed early. “No, that won’t be necessary. But don’t you try anything or I will tell Tom and Wade.”

“So your big brothers do come in handy once in a while,” Reid grinned. “For someone who complains about their interfering in your life, you don’t hesitate to use them as a threat.”

“Okay, forget them. But don’t try anything or I’ll scream.” That is if she could get past the first kiss. She had been kissed plenty of times but none had made her feel the way Reid’s kisses did. One touch of those finely chiseled lips and she was sponge cake. All she had to do was stay out of his arms and out of his reach. A quick look at the house plans and she’d be on her way home. With this settled to her satisfaction in her mind, she chanced a look at Reid. Big mistake. She felt a tightening in her stomach, a warm flush radiate from her toes up to her face. Maybe one kiss would be acceptable she amended silently.

Reid pulled her car to a stop facing the old house or where it had once stood. Now there was another house taking shape. He watched Gabby for a reaction and didn’t have long to wait as her eyes widened in surprise.

“It’s going to be huge,” she gasped. There was no sign of the older home. The log home that stood before her now was at least three times the size of the Putnam house. It was two stories and seemed to go on forever on either side of the two big front doors.

“It’s too dark to see now or I’d walk you through. We’ll go look at the plans and you can see the layout from them.” Reid moved the car around the back to the bunkhouse. When the car stopped, Gabby got out, coming around to the other side before Reid could help her.

Inside the bunkhouse, Gabby looked around while Reid went into the other room to get the plans. It wasn’t elegant, but it was comfortable. The small living room had a rose patterned sofa, matching chair and a wood rocking chair. There was a small television on a table on the far side of the fireplace that she would bet didn’t get used much. Something told her that Reid was a reader and not a couch potato.

The kitchen and living room were all one big L-shaped room with the kitchen in the back. The appliances looked old but everything was very clean. Off to her left were two doors leading to bedrooms. It wasn’t large but everything was neat. So, Reid wasn’t a slob. Or did Florence come in and pick up after him? Somehow she knew that he looked after this place by himself.

Reid came out of the corner bedroom carrying a roll of house plans. “Come on into the kitchen and we’ll lay them out on the table.”

Gabby followed. She sat in one of the wooden chairs as he spread the plans out. She didn’t know much about houses, but even she could tell that this was going to be a show place. It was going to be even bigger than her parent’s home. And that was a big house.

She studied the plans and immediately fell in love with the layout. There was a large foyer while straight ahead was a huge great room. To the left was the dining room, kitchen, mud room, laundry room, bath and a bedroom. To the right were the master suite with a large bathroom and a large study. She could see Reid sitting behind a big

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desk working. Gabby shook her head to dislodge this picture. Upstairs there were five bedrooms, another study and bathrooms.

"There are back to back fireplaces in the great room and the master suite," Reid told her indicating it on the drawing. "In the downstairs study the two inside walls are going to be floor to ceiling shelves. I have quite a collection of books and decided to do away with bookcases and go directly to shelving. As you can see there's a large deck off the great room, one off the master bedroom and a small one off the master bathroom."

"It's fantastic!" Gabby said her eyes shining. "But you don't have a formal living room?"

"No, I decided to enlarge the great room and master suite instead. When I was having the plans drawn up I mentioned it to a friend and she told me she thought it was a waste of space. Her family never even went in the living room. The furniture just gathered dust so why not put that space to better use."

"Good idea. At mom and dad's we hardly ever go into the living room now that you mention it. Even on holidays when we're all there, we all crowd into the family room." Gabby smiled as she thought of all the noise and laughter. Everyone talked at once with the kids right in the middle of everything.

Reid saw her smile. "Penny for your thoughts."

"Oh I was just remembering last Christmas. We were all together that morning. There are so many of us now that you have to find a seat and stay put or you might get lost in the boxes and wrappings. The room looked like a disaster zone by the time we'd all opened out presents. The temperature outside was about zero but with the fire in the fireplace and the spice tea mom makes, it was warm and wonderful."

"That sounds like a special memory," Reid said softly.

Gabby could hear the longing in his voice. "What were your Christmas mornings like?"

Reid ran a hand over his face. "Most of the time it was just mother and I. If my father was at home he was usually on the phone or working on some project. Once in a while he might come and sit while I opened a present. They always said from mother and father but I know that he didn't have a clue what was in the boxes. Mother bought everything and she tried to make the day special. My kids will know that I care about them," Reid vowed. "They're going to have a mother *and* a father."

Gabby thought of the way her nieces and nephews doted on Reid and had no doubt that he'd be a great father. Did he have someone in mind for the mother? She didn't know that much about him really. He could be engaged for all she knew. Surely he wouldn't have kissed her the way he did if there was someone special in his life. Would he? She looked back at the drawings partly to hide her expression. "Something tells me that you'll be out shopping for them too. And spoiling them rotten."

Reid leaned back in the wooden chair. "You're probably right. But you have to discipline too. I've seen too many kids who tell their parents what to do. My friend Stan and his wife have two great kids. He said it wasn't easy when they were little. When you tell them 'don't make me get up', you better be ready to get up. He said you have to be consistent no matter how much it hurts or inconveniences you."

"He sounds like a smart man," Gabby said smiling.

"He is. He and his wife Anne and their kids will be here in a couple of months for a vacation. Stan took over the running of the business when I moved out here. But I talk

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to him weekly and he calls if he needs me for anything.” He’d talked to him a couple of days after he’d found out Gabby’s identity. Stan said that he and the family would have to get to Wyoming now. They had to meet her, but Reid wasn’t about to tell her that.

Gabby looked at her watch seeing that it was going on midnight. “I should be getting home. Reid I have to admit that your new house is beautiful.” She couldn’t lie to him about it. She’d made a fuss about the old one but was not above admitting when she was wrong.

“I’m glad that you like it. Maybe you can help me shop for furniture?” Reid was reluctant to end the evening.

“Well, it will be a while before you’re ready for that,” she said hedging. She would love to decorate that house but hoped the longing didn’t show in her eyes.

“I’ve got two crews working on it so they can get it done before snow falls. We’ll talk about it later. Let me put these plans away then I’ll take you home,” he said rolling up the large sheets. Just as he started into the bedroom the phone rang. “Get that for me will you?” *Who could be calling this late*, he thought as he left the kitchen.

Gabby picked up the phone. “Hello.”

There was a slight hesitation, then a woman’s voice spoke. “Who is this?” the stranger asked haughtily.

Whoever she was, she was upset about something. “Who are you?” Gabby replied shortly. Who did this person think she was anyway? She didn’t have to act so superior.

“I happen to be Reid’s fiancé and I would like to talk to him. If that is all right with you, darling? Now get him to the phone. Now!” Marla knew it was late and wondered why a woman was answering Reid’s phone. No matter. Now that she was free once again, she’d see to it that whoever it was understood that Reid was her man. And Marla didn’t share. Not with any woman.

Gabby was speechless for several seconds. His fiancé? He’d never mentioned being engaged nor had her brothers said anything about that little item of information. Her temper began to simmer. He had the nerve to kiss her like that and all the time he was engaged to be married! She’d had him pegged right from the very beginning but had begun to let her family and her own feelings about him change that opinion. Well it was a good thing this woman called when she did and let Gabby know what a real jerk Reid McAllister was. “Just a moment, darling, and I’ll call him to the phone.” Gabby managed to put the receiver down on the table without breaking it. She grabbed up the keys that Reid had laid on the table and headed for the door.

Reid came out of the bedroom just as Gabby opened the door to leave. “Hey, where are you going? I said I’d drive you home.”

“That won’t be necessary, McAllister. I think you’d better stay and take your call or you might be in big trouble. I can find my way home from here just fine.” With that she slammed out of the house and ran to her car.

Before Reid could get out the door, Gabby had turned around and was driving away from the house. “Damn!” he muttered as he closed the door crossing the room to pick up the receiver. “McAllister here,” he snapped.

“Reid, darling, is that anyway to talk to me,” Marla cooed. “It’s been a long time and I’ve missed you.”

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He groaned. "What do you want, Marla? You're right, it has been a long time but I sure as hell haven't missed you."

"Five years is too long for friends to be apart, Reid darling." She'd been a fool to let him slip through her fingers. The man she'd married had been far richer than Reid had been at that time, but he had also been much older. And Reid was an excellent lover and a generous one.

"In our case, it hasn't been long enough. What do you want? And what did you say to Gabby?" Reid wasn't in the mood to listen to a bunch of Marla's simpering vows of adoration.

"Gabby? That's a real name?"

"Marla, I am going to hang up this phone if you don't start talking," he threatened. In hindsight, he wondered how in the hell he had ever let himself get involved with this woman in the first place. Sure she was beautiful, but it was all show. She didn't possess one true warm emotion. And lying came as easily to her as breathing. He found that out the hard way.

"All I did was ask to speak to you. She was a little snippy and slammed the phone down on the table. Your little friend isn't very polite?"

"Why do I have a hard time believing that's all you said? But I'll let that go for the moment. State your business so I can get to bed. We get up in the morning around here. You remember the sun Marla? Morning is when it comes up but you've probably only seen it going down." He could hear her gasp, then some sniffing.

"You're so mean, Reid. And I do so want us to be friends. That's why I'm coming out to see you. I'll be there next week. I was hoping that I could stay with you." The country was not something that she was looking forward to, but once she was back in his good graces, she'd see to it that they went back to Los Angeles.

"Why in the hell are you coming to Bentrige?" he roared.

"I told you, so that we can talk things out," Marla said with a breath of promise in her voice.

"There's nothing for us to talk out. And you can't stay with me because I haven't room. I'm living in a bunkhouse, Marla. You'd be completely out of your element. Come to think of it, you'd be out of your element in Bentrige or anywhere else around here. Stay in Los Angeles and cruise the street for some other sucker." What he wanted to do was get off the phone and call Gabby. But it was so late that he feared disturbing her parents.

"You can't talk me out of this Reid. I know that I made a mistake five years ago, and I've paid dearly for it. But we can talk about it when I get there. See you later, darling," she gushed before hanging up the phone.

"Damn!" Reid said replacing the receiver. "That's all I need." He returned to the bedroom and pulled off his boots before lying down on the bed.

Reid stared at the shadows dancing on the ceiling. Everything had been going so well with Gabby until the phone call. Damn Marla! Her betrayal had almost destroyed his ability to trust; had left him afraid to reach out until he'd taken a dunking in a swimming pool. It was as if the cool water had infused him with life again. Or was it the gorgeous little spitfire who had taken over his thoughts? If he was going to be honest with himself, she'd taken over his heart.

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All thoughts of Marla vanished as he pictured Gabby in a big bed in the master bedroom in the new house. He smiled. He'd get her to decorate it according to her preferences. They could plan the color scheme and shop for furniture together. The more she thought about it the better he liked the idea.

He'd deal with Marla when or if she showed up in Bentrige. His first priority was to get Gabby back to the warm friendly companionship they'd been sharing before the phone call. With this settled in his mind, he got up to take a nice cold shower before going to bed.

Gabby had arrived home safely and gotten to her room without encountering anyone, so she didn't have to explain her mutinous expression. Once in the quiet of her room she showered and put on her over-sized tee shirt before curling up in the large overstuffed chair by the windows.

As usual whenever Reid McAllister was involved, she was a mass of contradictions. When they'd entered the bunkhouse she'd promised herself that she wouldn't let him kiss her again. Not when they were so alone. And then when he hadn't so much as made a pass at her, she's been disappointed. Maybe on that last deep ocean dive she'd lost some much-needed brain cells. The man was engaged to be married! She'd be a bigger fool than she already had been if she let herself continue to be deluded by his kisses.

Beginning tomorrow she would concentrate on working with John and the shows. And there was the charity picnic Saturday. She would be civil to Reid when she met him, but there would be no more romantic interludes, if that was what they'd shared. With this she crawled under the covers, punched the pillow and settled down to sleep.

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CHAPTER 7

Saturday began as slightly cloudy but cleared up by nine that morning. Gabby and a host of others were already at work setting up for the charity picnic. There would be lots of dancing, games for the kids and a box lunch auction. Ida was fixing up the box lunch for Gabby. It was done up in white paper with a red ribbon and bow. Everyone kidded Gabby about her lack of culinary skills and she took it in good humor, mainly because it was so true. Hell, she even had trouble make kool aid! About all she could fix was a nice cup of tea and microwave popcorn.

Reid had called several times over the past three days but she'd always managed to be busy or out of the house. She had not returned any of his calls. What was the use? All they would do is argue and she was tired of that. She hoped that he wouldn't put in an appearance today, but that was just wishful thinking. He'd become a well-liked significant member of Bentrige in the short time he'd been living here. So it was a pretty sure thing that he would attend the festivities today.

Surrounding the gazebo in the park were long tables set up with various goods for sales from food to clothing. Three tables alone were taken up with baked goods...cookies, pies and an assortment of cakes. There were two long tables with preserves, pickles and relishes and jellies and jams. It took four tables to hold the large quilts made by the ladies. There was one queen sized forest fan quilt that had caught Gabby's eye. It had an off white background with fan pieces done in three shades of green and two of a green and beige patterned material. She was enchanted with it and knew at a glance that it would be perfect for the bed in her cabin up in the mountains. She spoke to Millie Price, who was setting up the display, and had asked her to put a sold sign on it. She'd pick it up later.

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Earl Clark was helping Griff set up the woodcarvings and various pieces of woodcrafts. There were quite a selection of beautiful carvings of horses, wolves and bears. Gabby recognized the variety of birdhouses that were Griff's specialty. She noticed that this year there were even some wooden cars just the right size for small children.

"Hey, Gabby!" someone hailed. She turned to see David Murphy hurrying towards her. He looked a bit frazzled.

"Hello, Mr. Murphy. Something wrong?"

"Doc Shanahan was going to man the dunking tank but he's been called to the clinic on an emergency. There's no telling how long he'll be gone," David said in a rush. "I'd ask John to help out but he's already working with the band and the kids face painting. Got any ideas?" he asked hopefully.

"Well," she said shaking her head. Then she smiled wickedly. "I don't think my brother Tom has anything planned today. We'll get him to fill in for Doc."

"That's great. Now all I have to worry about is the cooking. Sure hope we have enough hamburgers and hotdogs."

"Don't forget we have the lunch box auction too. I'm sure there will be more than enough food to go around. There always is," Gabby told him laughing.

"See you later then. And thank Tom for me," David said striding off towards the cooking area.

Gabby rubbed her hands together in glee. She would wait to inform Tom about his volunteer duty until he and his family were here in the park. That way there wouldn't be any graceful way for him to back out. Now all she had to do was think of something for Wade. Something would present itself; it usually did if she was patient.

Forty-five minutes later Gabby saw Tom coming her way and he looked mad. She didn't see Fran or the kids and assumed that they must be on the other side of the park.

Tom didn't waste any time once he cornered her. "What's with you and Reid? He said he's called every day this week and you haven't returned one of his calls. Common courtesy should have you calling to see what he wanted. What's with you two anyway?"

"We are not an item and if I choose not to talk to him, that's my business," Gabby said shortly.

"You've had a burr under your saddle about him from the beginning. What gives?" Tom pressed.

She sighed. "I just don't like him." But that wasn't altogether true a part of her demanded.

"But he's a terrific guy, dependable and kind, great business sense and really knows horses and cattle."

"He's also big, bossy and pig-headed! Just like you and Wade and Sam. Always trying to tell me what to do," Gabby said sticking her chin out defiantly. If Reid hadn't told Tom about his engagement yet, she wasn't going to be the one to drop that bombshell.

"What are you talking about? We don't boss you around!"

"Not anymore because I won't let you. But when I was younger, one of you was always breathing down my neck."

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"Well you're so reckless and stubborn that someone had to look after you. Like that time Sam and I found you behind a hay stick with Jimmy what's-his-face," Tom said smarting at the memory.

"You were completely out of line. He was only teaching me how to kiss properly. And that's all there was to it," she stated angrily.

"Yeah, right! You were only fifteen, Gabby, and too young to understand what you were inviting. If we hadn't come along when we did, you don't know how things would have progressed," Tom said as the memory rekindled the anger from that past experience.

"But it wouldn't have gone beyond kissing and you had no right to threaten Jimmy like you did. To this day, if he sees me he'll go out of his way to avoid me unless there's a big group of people around." Gabby had never considered Jimmy a boyfriend, but just a friend. And she'd been embarrassed for him that day.

"What about the time we caught you in Silver Canyon?" Tom shuddered at that memory.

"I was learning how to repel down the side wall, and it was only fifty feet down." Now was not the time to tell him about the lessons she'd taken since leaving home. She'd even done some actual work with a rescue unit in Colorado when she was working on a special magazine article. That information would probably curl his hair.

"Why couldn't you have taken cooking lessons like other girls?" Tom asked tiredly.

Gabby just glared at him.

"Look, I just want you to talk to Reid today. Find out what he has to say. It's not like you to deny someone a fair hearing," Tom said quietly. "Who knows, if you spend some time with him, you just might get to like him."

"I suppose I won't have much choice but to talk with him if he shows up today. But don't count on my liking him. He's still big and bossy," Gabby relented. Then she saw David signaling her from the dunking tank. Now was the time to sweeten Tom up a little. So she softened her tone. "But I'll talk to him, okay?" she said linking her arm through his.

"Good. And who knows, you might end up sharing lunch," Tom grinned down at her.

"While you're here big brother, there's something that I want you to see. Come on," she said pulling him towards David. Tom was looking down at her and not where they were going.

David held out a hand to Tom when they reached the tank. "Can't thank you enough for helping out in the emergency, Tom. Kids would be mighty disappointed if we had to close up this game.

"Ugh, glad to help out," Tom said looking from David to Gabby. Then he saw the dunking tank. Oh shit! She'd done it to him again. When was he going to learn to be on his guard during these picnics? And as usual, he couldn't see any way of getting out of this duty. Gabby gave him an innocent smile but her eyes were dancing with merriment.

"I can take your wallet and watch and give them to Fran to hold for you. Wouldn't want them to get wet, Thomas," Gabby laughed. "We officially open in thirty minutes. Shall I run over to the general store and get you a pair of bathing trunks?"

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"I think I can manage something myself. You've done more than your share, Gabrielle." He would get even with her for this. It wouldn't be easy but he'd think of something.

"See you later. I'll be first in line." With this parting shot, Gabby turned on her heel and walked away.

Tom watched her go as a plan formed. He grinned. Before he went to get something to wear for the tank, he'd find out which box lunch was hers. Then he'd make sure that Reid was made aware of that little bit of information. The picture of her having to eat lunch with him eased some of Tom's frustration about the dunking tank.

A short time later Tom had his opportunity to talk with Reid. He caught up to him on his way back to the dreaded dunk tank. Fran was probably still laughing. She'd almost fallen down when he'd told her how he'd gotten roped into it. "Reid!" he called out.

"Have you seen your sister?" Reid asked outright. He planned to have it out with her today and he didn't care who was around. Something had set her off and he was determined to find out what.

"Good day to you too," Tom laughed. He knew the reason for Reid's mood but was pretty sure that he could change it.

"Sorry about that. That sister of yours is the most stubborn, the prickliest little thing I've ever met."

"Tell me about it," Tom sighed. "Somehow I let her get me trapped into doing the dunk tank. But I just found out a little bit of information that might interest you," he continued before Reid started laughing.

Reid bit his lip to keep from smiling. "I'm all ears," he managed to say without a hint of laughter. He'd failed to notice that his friend was wearing shorts and a tank top instead of his usual jeans and shirt.

Tom pulled Reid over to the side of the gazebo. "I hope you plan on being at the lunch box auction, because I know which one is Gabby's," Tom said softly. He waited until two couples had passed by before he continued. "Hers is white with a red ribbon."

Reid smiled for the first time in days. "Thanks! I think I will attend. She owes me an explanation about the other night and why she hasn't returned any of my calls." He could just see her face when he bought her box lunch. He'd get it if it cost him a thousand dollars. It would be worth that and more.

"Good. Now I guess it's time for me to get to work. The auction starts at noon and don't let them start without me. This I have got to see."

Reid watched Tom climb into the tank and sit on the breakaway seat. If it had been anyone else, he'd be tempted to buy a ticket. But he liked Tom and didn't have the heart to drown him. But apparently his sister was of another mind. He turned to see her walking toward the tank carrying a handful of balls. She was wearing knee length denim shorts, a lavender shirt and white canvas shoes. Her hair was pulled up in two ponytails and she looked like a kid as they swayed back and forth as she moved. And there was determination in every step. He grinned. Boy was Tom in for it now.

"Hi big brother," Gabby grinned tossing a ball into the air and catching it. "I said I'd be back."

Tom tried to look menacing but couldn't quite pull it off. "Think you're big enough to throw that ball?" he taunted.

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"Oh, I don't know. As I recall I do pretty good on the softball team," she reminded him and had the satisfaction of seeing his eyes narrow. "Shall I give it a try?" She made a show of warming up before hauling back and letting the ball fly towards the target. It hit but not squarely in the middle. Tom remained seated.

"Maybe you're out of practice. Or maybe that scrawny arm of yours isn't as powerful as you'd like to think," Tom called out. Everyone got three balls for a dollar. It looked like she had six balls, so if he could get her off centered, he'd be in the clear. Of course, she could always get more balls. He had no doubt that he'd get wet but hoped it wouldn't be this soon.

"That was just a warm up," she said as she took aim and fired her second ball. This one missed again. She had to concentrate. Ignore whatever he said and just concentrate on her target.

Just then Tom's two oldest boys, Sam and Kyle, ran up. "Come on, Aunt Gabby. Get him wet!" they cheered.

"Hey, whose side are you guys on?" Tom called out. "You should be helping me here."

"She's gonna' get you good," Sam laughed.

"We want to see you get wet, dad," Kyle added jumping from one leg to the other in his excitement.

"I think I'm warmed up now." She winked at the boys. "Let's see what we can do." Gabby drew back and let the ball fly. This time it was true, hitting the target square in the middle. For a brief second Tom appeared suspended in space and then his arms flayed the air just before he disappeared under the water.

Gabby jerked her right arm to her side, bringing her knee up at the same time. "Yessss!"

"Way to go Aunt Gabby," Sam said giving her a high five.

"Yeah!" Kyle echoed and slapped her hand.

Tom reset the seat and climbed back up wiping the water from his eyes. She still had three balls left and to his dismay they were now drawing quite a crowd. Well, it was for charity. Each year they raised money for something that the town needed. This year they planned to replace the playground equipment at the school.

"Come on, Gabby, you can do it again!" someone yelled from the growing crowd.

She picked up another ball, gave her brother a sweet smile and swung. Once again Tom plunged into the tank. The next ball missed the center of the target again but her last one was right on. "See you later, Tom," Gabby waved as she sauntered away making room for the next person.

Tom shook his fist at her but he was laughing. "I owe you!" he called out before concentrating on the next person who was preparing to throw.

Reid caught up to her just as she neared the gazebo where the band was setting up. "You looked pretty good back there, piglet. Remind me to duck if you ever get the inclination to throw something at me. But for now, we need to talk," he told her.

"I can't think of anything that you have to say that I would be remotely interested in, McAllister," Gabby snapped. She was determined that he would not take up any of her time today. But goodness, he looked wonderful. No man should look that good in tight-fitting jeans and a plain white tee shirt. The shirt seemed to emphasize the muscles

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in his arms and chest. It took all her willpower not to drool. But then all she had to do was replay that phone call in her mind to keep her distance.

"I don't have to talk. You're the one who needs to talk to me."

"Me? What do I have to say to you?"

"I've called you four times and you haven't returned one call. I think I know the reason but I want to hear it from you," he said quietly. He didn't particularly want to have anyone hear their conversation.

"I would think that my not calling you would be a hint that I do not have anything more to say to you."

"What did Marla say to you before I got to the phone?" Reid demanded. It had to be something that bitch Marla said or implied.

"Oh her," Gabby said waving her hand. She was about to give him a piece of her mind when John rushed up.

"Hate to rush you, Gabby, but they're ready to start the pie judging and you're our captain this year," John said putting his arm around her shoulders.

She smiled up into his laughing face. Then she looked up at Reid and shrugged. "Sorry, got to go." She would be eternally grateful for John's timely intervention.

Reid scowled at John. "We'll talk later, Gabby," he said stiffly turning on his heel and walking away.

"What's his problem?" John asked as they made their way to the dessert tables. "Reid looked a little upset about something. You weren't aggravating him by any chance?"

"Me aggravating him? Why do you assume that I'm at fault here? The man is a jerk as far as I'm concerned. Apparently he's use to women falling at his feet, and since I don't fit the pattern, he's frustrated. Okay?" she said glaring at her friend.

John held up his hands in surrender. "Hey, I was just asking. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine with me."

"Fine. Now can we get to work? And John, I'm sorry that I snapped at you. Reid McAllister just makes me so mad sometimes," Gabby said putting her arm through his.

John patted her hand. "As you said, let's get to work." But inside he was smiling. He knew Gabby pretty well and had never seen her act this way over any boy or man. There must be some pretty strong attraction between her and Reid to keep her on edge like this. He'd be sure to tell his parents to keep him apprised of any developments in this area after he returned to New York.

It was just minutes before noon when Fran cornered Gabby on the way to the auction area in the gazebo. It was mostly the single women who prepared box lunches, but some of the married ones did too. Naturally they expected their husbands to buy it. "Gabby, I need to talk to you for a minute."

"Sure. Did you pack a lunch this year, Fran," she asked. Fran was thirty-seven but looked ten years younger. She was blond with the most vivid green eyes, average height and slender. To look at her you'd never guess that she was the mother of four children. The twins, Franklin and Brie, had inherited their green eyes from their mother.

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"No, not this year. I donated a quilt for the sale. We're eating hamburgers today and I don't have to cook. But that's not what I wanted to see you about. I overheard someone say that Tom told Reid which box lunch is yours," Fran told Gabby.

"That rat!" Gabby grumbled.

"My thoughts exactly. So I took it upon myself to change your ribbon with Thelma Retting. She was a good sport and is looking forward to talking to *your* young man, as she called him," Fran laughed.

Gabby almost choked as she began to laugh. "You didn't? Serves him right though. Do you know what Thelma fixed this year?"

"I didn't ask. But I'm sure that Reid will be in for the culinary experience of his life." Thelma, who was now seventy years old, had been a widow for two years now and had decided to experiment with recipes. Her husband had been strictly a meat and potatoes man so her creativity had been retrained. When the town had covered dish dinners, you never knew what to expect from Thelma. Everyone made sure that her dish was emptied even if not much of it got eaten. Only the truly adventurous actually put it into their mouths.

Before Gabby could reply, Griff began calling for everyone's attention. "Come on gentlemen, step right up here and buy your lunch and the company of one of Bentrige's finest ladies." To his right stood a long table with about twenty boxes. All were white with a colored bow and ribbon. Some of the bows were solid colors and some had stripes or patterns. This way each box was distinctive.

Fran leaned forward to whisper into Gabby's ear. "Your box has the green plaid bow."

Gabby smiled her acknowledgement. Then she spotted Reid standing in the front row across from her. He was looking directly at her and smiling. She smiled, then turned her attention back to Griff. He was a tall handsome man at sixty-four with thick steel gray hair and twinkling blue eyes. And he smiled and laughed a lot. Now he was holding up a box with a yellow bow. She noted that the box with the solid red bow was number seven.

It took all her will power not to look in Reid's direction. But when Griff reached for that box, she glanced his way. He was looking at her again and smiled when he caught her glance. She quickly looked back at Griff.

Reid had been a little unsure after seeing the other boxes with red bows. He hadn't been told if it was solid red or patterned, but when Gabby looked at him just as Griff reached for that box, he knew it had to be hers.

"What am I bid for this box of goodies? It's heavy so there must be a lot of food in here for some hungry man?" Griff said making a show of hefting the box before sitting it back on the table.

Someone called out, "ten dollars."

"One hundred dollars," Reid said raising his hand.

Griff did a double take. Most of the lunches went for about twenty-five dollars. "Do I hear more?" When no one spoke, he clapped his hands. "Sold to the young man with the big appetite."

A smiling Reid strode forward handing Griff the money. Griff handed the box over to him. "Thelma Redding, come on forward and claim your lunch partner," Griff called.

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Reid froze in place as a plump woman who must be in her late sixties stepped forward. "Come with me, young man. We'll get a table over there in the shade," she said putting her arm through his. "I'm glad that I packed plenty of sandwiches. You look like you need a goodly amount to keep you going. My late husband, Henry, could eat..." she was saying as they passed Gabby.

Gabby had her hand over her mouth to keep from laughing but Reid saw it in her eyes. "Enjoy your lunch," she managed without breaking up.

Thelma led him to a picnic table. Opening her voluminous handbag she pulled out a tablecloth spreading it over the wooden table. To his amazement she also had salt and pepper, a jar of horseradish and two plastic plates. Lord, what was he in for here? "Now you sit down," she instructed him. "And I'll fix our plates. You bought the Putnam ranch didn't you?"

"Yes, ma'am," Reid began. "I..."

"They were such nice people. Albert and my Henry worked on the park committee for years." Thelma talked as she filled Reid's plate.

He looked at it in dismay. *What in the hell was that?* he thought in mild panic. The sandwich she'd put on the place was made from homemade bread, sliced thick with something in the middle that looked suspiciously blue. He recognized the deviled eggs but they had a reddish color.

"I hope you like cream cheese. These are my cream cheese and tuna supreme sandwiches. I call them supreme because of the special blueberry catsup. There's barbecue deviled eggs and spice cake for dessert," Thelma said beaming.

It was obvious that she was proud of her offering so Reid didn't have the heart to refuse. To his momentary relief, Gabby's youngest brother, Nathan, appeared at his side.

"I thought you might need this," he said placing two large glasses of iced tea on the table. "Enjoy your lunch," he said slapping Reid on the back and giving him a wink.

"Thanks, I think," Reid muttered.

"What a thoughtful young man," Thelma commented placing a heaping plate in front of Reid. "But then all the Stoner boys are nice polite young men. Eat your lunch, then you can have some cake."

Reid's mouth suddenly felt dry. He smiled across the table at Thelma, picked up the huge sandwich and took a bite. It was a strange combination of tastes, not one he would want to repeat, but at least now he knew that it wouldn't kill him. He took another bite followed by a sip of tea. The deviled egg actually wasn't all that bad; a bit spicy but eatable.

What he did have difficulty swallowing was watching Gabby having lunch with John. They were sitting on a blanket about thirty feet away. At one point Gabby held up a piece of fried chicken and looking directly at him, took a bite. Naturally he couldn't hear what they were saying, but he couldn't miss their laughter and friendly banter.

All during the lunch Thelma nibbled on her small portion and talked. By the end of the meal he undoubtedly knew as much about her physical condition as her doctor. She had more aches and pains than anyone he'd ever met. He guessed she was lonely since her children had moved away; her son lived in Denver and her daughter somewhere in Vermont.

When they were done eating, Reid took the plates to the trash bin. He was shaking his head. He'd never had plain cream cheese on spice cake before. Thelma must

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have a thing about cream cheese. For his part, he'd had enough to last him for quite a while.

By the time he returned to the table, she had everything back in her handbag. Reid gallantly offered her his arm. "May I escort you back to the gazebo, Mrs. Redding?"

"If you don't mind, I think I'd like to go home. My house is just around the corner."

So Reid walked her home and saw her safely inside. "Thank you, Reid," Thelma said patting his arm. "Gabby is going to be a lucky young woman. I know you had planned to have lunch with her. But we women have to stick together, don't we?" Her eyes were dancing with glee.

Reid couldn't contain his laughter. He bent to kiss her cheek. "Thank you for a pleasant afternoon, Thelma." Then he beat a quite retreat back to the park. It took him about ten minutes to locate Gabby. She was standing off to one side watching as they began cleaning up the barbecue. He went quickly to her side. "We have to talk," he said taking her hand pulling her towards the parking area by the sidewalk.

"Let go of me! Reid, I can't keep up with you if you're going to run a footrace," she complained loudly.

Almost without breaking stride, Reid turned scooping her up over his shoulder. He'd carried bags of feed that weighed more than she did.

"Reid McAllister, you put me down this instant." She pounded on his back. "Put me down. You can't carry me off this way!" She kept pounding her fists against his back, but for all the affect it had, she might have been hitting concrete.

"We're going where we can talk undisturbed," was all he said.

"You have no right to carry me off like this you big hulking brute," Gabby shrieked in dismay.

Just before they reached the edge of the park, Nathan and Devra approached from the opposite direction. "Nathan! Help me!" she wailed from her embarrassing position over Reid's shoulder.

"Hey, I'd be the last one to get involved in a lovers quarrel! Go easy on her Reid, she's just a little spoiled." Devra gave him a punch to the ribs, but she was grinning.

Gabby rested her elbow in the middle of Reid's back. "Thanks a lot, you two. You're no help at all."

Reid walked around the cars until they were a short distance from the park. Then he plopped her down on the trunk of a beige car. "Now, talk piglet! I want to know why I'm in the doghouse."

She leaned forward to give him a piece of her mind but drew back when she realized that he was leaning forward with his arms resting on the trunk of the car. This put his face much too close to hers. "I told you not to call me that," Gabby gritted out between clenched teeth clasping her arms over her chest. "And you know very well why I'm upset."

"If I knew, I wouldn't be asking," he growled in exasperation.

"You're engaged to that woman!" she snapped.

"I am not!"

"That's not what she said. And I don't mind telling you that your fiancé is not a very friendly person. Rude and arrogant are two words that quickly come to mind."



"Gabby, she is not my fiancé. True, we were engaged over five years ago, but she married someone else. End of story." He hoped that Marla didn't show her face around Bentrige because he just might have to wring her neck. He was having enough of a difficult time with this little spitfire without any outside influence.

"Why'd she marry someone else? What's her name?"

"Marla. And he had more money than I did," Reid told her more quietly now.

"Oh," she whispered. She was tempted to ask him if he had been devastated but thought better of it. Besides it wasn't any of her business. "What did she want the other night?" Gabby had to know and wasn't quite sure why it was so important. It was none of her business but she blurted out the question anyway.

"She said that she wants to talk to me and that she is coming to Bentrige. I don't think she meant it though. Marla isn't comfortable unless there's a five star restaurant close by or expensive stores. She'd not what you'd call a country girl by any stretch of the imagination."

"Will you see her if she shows up?"

Reid cupped Gabby's face in his large hands. "If she does come here I won't have any option but to see her, if only to turn her around and point her back of Los Angeles. It's you that I want to see, Gabby. Only you," he said on a whisper before his mouth lowered to hers.

"Reid, not here in..." was as far as Gabby got before he swallowed her words. Instantly she was lost to the taste and feel of him. He pulled her forward to deepen the kiss and she wrapped her arms around his neck. He still wasn't close enough so she wrapped her legs around his waist. His lips lifted to brush lightly across her eyes before returning to claim her mouth.

Reid was on fire. No woman had ever had this effect on him. No one but Gabby. Wherever her body touched his, he felt heat, smelled the fresh scent of her shampoo and the special essence that was hers alone. His large hands cupped her pert little bottom drawing her closer to his heat.

It was the sound of footsteps and voices that finally penetrated Reid's mindless onslaught of Gabby's lips. He drew back to look down at her. She opened her eyes and he saw his own growing passion reflected there. He could tell that she wasn't focusing fully yet, but could tell the instant she did. She gasped.

"Well, I have never!" a curt voice rang out shattering the fog of intimacy surrounding Reid and Gabby.

"Hello, Mrs. Myers, Mrs. Osborne," Gabby said meekly. The two elderly ladies continued on their way with a snort of disgust. Gabby groaned burying her face against Reid's neck. "Those are the two biggest gossips in Bentrige. This will be all over the park and the town before nightfall."

He through back his head and laughed. "Guess this makes you my girl."

"What this makes me is very angry! Now let me go!"

Reid stretched his arms out to the side. "You're the one wrapped around me like a feather boa, piglet. But I'm not complaining. It feels pretty good."

Gabby blushed and that was something that she didn't often do. Slowly she dropped her legs from around his waist and released her death grip around his neck. Once standing back on the ground she didn't know what to do. "I have to go."

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“Dance with me tonight?” Reid asked. The forties show was tonight and there would also be plenty of dancing. And he wanted to hold her in his arms again...soon.

“Tonight!” Gabby gasped. “I forgot about the show. Reid, I really do have to meet John and the others. And yes, I’ll dance with you,” she gushed standing on tiptoe to place a kiss on his cheek. She took a couple of steps back, grinning all the way, then turned and ran back into the park.

Reid stood there with a stupid grin on his face for several minutes before he decided to go down to the café for a cup of coffee. Those sandwiches weren’t sitting too good. Maybe Bob had something besides coffee that would settle his stomach.

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CHAPTER 8

Gabby slowly drove to Nathan's house in town. What she really wanted to do was to go home to the ranch and hide, but there was the show in a few hours, so she had no choice in the matter.

How could she have lost control like that and right on the street in plain view of anyone who happened to walk by. She hadn't exaggerated when she'd told Reid that Mrs. Myers and Mrs. Osborne were the biggest gossips in town. By this time, everyone in Bentrige should have heard some version of her kissing Reid McAllister. No, not just kissing him. She'd been clinging to him like ivy to stone. And she couldn't put any of the blame on him. Well, not all of it anyway.

Her face heated just thinking about him and the memory of that kiss. For some unaccountable reason, whenever those big hands of his touched her, all coherent reason seemed to close down. And the smoldering promise in his vivid green eyes had held her mesmerized so that when his mouth claimed hers, she had been mindless to resist.

Well, she would just have to try and see to it that there was no more touching or kissing. Yeah right! She'd already promised him a dance tonight. But she would make sure it wasn't a slow one or she might just embarrass herself further. If that was possible!

Gabby had hoped to have the house to herself for a short time to help sort out her feelings and what had happened this afternoon. But this was not to be. Her parents were close behind her, followed closely by Nathan and Devra and Tom and Sam.

She hugged her dad who headed for the kitchen and a quiet cup of coffee. She had no doubt that he'd be on the look out for some of Devra's peanut butter cookies also.

After T.J. left, Sam walked slowly around Gabby. He looked her over from head to toe. "I don't see any bruises. Guess he just carried her off but didn't beat her," he

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teased with a big grin. Nathan had regaled them with the story about Reid carrying her over his shoulder. Sam couldn't believe any man was that brave.

Tom pretended to study her closely. "No, but her lips to look a bit swollen," he laughed as he stepped closer. "Reid's probably the one with the bruises."

"Very funny!" Gabby snapped. She would never hear the end of this. She glared at Nathan guessing rightly that he'd been the one to spread that particular tale.

Amanda rolled her eyes knowing from years of experience what was coming, but inside she was smiling. Her children might tease each other at the drop of a hat, but she knew it was done out of love and a deep caring. If one of them were in trouble the others would be there in a heartbeat to help. And if someone picked on one, the others formed a line of defense behind him or her.

"The way I heard it, she was ravishing him on the trunk of a car," Sam clucked in mock dismay.

"I heard she was using him as a clothes rack...or trying to get into his clothes," Nathan laughed but took a quick step back out of arms reach.

"We were not on the car," Gabby said stiffly. "And I suppose everyone has heard about the kiss by now?"

"Kiss!" her three brothers echoed.

"You were compromising him out in plain view of the entire world," Wade snorted.

"Me compromising him?" Gabby shouted glaring at her brother. She stood with her hands on her hips ready to do battle. How dare he blame her for what had happened? Reid was the one who had started it all. "Your friend literally carried me off and you say it's my fault! I wouldn't have him on a bet. I'm a little more choosy about my lovers," she said trying to sound more experienced than she truly was.

"What lovers? So help me Gabby, if some man has..." Tom began yelling.

"My love life is none of your business," she snapped encompassing all three men standing around her. "And..."

"That is enough from all of you," Amanda said throwing her hands up in the air. "Nathan go help your wife fix coffee. And you two go find something to do while I talk to your sister."

Wade and Tom turned to leave glaring at Gabby. Then Wade turned back. "You need to talk to your daughter or we will," was his parting shot. He'd beat the crap out of any man who lured his sister into bed with promises or romantic drivel. He'd conveniently forgotten that he and Kate had anticipated their wedding vows by several months. But that was different.

Tom was thinking something along the same lines. But he did wonder why the thought of her with Reid didn't upset him like it should. He liked Reid and trusted him. But with his sister? He wasn't so sure about that.

"Well, of all the nerve. If they think..." Gabby sputtered too angry for words.

"Gabrielle Stoner, why do you intentionally aggravate and mislead your brothers like that?" Amanda asked irritated.

"I don't. They keep trying to interfere into my private life. And they have no right to do that!"

"They love you and want you to be happy. But you seem to take delight in letting them believe that you've had lovers."

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"How do *you* know that I don't?" Gabby snapped, then felt ashamed by her tone. She never talked to her mother like this. Reid had a lot to answer for. It wasn't her mother's fault that the men in the family thought that they were entitled to dictate her life.

"Gabby, you're a beautiful intelligent young woman. And I have no doubt that you've dated a large number of men over the past years. But you're also very choosy about who you'll go out with. Besides, you're my daughter and I just know that you haven't recognized that special man yet." Amanda had her own opinion on who that man was, but that was something Gabby had to realize herself.

"Mom, how do you put up with having so many big bossy men telling you what to do all the time?" she asked giving her mother a hug.

Amanda put her arm around Gabby's waist and smiled. "By doing what I want but letting them believe it was their idea. You should realize that you can get much more by smiling than by frowning. How do you think I got that wonderful enclosed swimming pool? A few hints dropped here and there; a word about it's not being practical or feasible and pretty soon your father and brothers were drawing up the plans, and telling me how wrong I was."

"Well it might work for you, but they treat me like I was twelve."

"Once you're safely married they'll relax their overly protective stance. Then you'll be under the protection of a husband."

"But I don't want a husband. And I don't need protection of any kind."

"Who knows what's in the future, Gabby. Just take it one day at a time and we'll see what happens. Now, you need to get ready for the show tonight," Amanda said ushering Gabby towards the stairs.

Later that night the show had been in progress for about fifteen minutes. John was doing a medley of Bing Crosby tunes and everyone was tapping their feet and some even singing along. Gabby, Devra and Sierra stood off to the side watching. Like John and everyone else in the show tonight, they were dressed in 1940's style. They had chosen the pompadour style with their hair lifted into a roll at the front, sides and back. Their dresses were simple shirtwaist dresses in floral prints with padded shoulders. Chunky high heels and earrings completed their outfits.

The music was all prerecorded tonight so everyone was free to dance if they wanted to, even during the singing if the tune encouraged you to do more than just tap your feet. Gabby was swaying to the music as she waited for her turn to go on.

Just as the show began she'd spotted Reid sitting next to her mother. Reid had been looking at her and she'd felt herself blush before quickly looking away. The man was just too handsome for her sanity. He was wearing jeans and a light green pullover shirt that made his shoulders look powerful and wide. She'd seen his smile just before looking away. And she'd promised to dance with him tonight. Boy, was she in big trouble!

The next to go on stage was a group of the teenagers doing a wild boogie-woogie. Everyone was clapping and called for an encore, so they did the dance again. Then it was time for Gabby, Devra and Sierra to go on. They were doing a series of songs by the Andrew Sisters and they began with 'Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree'. Gabby was in the middle with Devra and Sierra on either side.

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Reid was impressed. All three had beautiful voices and, in his opinion, they were really talented. Once they started singing, he couldn't take his eyes off Gabby. It was plain that she was truly enjoying herself as she sang. They all looked beautiful in the yellow dresses with their hair up but Gabby was the one who fascinated Reid. She was so expressive as she sang; put so much emotion into her voice that he couldn't help but speculate on the wealth of untapped passion she held in check. He felt a tightening in his gut. He was going to be the one to mine that mother lode of passion. The lady didn't know it yet, but Reid had staked his claim and heaven help anyone who stood in his way.

Their next song, 'The Beer Barrel Polka', had some people jumping up to dance and that included Tom. He and Fran were swirling around, stomping and laughing. Reid grinned, then turned to Amanda. "I didn't know Tom was such a good dancer."

"He wasn't until Fran came along. Oh, he knew how to dance, but she took him in hand and now he really enjoys it," Amanda said smiling at the dancers. "It's amazing what a man will do for the woman he loves."

Reid glanced over at her but she was looking at the girls singing. Did she know about the Irish dancing lessons that Florence had given him? Was he a man in love? He had thought he'd been in love with Marla at one time, but now he wondered. Come to think about it, he'd been more angry than hurt by her deception. His pride had suffered more than his heart and he'd had no trouble removing her from his life. But as he thought about Gabby, his gut tightened. He couldn't imagine not being able to see her, even if it was to see her temper flare. She was so easy to rile; he enjoyed the way her eyes flashed when he teased her; the way she stood up to him even though he was a great deal taller than she was.

He looked back to the girls who were singing 'I'll Be With You in Apple Blossom Time'. Marla had squashed his ability to trust a woman. Over the last five years he had not allowed himself any serious involvement with a woman. But then, he hadn't met any that could hold his interest for long. They all seemed to be cut from the same mold... beautiful, smart, ambitious and independent. Gabby was independent. Boy was that an understatement! But she was different. Reid sensed gentleness, warmth and a vulnerability that drew him, made him long to protect her from the world at large. He thought of the house he was building. In his mind's eye he could see Gabby working in the kitchen, moving through the house, making it into a home. And he smiled.

"A penny for your thoughts," Amanda whispered. She'd been watching Reid and noted that he hadn't taken his eyes off Gabby. It was her turn to smile.

Reid looked over at her as if seeing her for the first time. He licked his lips. "I was just picturing Gabby in an apron."

Amanda put her hand on his arm. "Oh no dear, not an apron, not the kitchen. I'm afraid that she'd not too...too well acquainted with cooking."

Reid grinned. "Guess we'll have to hire a cook then." Then blushed at what he'd just implied.

"That would probably be the wisest course of action," Amanda told him before turning back to the singing. *I wonder if he realizes how badly he's fallen for my daughter?* Amanda thought to herself. She couldn't wait to talk to T. J. later tonight after they returned home. They both liked Reid and would be pleased to see him become a member of their family. Of course, that all depended on Gabby. This should be an interesting summer.

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The music for ‘Boogie Woogie Bugle Boy’ had just begun as Brie and Franklin danced out in front of singing trio. The girls began their song as the two youngsters did the boogie-woogie. For such young children, they were pretty good. Everyone in the audience was smiling. Reid glanced over at Amanda and saw her eyes mist. She placed her fingers to her lips but he could tell she was grinning. T.J. was laughing and it was plain that he was proud as punch of his grandchildren.

When the song ended, the audience was on their feet calling for more. So they did the number once again. After that John came back out to announce that the official dancing hour had begun.

Reid stood to go find Gabby. When he finally located her, she was with John in front of the gazebo. They were dancing to a swing number. And could those two dance! John swung her over his head and then down between his legs. Then they were twirling and strutting to the beat. Reid moved closer to the dance area. When this dance ended he intended to claim the lady for the night, or a goodly portion of it anyway.

Gabby was breathless when the dance ended. She was laughing at a comment John had made when she heard Reid’s unmistakable drawl. “I believe this dance is mine.”

“I did promise you a dance, didn’t I,” Gabby said thoughtfully. As if she didn’t remember.

“Have fun kid,” John said relinquishing her to Reid. He walked away whistling.

“I like him,” Reid said nodding at John as the younger man disappeared into the crowd.

“He’s a great guy. I think he likes you too or he wouldn’t have walked away like that,” Gabby admitted. Sometimes John could be just as protective towards her as her brothers.

Reid took her hand lifting it to his lips for a whisper light kiss. “Shall we dance?” he asked pulling her into his arms. She held herself rigid at first but then he felt her relax as they began to move to the music. It was a ballad, soft and slow. He pulled her close, his arms going around her to clasp behind her waist. He rested his chin on the top of her head savoring the feel of her much softer body pressed close to his, and the sweet clean smell of her hair.

Gabby gave herself up to the feel of the music. She tried not to pay any attention to the feel of Reid’s hard body pressed so close to her, but it was a lost cause. With each slow step her thigh brushed against the hardness of his. The feel of his arms around her created a warm haven that she hadn’t known could exist anywhere on this world. He hummed softly to the music as they danced, and to her surprise, he was pretty good. She smiled against the front of his shirt. She’d make it her job to see how well he could sing. Then she’d see about getting him into one of the shows. Maybe not this summer, but next would be fine. She almost stumbled when she realized that she was including him in her life, accepting him into her inner circle so to speak. When had this come about? This was moving much too fast for her peace of mind. She’d be leaving the end of August for Madagascar and would be gone for at least three weeks if not longer. This would give her some space to think about Reid and what, if any position he would have in her life.

When that dance ended, Reid claimed her for the next and the next. After four dances it was time for a break. Gabby didn’t hesitate as Reid led her off to the side where they could get a cold soft drink.

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She took a long drink before pressing the cold bottle to her cheek. Reid grinned down at her. Her eyes were shining and she was obviously having a good time. To his surprise, he found that he too was really having fun. And fun was something that had been missing from his life for a long time now. Work had been the beginning and end all of his existence since before and after his father had died. And especially since the end of his engagement to Marla. But now, he was slowly learning that there was more to life than work. And it was definitely better to share that fun with someone special.

“Have you always had this much energy?” Reid asked as he watched Gabby take another drink. He had an incredible urge to lean down to taste the soft drink on her lips. But, of course, he didn’t act on it.

“According to mom and dad I have. Dad says that when I was just a little over a year old I learned to crawl out of my crib onto the dresser. I couldn’t get the bedroom door open, but I sure had fun getting into drawers and the toy chest. He said that they moved the dresser and it slowed me down for a while.”

“Why do I have a feeling that you learned to crawl over the side of the crib and get to the floor?” Reid chuckled.

“It took me a couple of months from what they tell me. I’ve always been excited about learning new things, doing new things. How about you? Any interesting childhood stories?” Gabby asked laughing up at him. She immediately regretted her question as she remembered what he’d told her about his father. But Reid didn’t seem upset.

“My mother tells a story about me when I was around two years old. She was having some friends in for brunch and had everything laid out on a table in the dining room. Apparently I’d been playing on the floor by the door when she stepped into the kitchen to check on something. She’d only been gone less than a minute, but in that time, I pulled the tablecloth and dishes down onto the floor. When she and the cook ran back into the room, I was sitting amid the chaos munching on a stuffed sausage roll.” Reid shook his head. “She laughs every time she tells that story.”

Gabby burst into laughter. “What did she do about her guests?” She had never met his mother and wondered about her. She could just picture Reid as a baby with thick black hair and big green eyes. He would have been adorable.

“She entertained them with the tale while the cook quickly repaired the damage and replaced the food. Most of her guests thought it was hilarious, but some of the more snobbish were appalled. Didn’t bother mother, at least from the way she tells it.” He could picture Gabby with a baby, laughing at his antics, cuddling him when he was tired or not feeling well, and being as protective as a mother tiger with a cub. Reid hadn’t given much thought to a child until now. He found that he was greatly attracted to the idea, but he could picture only Gabby as the mother of his child.

“Your mother must be very understanding. I’d like to meet her someday,” Gabby said and then wondered where that comment had come from.

“I think she’d like to meet you too. As a matter of fact, I think she’d like your whole family. You’re very lucky, Gabby. They’re great people.”

“Yes, they are. I know that I complain about my brothers, but they have always been there for each other and me. And I do love them dearly. And if you ever tell them I said that, I’ll deny it,” she told him placing her hand in the middle of his chest.

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Reid stared down into her eyes unable to move. Her small hand burned through the material of his shirt, branding him as no other woman ever had. He watched her eyes widen as he drew her hand up to his lips. "I could get used to this," he said softly brushing her knuckles with his lips. "You're addictive, do you know that?"

Gabby swallowed or tried to, but it was difficult to make the muscles in her throat work properly. If just a kiss on her hand could turn her into a melting pool of desire, what would it be like to lie in his arms, to feel his weight pressing against her body. "It must be the heat," she finally managed to croak out.

"Oh it's the heat all right. But it has nothing to do with the weather. You might not want to accept it yet, piglet, but we have something special between us," he said for her ears alone. "Someday soon we'll discover just how special," he vowed huskily.

"I think that the heat has made you delirious, McAllister," Gabby said thickly. "We have nothing in common but animosity." *If only that were true*, she thought in dismay. For the first time in her life she had the desire to discover what being a woman was all about. And she didn't want anything between her and Reid, not even clothes.

Just then someone came up to claim Gabby for a dance but Reid had no intention of letting her out of his sight. "Sorry, this dance is mine," he said smoothly as he took her drink and set it down beside his before leading her back into the crowd of people.

"I believe you've had your share of dances tonight, McAllister," Gabby said as he drew her up against his long hard body.

"Darlin, there could never be enough dances where you're concerned," he said gathering her hands onto his chest as he enclosed her in the circle of his arms. He smiled into her hair as he felt her snuggle closer.

For once in her life, Gabby was at a loss for words. But for some unknown reason, she didn't care. With a contented sigh she moved with Reid to the music as if he'd been created just for her. She'd think about the feelings he aroused in her tomorrow.

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CHAPTER 9

Later that night Gabby stood at her bedroom window looking out into the darkness, the light from the full moon highlighting the mountains in the distance. The only thing that had gone as she'd planned tonight was the show. Her resolve to keep a safe distance from Reid had been laughable. One touch, one dance and she was ready to go wherever he led. So much for her self proclaimed independent nature. And to make matters even worse, she'd let him drive her home. She sighed.

He'd asked her to come over to look at the house tomorrow afternoon. She hadn't seen it since last week but knew that the construction was moving along nicely. And she did want to see it. In her mind she could picture some of the rooms, or at least the way she would decorate them. She had no idea what Reid had in mind although she was pretty sure she could rule out contemporary or ultra modern. He didn't look like a man who would be comfortable with chrome or shiny black.

Her hand lifted to gently trace her lips where they still tingled. *Damn the man! He has no right to have this effect on me!* she thought sitting down on the window seat. As usual, when his mouth silenced her planned good night, all resolve wafted away on the night breeze. She found herself clinging to him as she would to a life preserver. When he'd pulled her onto his lap as they sat in his car, she'd curled up like a contented cat. "Oh, piglet," he'd breathed into her mouth as his large hand cupped the back of her head bringing her mouth to his. His hands roamed over her arms and down her legs drawing her closer.

She'd thought about pulling away, she really had. But her body had a mind of its own as her hands fanned through his hair. Even when his hands began unbuttoning her shirt she hadn't protested. And when his lips trailed down her throat, the sensations he

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aroused in her were so new and exciting that she couldn't have protested if her life had depended on it.

As she relived the feel of his mouth as he caressed the soft swell of her breasts, her stomach muscles clenched. Oh, that wonderful feeling he'd created! Gabby hastily stood and began pacing her room. She could be honest enough with herself to admit that if they hadn't been in the car, but had been somewhere private, things would have progressed much further than they had. She felt the heat rise in her face as she remembered just how far Reid had gone.

With practiced ease he'd slid open the front clasp on her bra. His gasp of pleasure as he'd looked down at her bare breasts warmed her as nothing in her past experience. "Oh piglet, you are so beautiful, so very perfect," Reid had groaned before lowering his mouth to one pink tipped orb and sucking hungrily. Then he moved to its twin before burying his face between her breasts as he cupped them lovingly in his large hands.

It had been the headlights from Sam's car that had brought them both back to reality and where they were. Gabby had quickly gotten back into her seat and readjusted her clothes before Sam pulled up alongside of Reid's car. Sam had simply waved as he passed them and continued on into the house. She'd been at a loss not knowing what to say or where to look when they were alone once more.

Reid had cupped the back of her head to make her look at him. "You can't pretend indifference to me, piglet. You want me as much as I want you."

"It's just lust," she'd told him breathlessly. "I don't want to become involved with you Reid, but..."

"I hate to tell you this, but you're already involved. And it's not just lust. You're not experienced enough to know the difference, but believe me, I am. And there's no turning back for either of us."

"How do you know how much experience I have or do not have?" she'd asked rather put out that he was aware of her lack of lovers.

"By the special glow in your eyes that is surprise and wonderment. And I think I know you pretty well now and your background," he said grinning. "And if you try to tell me different, I'll pull you into my lap again and we'll see how experienced you are."

"You wouldn't dare now that Sam knows we're out here!"

"So we'll go somewhere more private, like my place." He'd reached forward to start the car.

"No!"

"You're so easy to tease, piglet," he'd said laughing.

"I asked you not to call me that!"

"You didn't complain a little while ago. But I'll let it drop for now. I want you to come over to see the house in the afternoon. There are some things I want to get your opinion on."

"Okay, I'll come. But no more kissing," she'd been stupid enough to tell him.

He'd leaned down to cover her mouth with his. "I'll see you about one, but I can't promise not to kiss you if the opportunity arises."

That's when she'd escaped into the house as if a pack of wolves were on her heels. She'd gone straight to her room, had a shower and now paced the floor as sleep eluded her. Maybe she could get a little more work done on her latest novel. She walked into the next room that had been a sitting room but had been turned into an office for her.

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Gabby sat at the computer hoping that an hour or two of deep concentration would finally let her get to sleep.

The next morning Reid was up at sunrise to ride out to check on some stray cattle. He hadn't gotten much sleep the night before and welcomed the morning and the activity. He'd taken two cold showers last night and still couldn't get to sleep. His body was hard and ready for Gabby. Even now his body responded just at the thought of her with those tender curves and lush breasts. She wasn't very big but she was soft and sweet and tasted like honey.

Now as he rode back into the corral, Cody hailed him from the stable. "You got a message to call Los Angeles. Stan called about an hour ago. Said he had some good news for you."

"Thanks, Cody. I'll call him after I take care of Dorado." Reid unsaddled the horse and led him into his stall where he gave him a good rubdown.

When Reid returned to the bunkhouse, he put through the call to Stan. "How are things in the big city?" Reid asked when Stan came on the line.

"Why don't you come visit and see for yourself?" Stan returned.

"Not unless I'm forced into it," Reid laughed. "Life is too interesting here to give any thought to city life back there." That was putting it mildly. He had no intention of being very far from the lovely young Gabby.

"How's your love life? You and the young lady making progress toward friendship?" Stan asked laughing.

"She's driving me crazy. Gabby is like no other woman I've ever met." No, he was used to women fawning all over him in their desire to court his attentions. But not Gabby.

"Still not impressed with the rich handsome Reid McAllister I take it?"

"Let's just say I'm hopeful and working on it," Reid admitted. "Now, what is this information that you have for me. I know you didn't just want to hear my voice."

"Okay boss. I traced the research group that is sponsoring the trek into the jungle in Madagascar. Boy did you luck out on this deal. It seems that an old school buddy of yours, Kevin Jennings, is financial director of research and development for Nolan Pharmaceuticals. That's the group funding the expedition. And they are in the market for some added investors. He's the one who has the final say in who is invited to go on this little trip," Stan told Reid.

"Good for Kevin. I haven't talked to him in...must be seven or eight years," Reid said thoughtfully.

"Well, he definitely remembers you. Seems that you saved him from some predatory female back in college or something. Anyway, he's happy to be able to help you now, although he's not quite sure what you actually want. What are you up to anyway?"

Reid frowned remembering that incident years ago. Kevin's family had money and some little greedy young woman decided that she aspired to be Mrs. Jennings. Kevin had never even dated her, but she'd claimed to be pregnant with his child and had been very specific about the date and time of its conception. That's when Reid had come forward with concrete proof that he and Kevin and two others had been in Mexico fishing at that particular time. So Kevin's reputation and freedom had remained intact.

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Reid tried to keep the smugness out of his voice when he answered Stan. "I'm getting married of course."

"You're what?" Stan yelled into the phone.

"You heard me."

Stan banged the phone on his desk. "Something must be wrong with our connection. I thought that you said something about marriage."

Reid held the phone away from his ear until the pounding stopped. "Why the surprise? People do get married. You did."

"Yes, but we thought you were totally off that institution. This Gabby must be some woman?" Oh, he and Anna had to get to Wyoming. They had to meet the woman who could make Reid McAllister act so out of character.

"She's not some woman, Stan. She's one remarkable woman. And when she goes to Madagascar, I intend to be by her side, as her husband."

"Is the lady aware of this?" Stan asked with a laugh.

"No, and she won't be until she gets to New York. Let me have Kevin's number so I can talk to him and let him know what I need," Reid said reaching for pen and paper.

Stan gave him the number. "Hey, you can't leave me hanging like this. What devious plan do you have to persuade Gabby to marry you? I'm assuming that a simple proposal wouldn't work here."

"I'm hoping that Kevin will have his team back me up and tell Gabby that no unmarried women are allowed on this journey. I'll make him a financial deal that he won't be able to refuse. Damned if I'll let her go off by herself into the jungle with a group of men for weeks." And Reid didn't want to be apart from her for the length of the expedition. He'd never felt this way about any other woman before. He had never felt so happy or alive since he'd come to Bentrige and met Gabby and her family. He realized that these were experienced people who would be leading the trek into the jungle, but accidents did happen. The thought of anything happening to Gabby, and his not being with her, made him go cold. He'd pay whatever price it took to assure his accompanying her and as her husband.

"Something tells me that the lady in question isn't going to be very happy about the change in plans if Jennings approves of your scheme. Had you thought about that?" Stan cautioned.

"You don't have to warn me about her reaction. Remember that I'm well acquainted with the lady. She's going to be mad as hell, but I'll just have to kiss her to make it better," Reid boasted. He hoped he was right. "Besides I have the Bentrige magic to help me."

"Excuse me? Are you into voodoo now or something?" Stan asked really confused.

Reid laughed. "No, nothing like that. There's a legend about Bentrige that began when the town was founded over one hundred years ago. Couples who meet and fall in love here will marry and always be happy together. From what I've heard and seen so far, there are few divorces here and those have been couples who met somewhere else."

"So a divorce attorney would starve in Bentrige?" Stan commented with a laugh. "You really believe that this so-called magic will help you with your lady love?"

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"Hey, with the McAllister charm and the Bentrige magic, how can I lose?" Reid stated with a touch more confidence than he really felt.

"Yeah, right! Well, I wish you luck, boss. Keep me apprised of your travel plans," Stan chuckled.

"I'll call you after I talk to Kevin and let you know if and when I'll be out of the country. So if there are any pressing issues that need my attention, get to me in the next couple of weeks. And give my love to Anna and the kids," Reid said ending the conversation.

"Will do. Talk to you later," Stan said before putting his phone down.

Reid stared at the phone for several minutes before picking it up and dialing the number Stan had given him. Kevin was on another call but Reid said he'd wait, so he was put on hold. It was only a minute later when Kevin came on the line.

After reminiscing for a couple of minutes, Reid told Kevin the reason for his call and his interest in the expedition to Madagascar. Kevin was skeptical at first, but Reid finally convinced him of his sincerity about the financial backing, and his plans to wed the young photographer scheduled to accompany the scientists on the trek.

By the time Reid hung up the phone he was smiling and humming to himself. Kevin was going to handle everything, including seeing to whatever equipment that Reid would need which included a tent and double sleeping bag for the newlyweds.

Between now and his unexpected meeting with Gabby in New York, Reid planned to keep her off balance as much as possible. And he planned to get her involved in the new house, which was why he'd asked her here today. A glance at his watch told him that he had just enough time for a quick shower before she was due to arrive.

He'd just finished changing his clothes and grabbed a cup of coffee when he heard Gabby's car pull up in front of the bunkhouse. He walked down the steps just as she stepped out of her car. She was wearing jeans, boots and a blue shirt with the words 'Genius In Residence' across the front. Her hair was pulled back into a long single braid down her back. She looked fresh and lovely. He grinned and his body hardened just looking at her.

For her part, Gabby was almost afraid to look at Reid. She could tell by the dampness of his hair that he'd just showered. He was dressed in tight jeans and a green checked shirt that emphasized his long legs and width of his broad shoulders. His green eyes were warm and held a promise that she wasn't ready to acknowledge. So she turned to study the progress being made on the new house. She gasped.

"Oh, Reid! It's going to be even more beautiful than I'd imagined." The construction crew was working on the second story, but it was plain that they were almost done with that. The roofers would be able to start very soon.

Reid walked out to join her by the car. He watched as she studied the house and he could tell that she truly liked it. "Come on," he said taking her small hand in his. "I'll give you a guided tour. The furniture hasn't arrived yet, but you can use your imagination."

"Furniture? You don't even have doors and windows yet, McAllister," she said laughing. "But I would like a look around."

"We'll go in through the garage," he said guiding her to the side of the house where the three-car garage stood, minus doors. Just off the garage was a mud room and laundry room that led into the kitchen. He led her into the middle of the kitchen area.



"The breakfast nook will be back there," he said pointing to the rear wall with its large bay window. "There's a large pantry and lots of cupboard space. I wanted to get your ideas on what to have in here."

Gabby looked at him blankly for a few seconds. "A stove? A refrigerator?" She bit her lip as she surveyed the one room in a house that she wasn't comfortable in.

"I was thinking about a little more detailed input," Reid said with a slight frown.

"Why ask me?"

"You're a woman and know about these things," he said somewhat puzzled.

Gabby rolled her eyes. "That's a sexist remark if I've ever heard one. Just because I'm a woman doesn't mean that I'm an expert on the kitchen...or sewing...or flower arranging." She wasn't quite sure why she was being so defensive. She had fallen in love with this house as soon as she'd seen the plans, and had envisioned some of the rooms as she would decorate and furnish them. But this was Reid's house and not hers.

"I've never been called sexist before. Just because I'm asking for your opinion doesn't mean that I'm being one now," Reid argued. Any other woman of his acquaintance would be scurrying from room to room telling him what furniture he should get, where and how much to spend. The one woman whose opinion he truly wanted was reluctant to open up to him. "Please, Gabby. I need help with this. What else does this kitchen need?"

She looked around the open space and grinned. "How about a French chef?"

Reid growled low in his throat. "How about I kiss you senseless?"

"I said no more kissing," Gabby said as she started to back away. But she didn't get more than a few steps before Reid pulled her up against his body. Her hands automatically went to his shoulders to steady herself, which was a mistake. His head descended and his mouth silenced whatever else she was about to say.

Gabby wrapped her arms around his neck, as once again, she became lost in the feel and taste of this big hulk of a man. When he lifted his lips, she buried her face against his shoulder. He was breathing hard and she could feel the thudding of his heart as it pressed against her chest.

Reid was the first to recover. "Maybe we should look at another room," he said hoarsely leading her out into a hallway. He pointed to the room directly across from the kitchen. "That's the formal dining room and down here is the great room."

Gabby just stared in amazement. It was huge. But it was the fireplace that drew her attention. As fireplaces went, this one was mammoth with log shelving on either side. "Oh Reid! This is absolutely wonderful!"

He beamed down at her as she walked around the large open area.

"This is large enough for you to have several of seating areas, one in front of the fireplace, another in the corner by the French doors leading out onto the deck and one back by the hallway." Gabby was already decorating the room in her mind. It would be in earth tones with large comfortable furniture. She could picture them sitting in front of a fire with their kids playing somewhere in the room. If she'd been walking, she would have fallen. Now where did that idea come from?

"I take it you might have some ideas on the furniture for this room?" Reid asked smiling down at her. "And if you simply say furniture, I'll kiss you again," he threatened.

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Gabby took a couple of steps away from his side before turning to look at him. "As a matter of fact I do have some ideas. I don't know your taste in furniture so I don't know if you'd approve. But you could use country or flower prints or go with a western motif for the fabrics. No, not flowers," she amended looking up at Reid. "I think the western motif would be best. What kind of stone are you planning for the fireplace?"

"I was thinking of fieldstone, but if you have something else in mind I'd like to hear it," Reid said pleased by her interest.

"Oh, I like that. Then you could..." she was interrupted by the sound of Tom calling from the kitchen.

"Hey, anyone here?"

"We're in the great room, Tom," Reid called out.

A few seconds later Tom and Wade strolled in obviously just as impressed with the house as Gabby was. "This is going to be some house," Tom commented.

"You can say that again," Wade added. "What you doing here, shrimp?" he asked Gabby with a knowing grin.

"Discussing the décor, if you must know. What are you two doing here?" she shot back as she crossed the room to give each of her brothers a kiss and hug.

"Reid has asked me to do the sound system for him," Wade told her looking around the large room. "So, what did you have in mind Reid? Just this room?"

"No, the whole house. I really like the system you installed into your parent's home. The idea of being able to pipe music to all the rooms is something that I've always wanted to do."

"Where were you planning on having the recording system itself?"

"What do you say Gabby? In here or in the study?" Reid asked turning to her.

"I think in here. That way if you were working, you wouldn't have to be disturbed if someone wanted to use it."

"You heard the lady. It goes in here. How about over in that corner on the far side of the fireplace?" He again looked to Gabby for her approval.

She nodded.

"Your dad said that he has the pool area and decks wired for sound too. I want the same thing, Wade," Reid told him. He could picture being in the swimming pool with Gabby at night, soft music filling the air. "From what your dad told me, he and your mother have really enjoyed the system since you installed it several years ago."

"They're not much for television, so they like listening to music as they read or sit and talk," Tom told him.

"Do you know that once last year, in the dead of winter, we stopped by and they were out on the deck dancing. Dancing in the snow of all things," Wade said shaking his head.

"Well I think it was terribly romantic," Gabby chimed in. "You wouldn't know it by looking at him, but our dad has a romantic nature, something his sons lack."

"Gabby, they're in their sixties!" Tom stated as if this were amazing.

"And what about that time we caught them skinny dipping in the pool. Damn, but that was embarrassing!" Wade added with a grimace.

"So? It's wonderful that two people can be married as long as mom and dad and still feel that way about each other. There's no timetable for shutting down the romantic side of your nature," she stated firmly.

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“But dad’s pushing seventy!” Tom insisted.

“Well, at what age should you forget about romance, big brother? Fifty? Sixty? If it’s fifty, you better watch out because that means you only have a set number of years left in you, old boy,” Gabby said with a smirk.

Reid burst out laughing. “I think you two guys better concede this issue while you’re behind. It might prove dangerous to your egos if you pursue it further. Personally I think it sounds romantic too.” He would file this little bit of information away for future use. Personally he thought that dancing in the snow with Gabby would be heaven.

Gabby gave him a surprised look, then shook her head. “I’ll leave you three to your sound system. I’m going to look around.” She turned and left the room going into the master suite.

Wade and Tom both gave Reid a long look. It was Tom who asked what was on their minds. “Just what are your intentions towards our sister, Reid? Is there more going on here than we’re aware of?” He liked Reid, but no one messed with their sister and if she was here discussing the house with him, the relationship must be further along than they had realized.

“Why, I intend to marry the lady, of course,” Reid said quietly.

Wade grinned. “Does the lady in question know this?”

“Not yet. But I’m working on it,” Reid acknowledged ruefully. “Ours hasn’t been a typical courtship.”

Tom relaxed. “Believe me, there is nothing ordinary about our Gabby. I don’t know whether to congratulate you or offer you condolences,” he said laughing.

“Please don’t say anything to her about this. I have to take it one day at a time. She’s really skittish about this romance thing. So I’m taking it slow.” And it was killing him. He was actually developing a liking for cold showers.

“Not a word,” both men promised but could hardly wait to get home to tell their wives. They spent the next few minutes discussing the sound system so Wade had a good idea of just what Reid had in mind.

They had just finished when Gabby reentered the room. “You should see the closet in there. It’s so big that you could put a bed in it. And a dresser. And the bathroom is going to be heaven.”

“I take it the house meets with your approval then,” Reid asked with a pleased smile. This was going to be her home and he wanted her final approval on everything.

“I wouldn’t change a thing,” she assured him.

“Well, you two, we have to get moving,” Tom said pleased with his future brother-in-law.

Reid took Gabby’s hand in his large one. “We’ll walk you out.”

As they left the house, Tom saw Dorado on the far side of the corral. He’d heard about Reid’s horse but hadn’t seen him yet. And he was a beautiful dark bay mustang with white stockings. “Is that your horse?” he asked in confirmation.

Reid turned to look at the corral. “Yes, that’s Dorado. Would you like to meet him?”

“Sure would,” Tom was quick to say.

When they reached the corral, Wade called to the horse but the animal didn’t immediately turn around.

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Suddenly an ear-piercing whistle split the air. Reid turned to see Gabby put two fingers to her lips and whistle again. He grinned. "I could never master that technique."

"If it has to do with loud noises, Gabby is usually in the middle of it. Why do you think she plays the drums?" Tom informed him with a shudder.

"Because it's fun?" Gabby stated with her hands on her hips.

"More likely because you know all that racket drives the rest of us up the wall," Wade interjected but with a smile. Actually, he was proud of her and truly enjoyed when she played with a group in town or at one of the town picnics.

It was Gabby's turn to grin. "That makes the fun all the more enjoyable, big brother." As a child she used to wait until the boys were studying before she began to practice on the drums. Once she'd had to go looking for her drum set. They'd been left in one of the barns in the loft. Her father had a difficult time keeping a straight face that day when he'd told her brothers to stay away from her things. But T.J. had set a specific time when Gabby could practice, so some of her fun had been ruined.

Dorado ambled over to their group and stood quietly as he was looked over and praised. He was a beautiful mustang and Reid was proud to show him off. To Reid's astonishment, Dorado actually sought out Gabby and nuzzled her neck. She cooed lovingly to the large animal that apparently had been completely won over by her gentle soothing voice and hands.

Since the construction crew was working upstairs, Gabby said she would come back another day when the roof was complete. She left soon after her brothers, but not before agreeing to have dinner with Reid later that evening.

She was ready at six that evening when Reid arrived to drive her into town. They were going to eat at the Mustang Café that served a mouth-watering steak or chicken dinner depending on your preference for beef or fowl. Gabby had wanted to look her best tonight so she'd put on a blue shirtwaist dress with a green vest. She wore her long hair down but with the sides and top pulled back into a braid down her back. Matching blue and green earrings and blue pumps completed her outfit. The full skirt swirled around her knees as she hurried down the stairs.

T. J. whistled when he saw her. "You're all dressed up for a change," he commented with a raised brow. He was well aware of her dinner date with Reid, but couldn't resist the urge to tease his only daughter.

"Dad, I do wear something besides jeans now and then," she told him laughing. "Do I look okay?"

"You look beautiful as usual, kitten. You and Reid seem to be getting on better these days. Is there something that I should know?" T.J. didn't know whom she dated when she was traveling since she'd never brought anyone home. But he'd been around long enough to realize that his daughter was showing quite an interest in their new neighbor. And Reid was easy to read. The man was smitten and T.J. would be delighted if their relationship blossomed into romance.

"We're just having dinner. It's nothing to get excited about," she told him rolling her eyes.

"Then why have you been up there for over an hour getting ready?" T.J. goaded. Gabby was the one woman he knew who could be ready to go anywhere in the world in less than ten minutes. For her to spend that much time was unusual to say the least.



"It did not take me that long. I had to sort through my dresses to find something cool to wear. Most of my things are for cold weather," she told him stretching the truth just a bit.

"Right! And pigs can fly," he muttered just as the doorbell rang. "I'll get it." He opened the door to Reid and gave him the same going over he'd given Gabby's apparel. "You all spruced up too. Must be something in the air."

Reid looked a bit puzzled as he stepped into the foyer. Then he saw Gabby and everyone and everything else receded from view. He gave her a broad warm smile. "You look gorgeous!"

T.J. smiled at the expression on Reid's face and couldn't resist the temptation to tease him too. "Thank you. I got my hair cut this morning and a had good shave."

"Huh," Reid said as he recognized the man standing next to him. He felt the heat rise in his face. "I'm sorry, T.J. I saw Gabby and forgot everything else. How are you?" he said extending his hand to the older man.

"I'm doing great. Now you two kids go have a good dinner. And have a piece of the coconut pie for me. Amanda will only let me have it once in a blue moon and it's my favorite," T.J. said laughing as he guided them to the door.

Gabby and Reid enjoyed a comfortable ride into town. The major topic of their conversation was Reid's house. Gabby had loosened up a bit as she talked about her ideas for the rooms that she'd seen so far. The one exception was the kitchen. She still didn't want to talk about that room.

As they were led to their booth, they smiled and waved to friends. Once they were seated, Reid ordered the steak and Gabby opted for the roast chicken dinner. Once the waitress gave them their drink and left, Gabby folded her hands on the table. "So, tell me how you like Bentrige so far."

Reid leaned back in his seat to study her. "I wish I'd have discovered it much sooner. Then I would have already met you."

"I'm afraid that I'm not home that much. At least not during the last four years. So I wouldn't have been here," she laughed.

"Why do you travel so much, piglet?"

"It's where my photography job takes me, I guess. And I can write anywhere and anytime. There's so much out there to see and experience. The end of August I'm going to Madagascar. Do you know that back in 1938 a fisherman caught a live coelacanth? Since then they have been observed in or around the Comoros. That's a small cluster of volcanic islands between southeaster Africa and Madagascar." Her face lit with excitement as she talked.

"Isn't that the fish that they call the 'living fossil'?"

"That's the one. It's big too. It lives in deep water, between 650 feet and 2000 feet deep and grows to five feet in length and up to one hundred pounds. Gosh but I'd love to photograph one."

Reid frowned. "That could be a bit dangerous wouldn't it?"

Gabby shrugged. "Not in a submersible. Well, there's always an element of danger I guess, but they make dives like that all the time now. But just think about seeing a creature that was alive four hundred million years ago. I guess the other thing that is drawing me to Madagascar is the fact that there are animals living there that aren't found anywhere else. I'm hoping we get to see some."

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“I’m surprised that T.J. lets you go on dangerous expeditions like that,” Reid couldn’t help but comment. Now he was certain that he was doing the right thing by going on this trip. He knew Gabby was going to be angry when she discovered his involvement, but that was just too bad. He was going to see that nothing happened to her. After that, well, he’d just have to play it by ear and hope.

“Dad would never do that,” Gabby huffed. “Oh, I know that he and mom worry about me. But I’ve tried to explain to them that I know what I’m doing. And the people I work with are professionals and experts in their fields.”

The conversation became more general after that as they ate their meal. After dinner Reid suggested a stop at the Wagon Wheel Inn to dance. All in all it was a pleasant evening and Gabby was actually a bit sorry it was over when Reid pulled up in front of her parent’s home.

Reid put his arm around her shoulders pulling her closer. His hand cupped the side of her face as he bent to cover her mouth with his. Gabby relaxed into him, her mouth opening under his. When he pulled back a little, she stared into his vivid green eyes seeing her own yearning reflected there. She licked her lips. “I need to get inside,” she said on a whisper.

“I’ll call you tomorrow,” Reid said. Reluctantly he got out of the car and came around to open the door for Gabby. He held her hand as he walked her to the front door before folding her into his arms for one last kiss. “Dream of me, piglet,” he said with a grin before turning to return to his car.

Gabby stood there watching as he pulled away. “As if I could dream of anything else,” she confided to the darkness.

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CHAPTER 10

Reid was actually whistling as he rounded up some stray cattle the next morning. He had talked to Gabby earlier before leaving the bunkhouse. It had been a sweet torture to hear her voice but not see her or be able to touch her. He smiled now as his thoughts turned to seeing her tonight. She'd agreed to have dinner with him again at the diner. He couldn't ever remember enjoying a woman's company as much as he did his Gabby. He loved watching her face when she talked about something she was excited about, like her work. And she was a big science buff, something that they had in common. So much so, that when she'd talked about some of the places she'd traveled to or about articles that she'd written, he had a lot of questions for her and insight on the subject at hand.

He was looking forward to this evening like a kid on his first date. He planned to go back to the Wagon Wheel for more dancing too. He'd go dancing every night of the week if it meant that he could hold Gabby in his arms.

It was close to three in the afternoon when he rode back into the corral. He led Dorado into the barn and gave him a good rub down. Cody had already cleaned out his stall. Once Dorado was settled for the night, Reid left the barn heading for the bunkhouse and a nice long shower. He was covered with hours of sweat and dust.

Just as he turned to enter the bunkhouse he heard the sound of a car coming up the road. It was a bright red Jaguar. The damned idiot was driving so fast that the car was throwing up a dust trail. Reid frowned. *Who the hell can that be?* he thought irritated by this delay in his plans.

The car slid to a stop not far from his truck. The door opened as a pair of long legs clad in white silk pants slid to the ground. She was wearing a matching white silk shirt with gold chains and long dangling earrings. Reid clenched his hands at his sides. Just what he needed! Marla smiled when she saw him looking at her. She swayed slowly over to where he stood. The high heels she wore were totally out of place for the uneven driveway.

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"Darling, I had no idea that you were living out in the wilderness. How can you stand it?" Marla cooed breathlessly as she stepped closer to him.

"What are you doing here, Marla?" Reid asked tonelessly.

"I told you that I was coming. We have so much to talk about. And what we have to say couldn't be said over the phone." She started to touch his arm but pulled back when she saw the dust and grime. She tried to contain a grimace but not quite succeeding.

"It's just dirt, Marla. It washes off with soap and water. And I told you that we don't have anything to talk about. I have nothing to say to you that hasn't already been said. And I can't think of anything you could say that could be of possible interest me."

"But darling, so much has happened in the last few months. I'm a widow now," she said trying to look sorrowful but failing miserably.

"I'd heard that your husband had died. What's it been, Marla? Three months? Guess your idea of mourning is much different from most people." Reid knew he was being unkind, but Marla had shown what kind of a woman she was five years ago. And he certainly didn't want anything to do with her now. She was just wasting her time. And his.

"Don't be mean to me, Reid. Henry was not an easy man to live with and made me so unhappy at times. And he was so much older than I am. He's gone now but, I'm still alive." Marla said defensively. Reid should be happy that she was back in his life, not standing here arguing with her.

"Look, Marla, there's nothing for you here. Just get back into your fancy car and head west."

"But it's getting late and I don't have a place to stay, darling. I was hoping that you could find room for me here," she said stepping a little closer.

"Sorry, no can do. I told you on the phone that I was living in the bunkhouse, and there's no room for you. As you can see, my home is still under construction," Reid said indicating the new house.

Marla turned to look at it and just stared. It was a huge home but certainly not something that she would have chosen. "How rustic!" was her snide comment. "But if you don't have room, where will I stay?"

Reid sighed heavily. "There's a boarding house in town. Maybe you can get a room there. The owner is Mrs. Delray."

"I can't believe that you're going to make me drive all the way into town. What's it called? Bentrige? Can you at least come in and have dinner with me tonight?" Marla hadn't come all this way to just be pushed aside like this.

"Sorry Marla. I have plans for tonight. And before you ask, I wouldn't break this date no matter who asked me. So get back into your car, turn left at the end of the drive and you'll be in town in twenty minutes at the rate you drive. But I'd better warn you to slow down before you get into town. I'd hate for you to have to spend the night in the local jail for speeding."

The only thing that Marla latched onto was the word 'date'. "Don't tell me that you are actually dating one of the local cowgirls, darling? I'd think that you'd be bored to tears with what this little town has to offer in the way of female companionship."

"I'm not about to talk about my private life with you. And you'd be surprised at the women in this town. They have a hell of a lot to offer a man. Honesty being one of

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the finest qualities that I find so appealing,” Reid bit out. That was something he knew first hand that Marla was lacking. That and others too numerous to list.

Marla huffed at the intended insult, but before she could gear up for a retort, Cody called from the front porch of his house. “Reid! There’s a call for you on line one. He said it’s important.”

Reid waved his hand in acknowledgement. “Got to go Marla. As I said, we don’t have anything talk about. I’d say it’s been nice, but it hasn’t. Go back to Los Angeles where you belong.” With that, Reid turned and headed for the bunkhouse. He heard the car door slam and the engine rev to life. He only turned to look when he heard the car speed down the drive. *Serve her right if she got picked up for speeding*, was his last thought as he went inside to take his call.

Marla was furious! Reid was not reacting to her new single status as she’d planned. And who was this woman he was dating. Gabby, that was the name he’d used on the phone. That must be the little snit who had answered the phone last week. Maybe she should meet this woman and set her straight. After all, what woman from a place called Bentrige could possibly compete with Marla Webster? She’d ask around in town about this Gabby while she inquired about the boarding house. Marla had never stayed in a place like that in her life and had no idea what one was like.

The first place Marla came to in town was a service station, and since she needed gas, she stopped. This was as good a place as any to ask for information.

Griff Palmer had just finished working on David Murphy’s truck. When he saw the red Jaguar pull up at the pumps, he grabbed a rag to clean his hands. When the woman got out of the car, he stopped dead in his tracks. She was dressed all in white and must be six feet tall. That was one beautiful woman. He wondered what she could possibly want in Bentrige. Lost most likely.

“Can I help you?” Griff asked as he stepped outside.

“Fill it,” the woman ordered shortly.

Griff nodded as he walked around to the pump. Beautiful, but snippy. Not a very attractive combination in his opinion. But then it takes all kinds. Griff was sixty-four years old and a widower. His wife had died about ten years ago and he’d never remarried, even though he was a good looking man, six feet tall with thick steel gray hair. He and Ellen had no, so he’d devoted these last years to his business.

“I was told that there is a...boarding house in this town. Could you tell me where it is,” Marla asked looking around with distaste.

“Yep. Go down this road to the next street and turn right. It’s the third house on the right. Alice Delray runs it. Don’t know if she has any openings, but you can ask,” Griff said as he studied the tall woman. *What in the world can she be doing in our little town?* Griff thought as he finished pumping her gas.

“Why ever don’t you have a hotel here? Where are people supposed to stay?” Marla snipped. She almost snorted to herself. Who would ever want to come to a backwater place like this anyway?

“Never had any need for one, I guess,” Griff stated trying to sound dumb. He didn’t like snobs and this was one of the worst he’d ever encountered. “That will be fifteen dollars and sixty cents for the gas. Want me to check the oil and water for you?”

“No thank you. I don’t suppose you take credit cards?” Marla asked with a sneer.

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"We sure do, ma'am," Griff told her giving her a big smile. "We're not that far behind the times here in Bentrige."

Marla handed him a credit card. As he turned to go inside to ring up the sale, a light gold car pulled up on the other side of the pump. Griff's smile was warm and genuine. "What can I do for you, Gabby?"

"Just gas, Griff. I'll pump it myself," she said smiling at the older man. He waved as he entered the station. Then Gabby's attention was drawn to the woman standing by the red car, and it was all she could do to keep her mouth from dropping open. She had thick black hair that was pulled back into a stylish chignon. Her white silk pants outfit was plainly expensive as was her jewelry and shoes. And she was tall, as in very tall. The look of obvious distaste that she recognized in her striking blue eyes made her frown. Gabby was sure that she'd never met this woman before because she'd have remembered.

Marla stepped towards Gabby's car. "Did I hear that man call you Gabby?" she asked sharply.

"Yes. Do I know you?" Before the words had left her mouth, Gabby remembered the voice and knew where she'd heard it before. So this was Marla.

"I believe we spoke on the phone last week. I'm Reid's fiancé, as I believe I told you then. I've come to get him to come home to set the date for our wedding," Marla lied. Reid couldn't possibly be seriously interested in this plain young woman. She'd always been able to hold her own against any other women, but for some reason she felt threatened by this little snit.

"Does Reid know that you're in town?" Gabby asked as she replaced the gas nozzle on the pump. She was getting to know Reid and couldn't imagine what he'd ever seen in this woman, beyond her obvious beauty. Her personality left a lot to be desired, at least in Gabby's opinion.

"Of course. I spoke to him a short while ago. I'm going to get settled in town and we're going to see each other tomorrow to make our plans," Marla said with a bright smile.

Gabby noticed that the smile didn't reach her eyes. "Interesting. He told me that your engagement had ended five years ago, and that he had no interest in you, especially since you had married someone else."

Marla's smile was cunning. "Oh, but my husband died months ago. And since then, Reid has been after me to renew our relationship. He's so handsome and such a wonderful lover that I've found myself falling in love with him all over again."

At that point, Griff returned with Marla's credit card. After she signed the slip, he gave her a copy. "Thanks for your business."

"Put the gas on my account, will you, Griff?" Gabby asked smiling. He was one of her favorite people in town. He always had a smile for everyone and a helping hand if they were in need. She saw him frown now as he nodded before walking off toward the large bay area where he did his repair work.

Marla watched him walk away before she turned her attention back to Gabby. "Just a word of warning, darling. Reid is a rich sophisticated man who would be bored within weeks with someone like you. If I were you, I'd cut my losses and find someone else more your own kind. He's told me how you keep throwing yourself at him. We had

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a good laugh when he told me about your crush. But it's so embarrassing. He doesn't want to hurt your feelings."

Gabby bristled at her tone. She knew Marla was lying and didn't know which disgusted her the most, her condescending manner or the lies. "Reid is a grown man who knows his own mind. He's also a man who cares about people and judges them by who and what they are...not by their bank account or their background. You lost out big when you didn't marry him five years ago, Marla. Don't come here now pretending to be in love with a man who has undoubtedly changed over that time. I'll keep seeing him until *he* tells me that it's over. But I wish you luck. He's also a very determined man when he wants something. I imagine that applies to something that he doesn't want also." With that, Gabby got into her car and started the engine.

"You little nobody. Reid belongs to me and don't you forget it," Marla snarled as Gabby drove away. The nerve of that little snit! She'd talk to Reid tomorrow and tell him just how nice his new little friend really was. Then she'd see what that Gabby thought of the outcome.

It was a short time later when Marla pulled up in front of a large Victorian house. She grimaced. Sighing, she got out of the car and went up the steps to ring the doorbell. The door was opened several minutes later by a short old woman in a floral dress over which she wore a peach colored apron.

"May I help you," Alice Delray asked. She had to look up quite a ways to see the woman's face. My word, but she was tall and not from around Bentrledge.

"I was told that you might have a room for the next few days," Marla managed in a neutral tone.

"Well, I do have one room left. Come on in and I'll show it to you."

Marla followed the older woman up the carpeted stairs. Alice led her into the first room on the left. "This is the room. There's a nice big closet and double bed."

Marla looked around. The wallpaper was white with lavender roses and the comforter and drapes were of the same pattern. How quaint! "Isn't there a phone?"

"No phones in the room. It's down in the sitting room and my guests are free to use it anytime. The bathroom is down at the end of the hall," Alice told her. This woman was too uppity for her liking and couldn't, for the life of her, think why such a woman would be in town.

"You mean I don't have a private bath?" Marla gasped.

"This is a boarding house, missy, not a fancy hotel. Breakfast is at eight, lunch at noon and dinner at six sharp," Alice said tightly.

"I couldn't possibly eat before eight o'clock," Marla snapped. "Isn't there somewhere else to stay in this town?"

"Nope. But there's a motel about fifteen miles south of town. You'd have a private bath there."

Marla took one last look around the room. "Thank you. I think I'll do just that." Turning on her heel, she stomped down the stairs and out the door to her car. "Imagine sharing a bathroom with strangers," she muttered as she started the car. "This place is still in the dark ages." If she weren't so set on winning Reid back, she'd give him an earful tomorrow for sending her to a place like that. But she was going to have to play it cool. Reid had the money she needed to maintain the lifestyle she'd come to enjoy. Since that wretch of a husband of hers had left the bulk of his estate to his son and

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daughter, she was quickly running short of funds. The paltry monthly income he'd left her wasn't enough to pay her bar tab. If she had her way, that would soon be remedied. She didn't want to have to resort to selling off any of her jewelry or the house in Malibu that had been her inheritance. Even the insurance money had gone to his children. She would have left him long ago if she'd known this would be the outcome when he died. Marla wouldn't be this foolish again. She'd learned a good lesson and would be sure everything was in writing next time.

Later that evening, after Reid had settled in the car beside Gabby for the ride into town, he broached the subject of Marla. He wanted her to hear it from him rather than from someone in town. "I had a visitor at the ranch today."

Gabby turned to look at him.

"Marla showed up driving a bright red Jaguar. She's as flashy as ever and just as devious."

"What does she want? As if I couldn't guess."

Reid snorted. "Claims she realizes she made a mistake and wants to rectify the error. Her husband has only been dead three months and she's already on the prowl. I sent her packing, but I don't know if I've seen the last of her," he said scowling.

"As a matter of fact, I ran into her at Griff's today. She's very beautiful," Gabby said trying to gauge his reaction.

He snorted again. "Oh she's beautiful, I guess. But it's all show. I learned that the hard way. Did you talk to her?" he asked taking his eyes off the road to look at her.

"Yes. She warned me off you. Said she was taking you back to the big city to plan your future together."

"She what!" Reid roared.

Gabby grinned. "Apparently she doesn't think I'm your type. For that matter, I think she feels that any woman from these parts is far beneath you in status."

"That bitch! Gabby I swear to you that I have no feelings for that woman other than complete aversion and..." he stopped as Gabby laid her hand over his on the steering wheel.

"Relax Reid. I believe you. Your ex-fiancé is pathetic and such a phony. What did you ever see in her anyway?" she couldn't help but ask.

Reid squeezed her hand. "Damned if I know now. She was beautiful and I had just turned thirty. Maybe subconsciously I decided it was time to get married and, since I didn't really believe in love, she was there willing and available. All I know is that I had one close call with misery because that's what marriage to her would have been."

"You don't know that for sure. She might have given you a few children and turned domestic."

At this Reid burst out laughing. "Somehow I can't see her with a child. I don't even know if she likes them. Come to think of it, I don't think I've ever seen her near one."

"You were getting married and you hadn't even discussed children?"

"Dumb, huh?"

"Yes, I'd say that wasn't too smart," Gabby laughed.

"How about you? I know that you love kids. How many would you like when you get married?" Reid asked glancing over at her. He felt her tense.



"Since I have no plans to get married, that question doesn't seem to apply."

"Humor me, piglet. Say by some miracle you did decide to get married, how would children fit into the picture?" Reid pushed.

"If I ever did marry, I'd want three or four children. And my husband would want them too and be an active parent like my dad. Mom runs the house and is everyone's anchor. Dad used to help take care of us when we were sick, getting up with us at night when mom was worn out from dealing with us during the day. He'd take us to the doctor if mom was busy." Gabby laughed. "He even learned how to bake cookies when mom and Ida were sick with the flu and I had to have them for a school party."

"I wish I'd had a dad like T.J.," Reid said softly. "That's the kind of father I'd like to be, so that when my kids are adults they'll look back with fond memories of our times together. I believe memories are a more important legacy than money and position."

Gabby knew Reid well enough by now to hear what he wasn't saying. The memories of his father were far from fond ones. After seeing the way Reid reacted with her nieces and nephews and the baseball team, she had no doubt that he would make a wonderful father. "What are your thoughts on discipline for these children? Mom and dad were firm about good manners and following house rules."

"I've never really given it much thought before. But I guess I go along with your parents. Ill mannered or sassy kids are a pain and definitely not pleasant to be around. Why do I have the feeling that you were a little sassy as a kid?" Reid said grinning over at her.

"I prefer to think of it as speaking my mind. Unfortunately, it landed me in my room on more than one occasion. How about you? Don't tell me you were a angel!"

"Actually, I was a real pain in the ass until I was about fourteen. I guess I was trying to get some attention from my father. That's when I gave up and decided it wasn't worth all the hassle. My mother heaved a sigh of relief too. Bless her, she stood by me and tried to pound some sense into my thick head. It just took a while to penetrate. I owe her a lot," Reid said with pride in his tone. "The last time I talked to her she said she was coming to visit but couldn't give me a date. Knowing her, she'll just appear one day out of the blue."

Gabby laughed. "I think I like her already. If she put up with you, she must be some special lady."

"Hey, I'm a prize catch and you should appreciate that by now," he said with feigned hurt feelings.

"I'll pass on that comment, if you don't mind. I'm hungry and don't feel like starting an argument."

"If you don't agree, I'll start listing all my good qualities and keep it up until we get to town," Reid threatened with a laugh.

"All you good qualities, huh. Well that ought to take us about fifty feet down the road!"

"Now I'm crushed," Reid said placing a hand over his heart.

"Just drive, McAllister. Keep this up and I'll start singing just to drown you out," Gabby threatened.

"Go ahead and sing. Who knows, I might even join in."

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Gabby broke into a rousing chorus of ‘Row Row Your Boat’ and Reid immediately joined in. They were still singing loudly when he pulled the car into the parking lot next to the diner.

They talked all through dinner and on the return trip home later that evening. Reid told her that the roofers were set to finish tomorrow morning and asked her to come over to look at the rest of the house. She wasn’t sure when she could get away but was sure that she could be there before noon.

When Reid walked her to her front door, it felt as natural as breathing when she melted into his arms. His lips were warm and hard on hers. He pulled her closer against his long hard length cupping her bottom, pressing her closer to his masculine hardness. Gabby wound her arms around his neck as she boldly traced his bottom lip with the tip of her tongue.

“Keep that up, piglet, and we’ll have to find a hayloft somewhere,” Reid whispered harshly. “I want you so much, I ache with it,” he said as his mouth crushed her lips in a kiss of possession and need.

“Reid, I’ve never felt this way before,” she whispered against his lips. “This is going too fast for me. Please give me some space,” she said reluctantly pulling back. Who was she kidding? Space was the last thing that she desired. Reid aroused such wonderful feelings that she wanted explore them further, to discover what it was that her body was craving from him.

He held her close wrapping his arms around her waist. He laid his cheek against her hair as he took a deep breath. “This is all pretty new to me too, piglet. I know that I’m moving too fast, but I just can’t seem to get enough of you. You’re the first thing that I think about when I open my eyes in the morning, and the last thing before I fall asleep at night. Pretty pathetic, huh?”

“No. I think it sounds kind of nice,” she said smiling. Nothing in her past experience had ever prepared her for the rush of feelings that had plagued her since Reid had lumbered into her life. It wasn’t something she’d sought; it just happened and there didn’t seem to be anything she could do about it. She was afraid that she’d already reached the point of no return where Reid McAllister was concerned. But was she ready to cross the line that would tie her to him even more completely?

“What I feel isn’t as simple as nice, but we’ll let it go for now. You get inside before I change my mind,” Reid said lifting her chin for one last kiss. Then he opened the door and ushered her inside. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Okay. Drive careful,” Gabby said with a smile. She went inside closing the door behind her, but couldn’t resist one last look out the window as she watched him return to his car and drive away. On the way up to her room she finally admitted to herself that Reid wasn’t quite the jerk she’d first imagined. Oh, and could he kiss!

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CHAPTER 11

Amanda stood at the kitchen window watching as T. J. ambled across the yard from the barn. Even after forty-two years of marriage to this man, just the sight of her big husband still thrilled her. T. J. had only grown more handsome through the years as his dark auburn hair became streaked with gray. He was still lean and muscular despite his sixty-eight years. Even while raising five children, she and T. J. had remained devoted to each other. One of his favorite surprises for her even today was to pack a lunch and ride their horses out to their special place by a small lake on the property. More often than not, he would make love to her under the canopy of trees.

When T. J. entered the kitchen Amanda gave him a warm welcoming smile. “I hope that you’re ready for breakfast because Ida’s putting it on the table right now?”

“Hope it’s her pancakes today,” he said as he began washing up at the kitchen sink. “I don’t suppose you’d let me have some sausage and eggs with that too?” he added hopefully.

Amanda raised a brow. This was not a new question but one that he voiced often. “Either or, but not both and well you know it, T. J. Stoner.”

He drew her into his arms. “Sure I can’t change your mind just this once?” he asked pressing his lips to the side of her neck. He smiled with satisfaction when he felt her slight gasp as his lips moved to her small ear.

“No I can’t,” she said breathlessly. “And the reason is because I want you around for a lot more years.” She had always watched his diet and made sure that he ate the proper foods, as she had with her entire family. Since he had never been a smoker and only had a beer once in a while, he was in excellent health, and he most certainly did not look his age.

Just then Ida scurried back into the kitchen. “Don’t let me interrupt you,” she chuckled as she loaded a tray with syrup and coffee cups. “But don’t dawdle too long or your food will get cold.”

T. J. wrapped an arm around Amanda’s shoulders. “Come on woman. Feed me so we can play later.”

Amanda shook her head laughing at her irrepressible husband. “Ida, is Gabby coming down for breakfast?” she asked the housekeeper.

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"She's eaten and already left for town. She wanted to see Devra and agreed to pick up some things for me while she's there."

Amanda nodded. But once they were seated and Ida had returned to the kitchen, she broached the subject that had been on her mind the last week or so. She poured herself a cup of Earl Gray tea. "Have you noticed a change in your daughter lately?"

T. J. paused spreading strawberry preserves on a couple of pancakes. "Why is it when there might be a problem, she becomes *my* daughter?" His dark eyes were twinkling.

"*Our* daughter then. She's been spending quite a bit of time with Reid and not much time writing. Now, you have to admit *that* is out of character," Amanda stated firmly.

"She got all dressed up the other night too. She reminds me so much of you when we were courting," T.J. said between bites of pancake. "Tell you one thing that I've noticed, and that's the way Reid looks at Gabby. He's got his eye on her and that's a fact."

"Does that upset you?"

"No, not really. Reid is a good man and I have a feeling he'll be good for her. Help to get her anchored."

Amanda sighed. "I would feel so much better if she didn't travel as much as she does," she admitted. "I wonder how Reid feels about her globe trotting? I know he hasn't known her all that long, but I'm sure he's aware of her job and all the places it takes her."

"Get her pregnant and she won't be going anywhere," T. J. said waiting for his wife's outburst.

"T. J. Stoner! I hope you aren't hoping that Gabby and Reid are having an affair? I'm fully aware that she's a grown woman...but she's still my baby."

"Well, if you can go by the way Reid devours her with his eyes, I'd say it's a strong possibility. And we did something along those lines, if you recall my lovely." He'd met Amanda one week and asked her to marry him the next. Two weeks later they were lovers and within three months they had married. And T. J. considered that one of the smartest moves he'd ever made. Amanda was the love of his life. He adored her. He couldn't honestly say that he was completely comfortable with the idea of Gabby sleeping with Reid, or any man. But he knew that when hormones take over, common sense usually goes out the window. And if love is involved, that makes it all the more difficult to restrain those natural urges.

Amanda sighed. "I know you're right. But I don't want her to get hurt."

"Who said anything about her getting hurt? She's got a good head on her shoulders. She'll be fine. Reid's the one who has to watch out. Gabby has been giving him a hard time. Now that I think about it, you did much the same to me when we first met," he said with a smirk. "But I worked you around, didn't I?"

"You were too cocky then and you're still too sure of yourself," Amanda said laughing. "I guess we'll just have to wait and let nature takes its course with those two."

Gabby had gone into town to have a visit with Devra and pick up some items from the general store for Ida. Her sister-in-law was delighted to see her and quickly ushered her into her sitting room. This was her work area where she had a computer and

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all her art supplies. Devra wrote and illustrated children's books, so she worked from home, which was going to work out perfectly with the baby on the way.

"How are you feeling?" Gabby asked as she sat on the beige and brown loveseat.

"Not bad really. As long as I eat a couple of soda crackers before my feet ever touch the floor in the morning, I seem to do fine," Devra laughed. "But even that's getting better each day."

"It won't be too much longer and you'll be in maternity clothes."

"Already am," Devra said pulling up her pink top to show Gabby the maternity shorts she was wearing. "They are so much more comfortable than my regular clothes. I tried to get into a pair of regular jeans yesterday and had to lie down on the bed to get them zipped up. Nathan saw me and insisted that it was time to put away the regular clothing and get into maternity wear."

"He's right. Can't have you putting the squeeze on my new niece or nephew," Gabby laughed. "Where is my brother anyway?"

"He's upstairs in his study working and having a fit. Some of the information he was given on this latest bridge project was not accurate, so he's had to redo a lot of his drawings. Actually I think he had to start from scratch and redo the whole thing," Devra said frowning. "He's already put a lot of time into this project, but since it was the project managers error, Nathan will be paid almost double for his work and time."

"I know that he's a perfectionist so it must have been very frustrating for him," Gabby acknowledged. Her brother designed bridges and was much sought after in his field. He was good and she was extremely proud of him.

Devra eyed her friend. "Well, now that we've established that Nathan and I are doing fine, how about you and Reid? And don't just tell me fine, or I'll tell Wade you're the one who super glued his boots to the back of the barn last year. Word has it that you and the gorgeous rancher are spending quite a bit of time together. You have front row seats at all his ball games."

"Don't you dare tell Wade anything! He hasn't a clue about who did it and it's driving him nuts. Since I'd pleaded a headache and was supposedly in my room, he doesn't even suspect me," Gabby laughed delightedly.

Devra just stared at her, tapping her fingers on the arm of her chair.

Gabby had never been able to get anything by her best friend so she gave up with a sigh. "He's not as bad as I'd first thought."

"And?"

"And what? You want a detailed account of our dates?"

"Sure. Come on, give," Devra laughed. "I kept you up to date when Nathan and I were dating. Now it's your turn."

"We're not dating...well, I guess we are. Oh Dev, Reid is so special that I don't know where to begin. He's intelligent and funny and he loves kids. He's a diver so we've spent hours talking about diving and ocean sciences. When I first encountered him in Los Angeles, he came on to me just like all the other jerks in town. But now that I've met him and spent time with him, he's nothing like I imagined that day." Gabby wasn't aware of it but her eyes held a special shine that said more than words.

"Do his kisses curl your toes?" Devra asked outright.

Gabby felt the blush begin at her toes and work up. It was an answer in itself.

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Devra clapped her hands. "I knew it! I knew that there was going to be something between you two."

"Well, you knew more than I did," Gabby chuckled.

"Whenever you're around, Reid can't keep his eyes off you. And you've been much too argumentative with him, even for you. That means the man has gotten under your skin and your defenses."

"What defenses? I just know what I like, that's all. And I do like Reid."

"Have you told him yet?"

"Of course not. I'm just not ready. That would be like making a commitment and I don't know if I'm ready for that kind of responsibility. Does that make any sense?" Gabby asked quietly.

"Perfect sense. Nathan told me that he loved me on our second date. It took me longer to say those words back to him." Actually, Devra had a crush on Gabby's brother for a long time and had a difficult time accepting the fact that he was truly interested in her. She'd been afraid that if she repeated his words back to him, he might disappear. Of course, now all of her insecurities were a thing of the past, but she could certainly understand and sympathize with Gabby.

They spent the rest of the hour talking about the expected baby and the show Saturday night. Soon after, Gabby left to see John at his parent's store. He had to leave to return to New York in the morning so she wanted to spend a few minutes with him. The morning seemed to fly and before she knew it, it was time to head out to Reid's ranch.

Reid had just completed an hour-long walk-through with the construction foreman going through each room in the house. The roofers were finishing up and the doors and windows were due to be put in today. He was just leaving the garage when he heard a car coming up the drive.

"Damn! That's all I need," he grouched spotting Marla's red car spewing up dust as she sped toward him. He felt his hands clench at his sides.

Her car slid to a stop a short distance away from him. Marla emerged swaying towards him in a way that was guaranteed to capture his interest, or so she believed. Today she wore a bright blue silk one-piece jump suit with the front zipper dipping low in the front. Her heavy breasts threatened to bounce free as she walked over the uneven ground.

"Darling, I've thought of no one but you all night. You just have to forgive me for my one indiscretion," she pouted coming to stand close in front of him.

Her perfume was almost overpowering and Reid had to restrain the urge to wave his hand in front of his face. But he did take a step back. "Marla, I told you that we have nothing to discuss. And I'm sorry to tell you, but I didn't give you one thought last night. I haven't for quite a long time now."

"Reid, please don't be mean to me," Marla cooed stepping forward. She reached out to trace the pocket on his shirt. "I know that you haven't forgotten how wonderful our physical relationship was."

He frowned. Actually, now that he gave it some thought, it hadn't been that good. He had the feeling that Marla simply went through the motions without really getting any satisfaction out of it. "Believe me, Marla, it wasn't all that memorable," he told her



honestly. "Take my word for it, I have no desire to rekindle any type of relationship with you. I'm involved with someone very special."

It was Marla's turn to frown emphasizing the lines around her carefully made-up lips and eyes. "I hope you're not talking about that little Gabby? We met in town yesterday. She's quite a scrappy little thing, I must say. I told her that you'd be bored to tears with her in a short time. But I don't think she believed me. Poor little thing."

"Stay away from Gabby," Reid said coldly. "She's a lot smarter than you give her credit for. She didn't believe a word of that load of crap you tried to unload on her."

"Darling, how can you defend her when we share such a long friendship?" Marla could feel her chance with Reid dwindling if it had even been there to begin with. This made her angry...at him and at her for letting it happen.

At this Reid laughed. "What friendship? We were lovers for a time, engaged for even less time and certainly not friends after the engagement ended. Accept the fact Marla, you and I have nothing in common except one brief past relationship."

Marla bristled. "We made a striking couple. Everyone said so if you remember correctly. We're both tall and so suited to each other. That country girl is such a runt. What can you possibly see in her?"

"She's my friend. And hopefully, one day, she'll be my wife. Does that answer your question, Marla?" Reid was quickly tiring of this confrontation. He must have been mad to even consider marriage to this woman. Lucky for him he'd found out just how much Marla's vows of love had meant before any wedding had taken place. "Now just head back to Los Angeles. I'm sure your late husband must have some generous friends who would welcome you into their beds."

"Why you bastard! How dare you talk to me like that?" In anger, Marla was not a pretty sight. Funny how he'd never noticed that before.

"I dare because it's true. You don't think I buy all this crap about you still being in love with me. My guess is that your source of income has dwindled or shrunk, so you're looking for another meal ticket. Look elsewhere lady. I'm not interested." Reid wasn't proud of himself for speaking to Marla like this, but he didn't know of any other way to get her to leave. So he was momentarily disconcerted when she threw her arms around his neck and pressed her lips to his.

Marla was furious and was about to explode verbally when she saw Gabby's light gold car coming up the drive. Her actions had been automatic. She might not get Reid but she'd make sure that he suffered also. She wrapped her arms around his neck as she kissed him, draping one long silky clad leg around his.

Reid put his hands on her arms to push Marla away, but she had a death grip on his neck. Vaguely he was aware of the sound of a car but his first priority was to get away from this female piranha. When he finally managed to disengage her, he wiped his mouth with his shirtsleeve. "What the hell was that for?"

Marla stepped back with an ugly smile curving her lips. "Just a goodbye kiss, darling."

Then Reid became aware of a car speeding *out* of the drive. He turned to see Gabby rapidly heading out to the main road. He'd had his back to the drive and hadn't been able to see the car approaching. But Marla had. "You bitch!" he stormed striding forward.

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Marla retreated to her own car. "Let's see you explain that little scene, darling. Are country girls as understanding as city girls? Somehow I don't think so." She was just a little afraid of the anger she saw on Reid's face and in his rigid stance, but it didn't stop her from baiting him.

"Get off my property. And don't ever set foot on it again. For that matter, don't ever set foot in Bentridge either. Just get your ass in that car, point it west and don't stop until you hit California," Reid snarled. He stood rigid not daring to let himself get any closer to Marla. He had never hit a woman in his life, but right now he could happily slap that phony smile from her heavily made up face.

"Go to hell, Reid McAllister! And I hope your little girlfriend gives you the old heave ho." She jumped into the car and was streaking down the drive before Reid could move.

"Damn," he swore as he raced for his truck parked in front of the bunkhouse. He had to talk to Gabby and explain. Everything had been going so well with them and now this.

"Hey Reid!" Cody called from the barn. "We got a bad problem."

"Not now Cody. I have to get over to the Stoner's," he called out reaching for the door handle.

"Sorry boss, it can't wait. We got fence down north of here and some calves have gotten out. They're pretty young and vulnerable. Got to get them back right away."

Reid swore a blue streak as he turned. "Get Dorado saddled and let's get it done."

"Already ahead of you. All set to go right now," Cody told him as Reid approached. He'd seen Reid with that woman and from the expression on his face, he'd been reluctant to interrupt their conversation. His boss wasn't a happy person right now and he could imagine why. Cody had also seen Gabby's car.

It took the better part of four hours to mend the small portion of fence and retrieve the three bawling calves. Reid was in a foul mood when he rushed into the bunkhouse for a quick shower. Then he changed his mind reaching for the phone instead. He called Gabby. T.J. answered the phone. "Let me talk to Gabby, T. J."

"She's not here Reid," her father told him. "And she'd mad as hell about something."

"Do you know when she'll be back? I have to talk to her. It's all a misunderstanding," Reid said running a hand through his hair.

"Probably will be gone a couple of days."

"Days?" Reid shouted. "Where the hell did she go?"

"She went to her cabin for a while. Guess you can talk to her when she gets back."

"Where is this cabin? I can't wait that long," Reid said shortly.

"Sorry, can't tell you that," T. J. responded sadly. He had been truly pleased with the growing relationship between his daughter and Reid. But Gabby had made him promise not to tell him where she was.

"I'm coming over," Reid said putting down the receiver before T. J. could give him an argument. He skipped the shower and made it to the Stoner ranch in record time.

Amanda answered the door. She gave him a sad smile before directing him to T. J.'s study. The older man was sitting in a deep brown leather chair reading a book. When Reid entered, he laid the book on the table next to his chair. He looked at his

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watch. "You got here about ten minutes earlier than I figured you would. Mind giving me the mini version of what sent my daughter into such a raging fit of anger?"

Reid sat on the edge of the chair opposite. He told T. J. about Marla, a little of what had been said and then what the bitch had done when she'd seen Gabby coming down the lane. "So you see, I have to talk to her. It wasn't what she thought. I've never wanted to hit anyone as much as I did Marla when I'd realized what she'd done," he confessed.

"But you didn't. And that tells a lot about a man. Where is this Marla now?"

"Don't know and don't really care. On her way home I hope. T. J., where is this cabin?" Reid asked leaning towards the older man. "Please."

T.J. studied the younger man for a full minute. "This may sound old fashioned but I have to ask. What are your intentions towards my daughter, Reid?"

Reid relaxed slightly. He smiled for the first time in hours. "I plan to marry her."

"Good answer," T. J. grinned. "But I promised her that I wouldn't *tell* you where she was. But if say, a map were lying on the table next to your chair and you just happened to pick it up, there wouldn't be much I could do about it. Would there?"

Reid glanced at the end table next to his chair and smiled broadly. He picked up the piece of folded paper and opened it up. The map was neatly drawn and he had no difficulty reading it. "Thank you, T. J. I can't tell you how much this means to me. Will you talk to Amanda and let her know that I'm not a cad? Her opinion means a lot to me too."

"Don't worry, I'll talk to her. You don't have anything to worry about on that score anyway. She tried to get Gabby to stay and talk to you instead of running away. So she's already on your side. Now get out of here. Gabby took the long way on Pegasus, but you should make it in about half an hour. The road in is narrow and not in the best shape, so you drive careful. And Reid? Good luck." T. J. stood extending his hand to Reid.

They shook hands before Reid raced out the door to his truck. He drove faster than the limit until he reached the turn off that would take him up to her cabin. T. J. hadn't been kidding about the condition of the road. He glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was almost five o'clock. Damn! It had been just before noon when his world had fallen apart. He wondered what her reaction would be when he showed up at her door. Mad as hell, he had no doubt. *Hope she doesn't have a gun*, he murmured aloud.

He saw the cabin through a clump of trees around a bend and thought about leaving the car there and walking up to the house. But he decided it would be best just to stride right into the line of fire. He pulled up in front of the porch and was out of the truck in seconds. Striding up the steps he pounded on the door. "Gabby? It's Reid. Let me in."

Gabby had been crying. Anger had been her companion on the ride up to the cabin, and had sustained her while she gave Pegasus a rub down and got her settled into her stall in the small stable behind the cabin. But once inside she couldn't keep her thoughts or tears at bay. After an hour of wallowing in self-pity she got up to gather in firewood for the evening. It was still early but she showered before changing into an over-sized tee shirt and boxer shorts, her usual sleeping attire.

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She tried working, but her thoughts were too scattered for her to concentrate. She picked up a book, read the same page three times before slamming it down on the coffee table. “Jerk!” she muttered. *I was right about him from the beginning*, Gabby thought in dismay, which brought on another flood of tears. She’d allowed herself the privilege of getting close to him. Hell, she’d almost crawled into his pants on a couple of occasions!

But she had come to like him, more than like really. He was fun to be with and stimulating on all levels. He’d been so...nice. Had she been wrong to leave like her mom had tried to tell her? Gabby knew from meeting Marla just what kind of person she was. But Reid was kissing her! She jumped up to pace the living room. Maybe she should go back and listen to what Reid had to say? Maybe...

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CHAPTER 12

She stopped pacing when she heard a car approaching the cabin. She frowned. *Oh please, don't let it be one of my brothers*, she muttered looking at the ceiling for support. That's all she needed was one of them on her case. She froze when she heard footsteps on the porch. Then it was Reid's voice demanding her to let him in. She would see him, but in her own time, not his. "Go away," she finally yelled through the door.

"We have to talk and I'm not going anywhere until we do," Reid insisted firmly.

"Fine. You can stay out on the porch all night for all I care," she retorted.

"Piglet, please. It wasn't what you thought. I swear," he avowed so softly she had to strain to hear through the closed door. He reached for the doorknob and to his amazement it turned. Damned woman didn't even lock her door! But this one time he wasn't going to berate her for it.

Gabby had gone to stand before the fireplace. When she heard the door open, that was her first inkling that she'd forgotten the lock again. She swung around to face Reid. "I said I didn't want to talk to you. Please leave now. We can talk later." She was close to tears again and didn't want him to see her cry.

"I'm not going anywhere, piglet. And we're going to talk now. What you saw back at the ranch was all a put on. Marla and I had just had words and I'd told her to get lost when she saw you. She was kissing *me*," he tried explaining.

"That's not what it looked like to me. You were kissing her and you had your hands all over her," Gabby accused him. She knew what she'd seen. She wasn't a complete idiot.

"*She* was kissing me, but I was not kissing her back. And my hands were not all over her, piglet. They were on her arms trying to pry her off of me. She was like damned flypaper. Pry her off here and she sticks somewhere else." Reid fanned his hands through his hair.

"You were lovers once and had even planned on getting married. She's beautiful and...tall," she snorted as if that meant something.

"I told you that we had been engaged, but it was over years ago. You're the only woman in my life now, piglet," Reid said softly, closing the distance between them. He saw the redness around her eyes and cursed Marla and her timing.

"Oh, to hell with it," he hissed hauling her into his arms. "This is how I kiss *my* woman." His mouth covered hers in a bruising kiss as he held her close against his long

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hard length. His mouth lifted to brush against her soft warm neck. Suddenly she was pushing against his chest with all the strength she could muster.

“Oh, you...I can still smell that heavy perfume she wears,” Gabby grumbled backing away from him.

“Fine. I can remedy that!” he snapped as he unbuttoned his shirt before pulling it off and dropping it to the floor. Then he sat on the chair to remove his boots.

“What are you doing?” Gabby gasped. The broad expanse of broad muscled chest with the mat of dark hair made her gulp. When he didn’t answer but removed his socks then stood and began to undo the band on his jeans, she started to panic. The man had a body that Apollo would envy. He was beautiful! She gulped again.

“I’m removing my clothes so they can be washed. It will be like washing Marla out of our lives once and for all,” he said standing to once again close the distance between them. Her dark eyes were wide and he saw an invitation there that she probably wasn’t aware of. But Reid was. He advanced.

“You stay right there, Reid McAllister.” Gabby took a step backwards. “Don’t you dare touch me after you’ve been with *her*! I’ve been up here for hours and for all I know you could have spent this time with her.” She was being totally unreasonable but couldn’t seem to stop herself.

“I have not been with Marla. She left right after you took off. But there’s only one way for me to prove it to you,” Reid observed as he scooped her over his shoulder and turned to the bedroom.

“Put me down!” she yelled pounding on his back. “I won’t...” was as far as she got before he dropped her down on the bed. She jumped to her knees to continue pounding on his chest this time. Before she could berate him for his brutish behavior he pulled her down under him on the bed. She gasped as his weight pressed her down into the mattress. She made to grab his hair but he beat her to it and pinned each of her arms out to the side.

“Now, you will listen to me, piglet!” he grated out.

“I will not!”

“Going somewhere, are you?” he asked with a chuckle. He could laugh now that he had her restrained.

Gabby didn’t reply but looked towards the window. She didn’t know if she could say a word. The weight of his big body pressing along every inch of hers was a wondrous experience. She’d never felt anything like it before. And if her mind was issuing warnings, her body had other ideas.

Reid felt himself harden. He wanted to talk to Gabby, make her understand about Marla. If he didn’t do that soon, he would be beyond all talk. “Piglet...”

“I told you not to call me that,” but it was a feeble protest at best.

“Piglet, I am not nor have I been interested in Marla since our engagement ended. I did not ask her here and I most definitely was not kissing her. She leaves me cold, Gabby. Since I met you, you’re the only woman I want. You drive me crazy, but I adore you all the same. You’re not like any woman I’ve ever met,” he said lowering his head to kiss her eyes and forehead.

Reid’s lips were cool against her heated skin, and so gentle. Gabby felt herself weakening. If she was going to honest with herself, all she had seen was the way Marla



had draped herself around Reid. And she didn't think he was the type of man to make love to a woman out in plain view like that.

"She's really gone?"

"I told her some things that she didn't particularly want to hear. Plus I instructed her to get the hell off my property. What do you think?"

Gabby smiled for the first time in hours. "I'd say that she's probably on her broom flying to greener pastures."

Reid returned her smile as he released her hands cupping her head in his large hands. "Meow! Jealous my darling piglet?" Her reaction to Marla gave him hope that Gabby did feel something for him. He kissed the side of her mouth.

She wasn't quite ready to end the issue yet. "If you weren't with her, where have you been all this time?" Then it dawned on her. "How did you find my cabin? I told dad not to tell you where I went."

Reid grinned down at her. "He didn't *tell* me. He'd carelessly left a map by the chair and I found it. Convenient, huh? As for the delay, Cody and I had to rescue some calves that had gotten through a broken fence. I didn't want to take the time, but Cody couldn't have done it all by himself."

"But you did come?" she said with a touch of wonder in her voice.

"I'll always be there for you, piglet." He lowered his head until his mouth covered hers. When she wrapped her arms around his neck, he ground his hardening body against her much softer one. He moved to kiss the side of her throat where he could feel her pulse racing, then moved to her eyes and nose before hungrily closing over her mouth once more. When the tip of his tongue traced her lower lip, her mouth opened to his. His tongue delved in to learn the taste and feel of *his* woman.

Gabby found it more and more difficult to lie still. Without conscious thought her hips lifted for a closer contact with Reid's. Her hands traced his broad shoulders, down his back to where his jeans rode low on his hips. His groan of pleasure made her more daring as she brought her small hands between their bodies to feel the taut muscles and soft hair on his chest. When her hand rubbed against his masculine nipple Reid responded by reaching down to grab the hem on her shirt. In a second it was pulled over her head and flung to the floor.

The feel of his hard chest pressed against her bare breasts made her long to feel more of him. "Reid?" she whispered looking deep into his green eyes.

"You're so beautiful," he breathed against her lips. Then his mouth moved down to caress a breast, first the top fullness then beneath before he laved her dark pink nipple with his tongue. When he sucked this morsel into his mouth, he felt her buck beneath him. Reid turned his attention to the other breast. When her hands fanned through his hair holding his head in position, he sucked harder.

Gabby was lost to the wonder of these new breathtaking sensations. She might be a virgin, but she was well aware of the mechanics involved. She had no idea, no previous experience with the delicious feelings that could be aroused. Reid was weaving magic with his hands and lips, and she had no desire to stop him.

When he lifted off the bed to remove his jeans, she just stared at him wide-eyed with wonder and a feminine appreciation of what a beautiful man Reid truly was. Broad shoulders tapered down to narrow hips and long muscular legs. She eyes widened when she saw his arousal. She quickly averted her gaze back to his face. He leaned over her to

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kiss her as he pulled her shorts down her slender legs. Then he was lying next to her, drawing her close to his naked body.

Liquid fire coursed through her as his mouth covered hers once again, his hands exploring with no clothing to act as a barrier. He moved her onto her back, his hands cupping, kneading her soft tender breasts. His mouth moved down to lave the underside of her breasts before dipping into her navel. That coil of passion tightened into an almost painful yearning as Gabby arched against his hard body. "Reid...please," she moaned.

The sound of his name on her lips drove him over the edge. He moved up to cover her body with his. With one long leg he parted hers, gently positioning her hips up to receive him. He moved into her then, slowly until he met her barrier. He wasn't truly surprised because he'd guessed she had never taken a lover. He knew that he had to plunge forward; there was no way to get around hurting her and this he did regret. One powerful thrust and he was buried deep inside her. She'd stiffened only for an instant before relaxing against him.

For Gabby the pain was instantly forgotten as this wondrous pleasure surged through her, coiling tighter and tighter. It was exquisite. It was a painful delight that she wanted never to end, but at the same time she yearned for fulfillment. Reid's groans of approval urged her to move against him deepening her own pleasure. Then, suddenly, that coil of pleasure peaked as her body stiffened, sending a current of unimaginable ecstasy surging throughout her body. Reid groaned his own release seconds later before collapsing on top of her. She clung to him never intending to let this moment pass.

Reid rolled onto his side pulling Gabby close against his chest. She felt his lips against her hair and she smiled. She could never get back to pretending indifference to him again. She looked up to meet his penetrating gaze.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked brushing a long strand of strawberry blond hair behind her ear.

"Nothing worth mentioning. I never knew it would be like this, Reid." She was still floating down on a haze of pleasure.

"Would you believe me if I told you that it gets better and better?"

"Oh, I don't know how it could get any better than this." She almost said that she was willing to find out, but stopped the words just in time.

"I think there's something you should know," he said softly.

"What?" She traced the fullness of his lower lip with her thumb.

"I'm a possessive man. You belong to me now."

"Did you feel that way about Marla?" The question was out of her mouth before her brain had time to filter the words. She felt him laugh. "Is that funny?"

"No, not really. I'd never thought about it before. But the answer to your question is no. There is no comparison to what I feel for you and what I once felt for Marla. It's so different you're talking apples and oranges."

Now it was her turn to smile. "Good."

"Piglet, I want to explain about the engagement to Marla. Should have done it before." Reid hesitated as if trying to decide where to begin.

"Reid you don't have to say anymore, really."

"I was the one who ended the engagement. I got back into town a day earlier than planned and went directly to her apartment. Since I had a key I let myself in and went to the bedroom. She was there. But she was not alone. She was in bed with another man. I

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threw the key on her bed and walked out of that apartment, and out of her life. Apparently she'd been seeing this guy for several months behind my back. Most of our so-called friends knew about it, but no one thought to enlighten me."

Gabby cupped his face in her hands. "She wasn't good enough for you. Did she try to get back into your good graces?"

"She tried but I wasn't having any part of her. Three months later she married a man almost forty years older than her. Someone who had a hell of a lot more money than I did at that time. All I felt was pity for the poor bastard who got saddled with her. He died about three months ago, so she's on the prowl for another meal ticket," Reid said with a shrug of indifference.

"Why don't we forget about her from this moment on. Let's not waste any more of our time on her," Gabby whispered moving softly against him.

Reid's smile lit up the room. "I could think of other things to talk about. Or do." He lowered his mouth to hers to show her exactly what he was referring to. She nestled into his embrace ready to follow his every lead.

It was about an hour later as they were lying sated in the middle of the rumpled bed that Gabby's stomach growled. She hadn't eaten any lunch and now it was past her usual dinner hour. When Reid's growling stomach answered hers, she laughed. She leaned up on an elbow to look down at him. "I think we need sustenance. We do need to keep our strength up, you know?" She bounded from the bed pulling on the discarded tee shirt.

Reid watched her with adoring eyes. Lord but she was beautiful and warm and loving. He could hardly credit what had happened here this afternoon. He watched as she walked towards the bedroom door. "Can you cook?" he asked sitting up in the bed.

"Of course I can cook. I'm not totally incompetent in the kitchen." With this she flounced out of the room. But once in the living room, her shoulders sagged. Cooking was not one of her more tested skills. To be honest, her abilities in that area were extremely limited and in no way could they be considered a skill. But how hard could it be to prepare a small meal for two people. She'd watched Ida cook plenty of times.

First she checked the freezer to see what was available. She ruled out steaks because it would take too long to get the grill going. She knew enough to know that roasts took hours. She found a package of three pork chops. They were thinner than steaks or roasts so she assumed that they would cook much faster. Gabby put them in the microwave to defrost. Next she located some potatoes that she peeled and put on to boil. Then she put some water to boil for the frozen vegetables. So far, so good.

After putting the skillet on the burner Gabby wasn't sure what to do with the chops. She knew that Ida breaded the chicken when she fried it, but couldn't remember about pork chops. When they were thawed, she rolled them in flour before putting them in the pan.

She smiled. This wasn't so bad. Maybe this cooking thing wasn't as difficult as she'd thought.

Reid had taken a quick shower before leaving the bedroom. In the closet he'd located a clean pair of clean jeans that he assumed belonged to one of her brothers. When he entered the kitchen he smelled the rich aroma of frying pork chops. He was pleasantly surprised. "Anything I can do to help?" he asked eyeing the boiling potatoes.

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"Not in here," she told him guiding him back into the living room. "But you can build a fire in the fireplace. It doesn't get too cold up here at night but it makes it nice and cozy. I filled the wood basket this afternoon so there should be plenty."

"Yes ma'am, I'll get right to it," he said with a cheeky grin. "Then I need to wash my clothes."

"Already ahead of you there, McAllister. They're in the washer now."

After getting the fire going, Reid sat on the sofa. "What are these?" he asked holding up one of the pictures scattered on the coffee table. They were all sea creatures, fish, turtles, dolphins, sharks and whales. And some sea fans and eels.

"Those are for the book I'm doing on sea life. It's taken me five years to gather all the shots I wanted. Now it's just a matter of getting the project organized," she told him as she turned the pork chops. "Have a look at them, if you like."

Reid nodded and began sorting through the stacks of pictures. He was impressed. She was obviously a talented photographer and it was apparent that she loved her subject.

Gabby placed the vegetables into the boiling water before turning her attention back to the pork chops. Ida had made gravy from the drippings...milk gravy she'd called it. Flour...she need flour for the thickener. After scouring the kitchen for what she needed, Gabby placed the dark brown chops onto a plate and poured a couple of cups of milk into the hot pan. How much flour? Half a cup ought to be enough, so she dumped it into the pan somewhat dismayed when it just sat there in a clump. Taking a large wooden spoon, she stirred and stirred until only a few small clumps floated on top of the brownish gravy.

She added a little salt and pepper then continued to stir. It got thicker and thicker. Soon it was the consistency of cake batter. *Gravy wasn't suppose to be this thick*, she thought grimacing. She added more milk and a little water, continuing to stir. Now it was too thin so she added more flour, salt and pepper.

The smell of something burning drew her attention to the potatoes that had boiled dry and were now sealing themselves to the bottom of the pan. "Damn," she muttered grabbing the pan and rushing to the sink to add water. The pan hissed as the cold water made contact with the overheated metal.

When she replaced the potatoes back on the burner, the vegetables were almost boiling over the side of the pan, so she turned that burner off. Gabby picked up the wooden spoon to stir the gravy only to find that it was too thick once again. This time she added just a small amount of milk and was rewarded by gravy that she thought came pretty close to the desired consistency.

After draining the potatoes in the colander, she beat them with a hand mixer. She didn't remember seeing brown and black things mixed in with Ida's mashed potatoes. *Oh well, the gravy will cover them up*, she thought with a shrug.

Taking two daisy-patterned plates down from the cupboard, she prepared their plates. She placed two pork chops on Reid's plate with a generous helping of mashed potatoes and gravy. Then she added a good-sized portion of broccoli. After fixing her plate, she eyed her two offerings warily. They didn't look as appetizing as she'd hoped.

Reid entered the kitchen just as she sat the plates down on the table. "Dinner is ready," she announced formally.

"Good! I'm hungry," Reid said eyeing the dinner plates. Inwardly, he winced. It didn't look very appetizing, but he'd eat every bite if it killed him. And from the looks of

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the food, that was a very distinct possibility. If he were honest with himself, this made Thelma's sandwiches look appetizing.

Gabby sat watching as Reid took the seat across from her. She picked up her fork easing a portion of potatoes and gravy into her mouth. She froze. It was terrible! It was a toss up as to which was worse, the burnt flavor of the potatoes or the pasty flat flavor of the thick gravy. She dropped her fork to her plate and jumped up from her chair to grab both plates from the table before Reid could eat anything.

"It's horrible!" she wailed thrusting the plates into the sink. Then she promptly burst into tears.

Reid was right behind her drawing her into his arms. "Hey, it's okay, piglet," he soothed holding her head against his chest while rubbing her back with his other hand. Part of him was relieved not to have to try her offering, but he knew how hard she'd worked to prepare that meal for him.

"I...I wanted to fix you something good. B...but I...can't cook," she sobbed even harder now.

"We'll fix something else. It's not the end of the world, piglet."

She sniffed. "I can make microwave popcorn." She felt his laughter.

"I think I can come up with something a little more substantial. We can have the popcorn later."

"You can cook?" Gabby inquired leaning back to look up into his face.

"I'm not up to Florence or Ida's standards, but between the two of us, we should be able to find something," Reid laughed. Now he truly understood Amanda's remark in the park that day about Gabby not being too well acquainted with cooking. "You were serious about that French chef weren't you?" he had to ask.

She hiccuped. "Look in the sink. What do you think?"

"I'm not much on French cooking as a steady diet. How about someone like Ida?" Reid didn't give a damn about cooking or any skills his Gabby had in that area. He loved her for being Gabby...intelligent, warm, funny and loving.

"Whatever you want. I will never cook anything again as long as I live," she avowed with a sniff. "My cooking ability makes Thelma look like a gourmet cook."

"I wouldn't go that far," Reid laughed remembering those cream cheese and tuna sandwiches. "Come one, let's see what we can fix. Got any eggs?"

Gabby watched as Reid prepared a pan of scrambled eggs. She managed the toaster without any mishaps, which raised her spirits somewhat. As she ate, she didn't think she'd ever eaten anything that tasted as good as this dinner. Reid had been so wonderful about everything. She sighed after placing the last forkful into her mouth.

Reid grinned at her. "I'll wash and you dry," he said taking their dishes to the sink. He located the dishwashing liquid in the cupboard underneath the sink and filled the left sink. They spent the next fifteen minutes playfully cleaning up, getting as much water on each other as on the dishes. Once everything was clean, they retired to the living room.

The fire in the fireplace was going nicely. When Gabby tried to sit on the sofa, Reid directed her to the rug in front of the fire. "Let's sit here." He pulled her down to lie beside him. "It's getting late. We should be getting back."

Gabby shook her head. "I wouldn't want to ride Pegasus back at night. And you shouldn't try driving that road in the dark." Her hands caressed his bare chest marveling

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at its sculptured hardness. She leaned forward to kiss his throat. “Thank you for being so understanding tonight.”

Reid fanned his fingers through her long hair holding her head captive between his hands. “It was my pleasure, fair lady.”

Gabby gasped at the promise in his deep green eyes. “Why do I have a feeling that the pleasure will be mine?” she asked with a knowing smile before dropping kisses along his shoulder. She felt his arousal press against her stomach causing her own stomach muscles to tighten.

“It will be a shared pleasure, piglet,” Reid groaned harshly as his mouth covered hers. After that, the only sounds in the cabin were the rustle of clothing being removed and husky sighs of pleasure.

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CHAPTER 13

Reid slowly opened his eyes staring at the ceiling as the first hint of daylight peeked through the drapes. He became instantly aware of the soft weight pressing along the length of his body. He glanced down to find Gabby sleeping contentedly right on top of him; her head nestled on his chest and her legs draped over his. His slow warm smile was full of contentment. *What a way to meet the morning*, he thought to himself, filled with a sense of wonder. He could easily do this the rest of his life and never tire of it.

He pushed the sheet down to caress her bare back and rounded little bottom. Her skin was silky soft and warm as she moved, in the process rubbing her bare body enticingly against his. Reid felt himself harden in response. Oh yes, he could definitely begin each day like this! As he rolled her over onto her back, she opened her eyes and smiled.

“Good morning,” she sighed looking up at the man in her bed. Gabby wanted to savor every second. She had no desire to get up let alone move. Last night had been something that she would never forget. Reid had made her first night special with his gentle tenderness; he’d made her feel as if she were the only woman in his life, desired and cherished.

“I have to get back to the ranch, but I don’t want to leave this bed, piglet. I could spend the rest of my life right here with you by my side,” Reid whispered as he lowered his lips to hers.

“You don’t have to leave right this instant, do you?” she asked wrapping her arms around his neck. She could feel his arousal pressing against her thigh. Gabby smiled against his lips as the tip of her tongue sneaked out to trace the shape of his full lower lip.

Reid groaned. “I couldn’t get out of this bed if the house were on fire.”

“Good!” she laughed raising her hips in unconscious invitation.

“Woman, I’m the one on fire and you’re the only one who can douse that burning,” Reid groaned as his mouth slaked over hers in a kiss of heated possession.

It was sometime later when Reid reluctantly got out of bed dress. He didn’t want to leave, but there were chores and various matters that required his attention at the ranch. Gabby had decided to stay up here in the cabin until Wednesday to get that work done on her book.

When he was dressed and ready to go, he leaned down to kiss her goodbye. “I’ll see you sometime Wednesday, piglet. Call me when you get home. If I’m not in the bunkhouse, leave a message with Florence.”

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“Okay,” she told him still floating on that cloud of euphoria. “Be careful on the trip back down. That road is a disaster.” She was on the verge of telling him that she’d be home today too, but knew that she had to get that work done. If she went home today, she’d be spending all her time with him.

After one last lingering kiss Reid let himself out of the cabin. Gabby stayed in bed for sometime listening to the sound of his truck receding in the distance. Realizing that she wasn’t going to get back to sleep regardless of the hours of sleep she’d missed last night, she got up to shower and dress.

It was only when she went to the kitchen to make something to eat that she realized she hadn’t offered to fix Reid any breakfast. In the same instant she cringed. Maybe under the circumstances the oversight had been in his best interest. Although, she could pour cereal into a bowl and add milk without too much difficulty. At least so far she hadn’t messed it up.

Gabby sighed recalling the disastrous meal she’d managed to put together last night. It had been even worse than the time she’d tried to make steaks. No one had told her that you didn’t fry them. Wade still loved to tell that story about those steaks that could have been used for shingles. To prove a point, he’d actually nailed one over a leak in one of the unused storage buildings. To her chagrin the damned thing had actually kept the rain out. She wouldn’t offer to fix Wade or any of her brothers anything to eat again if they were all starving. Of course, they would undoubtedly think that starvation was preferable to whatever fare she could come up with. The sad part was that they were right.

Reid drove up to the front of the bunkhouse, arriving home later than he’d planned. It was well after six, heck it was almost seven in the morning and he knew that everyone would be wondering where he had been. Hopefully, they would think that he’d gotten up early and left on some errand.

Once inside he quickly changed clothes, then went to check his e-mail. He deleted the junk, answered all but one of the others. That one was from Stan in Los Angeles. He’d apparently called several times yesterday afternoon and then again last night with no success. Stan had finally e-mailed at eleven before going to bed knowing that Reid always checked his mail before going to bed. Reid was well aware that Stan would ask where he’d been, and he wasn’t sure he knew what to say. Last night had been special; something just for him and Gabby. He wasn’t ready to share that particular part of his newfound happiness just yet, if ever.

Then it dawned on him that he hadn’t been the least concerned about *why* Stan had been so anxious to talk to him. Reid laughed to himself. Bentrige had definitely been the right place for him to settle. Before moving here, he would have been uptight about Stan’s calls and worrying about what the problem could be. Now work, at least the corporate kind, had taken second place to his personal life. Maybe this was what his mother had been trying to get into his thick head for the last few years?

In the end, he e-mailed Stan and told him that he would call at ten Los Angeles time. It was too early to call him now. After that Reid left the bunkhouse to check with the construction foreman. The building was up...roof, doors and windows. Now began the work on the interior. And he had a contractor coming out to give him a quote on

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getting the long road into the ranch and the drive up to the new garage paved. That man was due at noon today and Reid had to be there when he arrived.

He found Cody in the stable. The older man gave him a hard look, but didn't ask any questions and Reid didn't offer any information. They worked side by side mucking out the stalls. Cody told him that he had two men coming at nine for interviews. They needed a few more hands since Reid wouldn't always be free to help when needed.

It wasn't until Reid went back to the bunkhouse to call Stan that he realized he was hungry. After fixing a bowl of cereal, he went to make the phone call.

Stan picked up the call himself on the first ring.

"What, you playing secretary today?" Reid laughed.

"Mrs. Blackworth is on an errand for me. When the phone rang I knew it had to be you, boss. So, you must have had a busy day yesterday. I called twice during the day and two more times between seven and eleven last night," Stan said trying to keep the question out of his tone.

"Let's just say I was tied up until quite late. What's the problem? Must be important to have you in such a rush to talk to me." Reid hoped it wasn't anything that would take him back to Los Angeles. He didn't want to leave right now with things moving along so wonderfully with Gabby the way they were.

"Business is booming so you can relax. I was just curious about Marla Webster. I saw her yesterday afternoon, and just the mention of your name sent her into a fit of...well let's just say that I haven't heard language like that since I was in the Marines. Not that anyone is paying much attention to what she's saying about you. After all this time, just about everyone around here has her number, so you don't have anything to worry about on that score. Me thinks you hurt the dragon lady's feelings," Stan said with a chuckle.

"Under the circumstances, it's a miracle I didn't wring her blasted neck," Reid growled. "She showed up here at the ranch...twice. On her second visit, Gabby arrived just in time to see Marla throw herself into my arms."

"I take it Gabby wasn't pleased?"

"She turned around and took off like a bat out of hell. I told Marla a few things that she didn't want to hear and told her to get the hell off my property. How could she actually think that I'd be willing to get involved with her again?" Reid almost snarled into the phone.

"She's beautiful. Didn't she tell you? No man is supposed to be able to resist her multitude of charms," Stan laughed trying to lighten the mood.

"Well I can resist her very well, thank you!"

"Word has it that Henry Webster didn't leave her as much as she'd been counting on. Besides a house in Malibu, he'd set up a trust fund. But apparently the monthly amount is just enough to pay a fraction of her monthly expenses. She's definitely on the prowl," Stan jeered. He and Anna had never liked Marla and, while they had been saddened by the way she'd hurt Reid, secretly they'd been relieved when the engagement had ended.

"As long as she stays far away from me," Reid snorted. "I have no doubt that she'll find some poor bastard who can't see beyond the long legs and big breasts. But that will be his problem."

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"Now that we've buried Marla, how is the beautiful and alluring Gabby? Did you two make up or is she still mad at you?" Stan asked. He and Anna were looking forward to meeting this young lady.

"We talked and everything is fine." Reid did laugh then. "She might not be very big, but she's not cowed by anyone...and that includes me."

"Good. Now if we run into Marla again, Anna and I can casually let it be known that her little ploy didn't work. Matter of fact, I can just see Anna seeking her out to do just that," Stan announced with pride. Anna was pretty fierce when she was protecting her own, and Reid was part of their family in her eyes.

Reid laughed. "I'm glad she's on my side." They chatted a while longer before ending the call.

The first man due for an interview arrived a bit early so Reid sought out Cody to begin. After the second interview, Reid went into the bunkhouse to make some calls to check on references since he and Cody had been impressed with both men. Jake Paulin and Lyon Brown had both worked on a ranch in Utah that had recently changed owners. They didn't like the way the new people were handling the property or the workers. So they set out to find other employment.

After the phone calls, Reid told Cody to get in touch with the men in town at the boarding house and hire them. Cody was pleased as punch because he could tell good workers when he saw them and knew they had winners in those two.

Then the paving man arrived and their business took up the better part of an hour. After that Reid ate the lunch Florence had prepared and before setting out to round up some cattle and move them to a different pasture. When he arrived back, there was a white sedan parked in front of the bunkhouse and he could see a light on in the kitchen. What the hell was going on?

He took the steps two at a time, yanked open the door and stomped into the living room. Then his mouth dropped open when his mother rushed from the kitchen area. She was wearing an apron and had flour on her face. "Mom? What are you doing here? Why didn't you tell me that you were coming?"

"I didn't know myself. Just made up my mind to come, packed a suitcase and here I am," she said reaching up to give him a warm hug. "You look wonderful! This life must agree with you."

He smiled then. "Yes, it does, mom. And I'll tell you all about it over dinner. Just let me shower and change and I'll take you into town."

"Oh, we don't have to go to town, Reid. I've got dinner planned. And I've made a cake and baked cookies," Lily McAllister stated proudly.

"You cook?" Reid gasped. He'd never seen his mother in the kitchen. They had always had someone do the cooking and cleaning. Her main function had been as hostess.

"As a matter of fact, I'm a very good cook. Not that you'd be aware of it."

Reid's stomach growled, as he became aware of the delicious aroma coming from the kitchen. "Did you say something about cookies? I could use something to tide me over until dinner," he said hopefully.

Lily laughed at the boyish hope in his voice. "You can have a few, but don't spoil your appetite. I've got a pot roast defrosting and I'll be making biscuits too."



Reid sat at the small table as Lily placed a heaping plate of warm oatmeal and chocolate chip cookies in the center. After getting him a large glass of cold milk she took the chair opposite him. He took a chocolate chip cookie and bit into it. He rolled his eyes and sighed. "Mom, this is wonderful!"

Lily smiled at him, pleased by his reaction. Then she sighed. "I wish I'd been able to bake them for you when you were younger. But I was kept busy with all of the social functions that your father and grandfather thrived on."

"You were the best hostess in Los Angeles," Reid pointed out. He'd always been proud of his mother. She had just turned fifty-seven but looked years younger. She still had a slender figure even if her hair was turning gray. Reid blinked. "Mom, you've changed the color of your hair."

"Nothing gets by you does it?" she laughed. "I've *stopped* coloring my hair. This is the real me. I'm tired of always putting on a front. I just want to be me."

"Is this a mid-life crisis type of thing?" he asked tentatively.

"No! It's something that I should have done years ago, but was too caught up in your father's way of life to protest. It's taken me this long since Jason died for me to make the move. And it feels wonderful!" Lily said happily.

"I'm not quite following you, mom. You liked the parties and the social scene."

Her smile faded as she reached out to take his hand. "No Reid, I did not truly like the life I led with your father. I was young when I married Jason and quite impressionable. You were born the first year of our marriage and after that, the business and working with your grandfather became everything to Jason. After a couple of years, I felt more like another employee than a wife."

"Why didn't you ever say anything, mom? I knew that you and dad didn't spend a whole lot of time together, but I didn't know things were that bad."

"I didn't want you to know. That was between Jason and me. I wanted you to have as normal a childhood as possible. That's something that I failed at also," Lily sighed sadly.

Reid took both of her small hands in his. "You did not fail, mom. You were always there for me. And I remember you at most of the sporting events. Remember, you always wore that yellow straw hat so I could see you."

"And I remember each time when your father said he'd try to be at one of your games, how you'd be looking for him. And the sadness in your eyes when he didn't show up. There is so much that I would have done differently if I could have."

"Why didn't you leave him? Hell, he probably wouldn't have noticed until there was another party due," Reid hissed angrily.

"Oh, I thought about it many times but..."

"But what, mom?"

She took a deep breath before speaking. "I did confront him once when you were about five. I'd just found out about an affair he was having. He told me that I was free to leave, but that you would be staying with him. I couldn't leave you, Reid. You were all I had. And I was determined that Jason and William McAllister weren't going to turn you into a carbon copy of them. That's one reason why I encouraged your involvement in sports and other academic organizations. I wanted you to be a well rounded young man, not a corporate junkie!"

Autumn McCullah



"And why you've been so supportive of my ranching," he commented understanding so much more now. Reid now had a much better understanding of what his mother had suffered through for him. Any feelings of guilt over not feeling any remorse when his father died melted away. Jason McAllister had paid the bills, but he hadn't given anything of himself either to his wife or to his son.

Lily smiled. "You came alive on the ranch. Your love of horses, cattle and the whole ranching process was obvious. Life is too short to spend it doing something that you don't really enjoy. I wanted you to discover that fact before you'd wasted any more of that life, Reid."

Now it was his turn to smile. "I think I've discovered that already, mom. And a great deal more. I've met someone here in BentrIDGE. Her name is Gabby Stoner and we're getting married."

"Oh Reid, that's wonderful! When..."

"Mom, the young lady isn't aware of that little fact yet. But I'm working on it. She's being just a little stubborn about things," he told Lily with a crooked grin.

"Well this is something to celebrate anyway. Maybe I will let you take me to dinner. We can have the pot roast tomorrow night," Lily said getting up from the table. "And I want to meet this young woman who hasn't fallen at your feet."

Reid took her hand in his. "One more thing mom. This is a bunkhouse. It's nothing fancy. Would you be more comfortable in town? They have a nice boardinghouse?"

"My things are already put away in the other bedroom and this is exactly where I plan on staying. I think it's wonderful. Now go get cleaned up while I change into something without flour on it. I might be a good cook, but I'm a messy one," she laughed.

"Yes ma'am," he said before heading for the shower. She'd given him a lot to think about, but for tonight, he wanted to show her off to BentrIDGE and get her reaction to the town that he'd come to call home. And he'd plan on getting her together with Gabby and her family. He had no doubt that she would adore them.

It was just going on seven when he pulled the truck up to the pump at Griff's gas station. They closed at eight and he wanted to be sure to fill up before they left to return to the ranch. He got out to pump the gas and Lily got out to stretch her legs.

"Reid, just the man I needed to see," a deep voice drawled. Griff Palmer rounded the back of the truck to stand beside Reid, giving him a slap on the back. "Got your electric saw fixed and the axle on your hay wagon. Tell Cody he can..." he stopped in mid sentence when he spotted Lily coming around the front of the truck. She was just about the prettiest lady he'd ever seen and had the most dazzling green eyes.

He hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath until Reid slapped him on the back. "It's okay to breathe, Griff. This is my mother, Lily McAllister. Mom, this is Griff Palmer. He runs the station and has a repair shop here in town."

Lily smiled warmly as she stepped forward extending her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you Mr. Palmer." She was overcome with the strangest feeling when his huge hand engulfed hers in a firm handshake. He had the most beautiful steel gray hair that was so thick that it stayed in place just from the weight. The laugh lines around his deep blue eyes intrigued her. And when he finally smiled, Lily found herself actually attracted to a man.

Autumn McCullah



"Everyone calls me Griff," he stammered. Damn, but he felt like a kid. He could smell the floral perfume she wore and it was doing things to him that he'd long thought were a part of the past.

"And I'm Lily," she said feeling tongue-tied.

Reid looked from his mother to Griff and back again. He smiled. "Griff, we were just going over to the café for dinner. If you're not needed here, why don't you join us?"

"Yes, Griff. That would be very nice," Lily chimed in rewarding Reid with a grateful smile.

"I'd like that," Griff quickly agreed. "I'll tell Ted to put the gas on your account when I go in to wash up. I'll meet you at the café in about ten minutes, if that's all right?"

"We'll looking forward to seeing you there," Lily all but sighed before walking back to get into the truck. Once inside she put her hands to her face. She must be an old fool to let herself be attracted to someone so quickly. Oh, but the warm sparkle in his blue eyes and that wonderful smile!

Reid sat through dinner watching as his mother and Griff carried on like long lost friends. He couldn't remember ever seeing Lily so animated, so alive or so happy. She'd always been a warm and gracious hostess, but never this...natural. That was the word. She looked relaxed and natural chattering away with Griff.

And Griff had the widest smile on his face all evening. Reid could have gotten up and left the table and they probably wouldn't have even realized he was gone. He smiled and vaguely thought about the Bentrige magic wondering if it was casting its spell once again.

Early Wednesday morning, Gabby ate a bowl of cereal, tidied up and, after saddling Pegasus, headed home. She was actually eager to see Reid. Surprisingly, she'd missed him far more than she had imagined. It had been an effort, but she had made good progress on the text that would accompany the undersea pictures. If she could keep her mind on work, she should have it completed by the first of the week.

George, one of the ranch hands, was at the stable when she road in. He offered to take care of Pegasus but Gabby declined. T.J. had been adamant that when each of his children had gotten their own horses they be responsible for all care that went along with it. Besides, she liked giving Pegasus a rubdown. It was a special time for them where she chatted to the appaloosa; a time when they shared their own special bond.

Once Pegasus was back in her stall, Gabby grabbed her gear and headed for the house. She was heading down the hallway to her room when Aunt Frieda came out of her suite.

"Have a good stay at the cabin, Gabrielle?" the older woman inquired giving Gabby a keen look.

"It was wonderful, Aunt Frieda," she replied giving more away in those few words than she could have imagined.

"Look at me," Frieda ordered coming to stand closer.

Gabby just stared not sure what was the matter.

Then Frieda smiled. "About time!" was her satisfied comment.

"For what?" Gabby asked truly confused now.



"He finally made a woman out of you, that's what!" Frieda almost cackled with glee.

"Aunt Frieda! What a thing to say! I...I..."

"Oh, don't play coy with me child. I may be old, but I can still remember the warm glow, the floating down on a cloud of indescribable joy after a good hearty romp with a lover. And before you say anything, making love is the most natural thing in the world, especially when you're with that special someone. And you've waited a long time for that man."

Gabby felt the heat burning her face. Would everyone who looked at her be able to tell? Something of what she was thinking must have been plain on her face.

"Don't worry child. No one will know unless you tell them."

"You knew," Gabby muttered in dismay.

"Yes, but I've been looking for it. I saw the way you two looked at each other, even if you weren't aware of it yourselves. Now go. And Gabby, there have only been three men in my life. The last one was eleven years ago. Not too bad for an old spinster!" Frieda laughed as she turned to go downstairs.

Shaking her head, Gabby went to her room to shower and change. But first, she called Reid to leave a message that she was home.

An hour later she was walking into the gym at the school in town. Devra, Sierra, Earl Clark and Millie Price arrived almost at the same time. They were set to go over the program for Saturday night and Wade had gotten permission to use the school gym for the rehearsal. He's already hooked up the electronic equipment. The music for the next show will be country with plenty of singing, sing-a-longs and dancing. Gabby would be playing the drums as well as singing. Devra and Sierra would be the main female singers with Earl and Millie doing some duets.

Everyone was well prepared so the rehearsal went smoothly. Shortly after noon, they finished for the day and went their separate ways. Gabby had a list of things to pick up at the general store for her mother and Ida so Devra offered to keep her company.

"Word has it that you've been out a number of times with Reid. Have you two signed a peace treaty? Or has the devastatingly handsome hunk finally won you over?" Devra asked as they walked down one of the narrow aisles in the store.

"We've had dinner a time or two. And I told you about that on the phone if you remember. I guess you could say that I'm not as adverse to his presence as I was in the beginning," Gabby said stretching the truth just a bit avoiding her friends gaze. Devra knew her too well and it wouldn't take much for her to guess that she and Reid had become more than friends. Gabby wasn't quite ready to share that little bit of information with anyone.

"Nathan I went by to see him Tuesday morning, but he was out with Cody. Florence showed us around the new house though. Gabby, it is going to be gorgeous! Nathan talked to the builder to get his name and other information. We've talked about building a house on that property we bought last year, but we weren't sure what we wanted. After seeing Reid's house, now we know that it has to be log." Since both she and Nathan work from home, it didn't really matter if they lived in town or out in the country. And if they built this house they could have some animals and horses. She knew that Nathan really missed having his horse, Socks, close by so he could ride him whenever he wanted. Now he had to go out to his parent's to ride.

Autumn McCullah



"Reid has asked me for some ideas on the decorating. He started in the kitchen, if you can believe that?" Gabby laughed.

"Poor man didn't know what he was getting himself into. At least there wasn't any chance of you cooking him anything," Devra shuddered.

Gabby blushed as the memory of that disastrous dinner filled her mind. Devra was quick on the uptake.

"Oh please tell me you didn't? Gabby you couldn't have tried cooking," Devra almost gasped in alarm.

Gabby looked a bit miffed at her friend's concern. "It wasn't all that bad!"

Devra put her hands on her hips and stared at Gabby.

"Okay. It was a big, and I mean big, mistake. But I've learned my lesson. I'll never try cooking anything again as long as I live."

Devra seemed to sigh with relief. "Society thanks you!"

"Why is it that everyone assumes that just because you're a woman you can cook or sew? Those are talents just like singing or writing or sports. We don't all excel in everything," Gabby said hotly.

"Point taken. You sing and let everyone else cook. Now what else is on that list of yours? While you're doing that, I'm going to see if Mrs. Gordon has any sardines," Devra said turning to go down the other aisle.

"Sardines?"

"They're great on crackers. I had some last night with a dish of sauerkraut. Nathan went and locked himself in his study. Said something about the smell giving him morning sickness," Devra shrugged.

Gabby gave her a long look. "Don't say another word about my cooking when you eat a combination like that," she said laughing, then shivered as she imagined actually eating something like that.

Devra had gone to the front of the store and Gabby was still in the back looking over the shampoos when she heard Helen Myers and Barbara Osborne behind her. What had caught her attention was Reid's name.

"It's shameful, that's what it is," Barbara snipped.

"I heard that she's been out there staying with him since Tuesday," Helen retorted.

"That means that she spent the entire night with him. Florence must be beside herself," Barbara scoffed. "And after what we'd witnessed in the park with Gabby Stoner, we thought that *they* were going to be a couple. Just goes to show you can never be too sure about anything."

"Well, Reid McAllister is a big city man and you know how they do things a bit differently there. He did seem to be such a nice young man though. Even I'm a bit surprised that he has a woman living with him already," Helen Myers observed. She loved to gossip and this was too good to pass up.

Barbara was her counterpart in the gossip mill and neither gave any thought to the accuracy of their stories as they told them to whoever would listen. "No one has met her yet, but the rumor is that she is quite attractive. And I..." Their voices trailed away as they walked to the front of the store.

Gabby was frozen to the spot. There was only one person who came to mind. Marla! Had she returned and gotten Reid to listen to her? He'd sounded so final when



he'd told her about sending Marla away. Had it all been a ruse just to lure her into his arms? No! She wouldn't believe that. There had to be some other explanation.

She checked her list to be sure that she had everything before stomping over to the checkout counter. Devra had just paid for her purchases when Gabby walked up behind her. Gabby schooled her features so her friend wouldn't ask any questions. But inside she was fuming. "Get your sardines?"

"Five tins. And two large cans of sauerkraut. Want to come to dinner tonight?"

Gabby did laugh at this. "I'll pass if that's what's on the menu. Besides, I have plans," she said, but now she wondered if that were true.

"Well in that case, I'll take my treasures home and have them all to myself." Devra looked at her watch. "Got to rush. My editor is due to call in about twenty minutes. I'll call you later," Devra said in a rush as she raced out the door.

Gabby paid for her groceries and left the store. She had to know what was going on, even if it hurt. What if it was Marla? What would she do, especially after the way Reid had made love to her? Gabby didn't know if she should be mad at Marla for being so persistent where Reid was concerned or furious with Reid for allowing himself to be coerced by such a scheming witch.

Putting her car in gear she headed out of town straight for Reid's ranch. All the way out of town Gabby alternated between visions of riding Marla out of town on the hood of her car or hanging Reid up by his thumbs from the nearest tree. The fact that she had never felt this possessive of any boyfriend in her life was completely ignored along with the notion that she now considered Reid her property.

In record time she was pulling up in front of the bunkhouse. The only other car there was a white sedan. So far so good, maybe. Marla had been driving a red car.

Taking a deep breath, not giving herself time to think about it, Gabby got out of her car and marched up the steps. She rapped on the door. Several seconds passed before the door opened. Gabby just stared at the older woman standing there. She was several inches taller than she was, slender and very attractive. Gabby guessed her to be in her late forties or early fifties. "I was looking for Reid," she managed to stammer. Now that she was here, she felt like an idiot, especially since the person staying with him was not a young woman.

"He's out with Cody and one of the other hands. You must be Gabby," she said opening the door wider. "Please come in. I'm Reid's mother, Lily McAllister."

"I'm so happy to meet you, Mrs. McAllister," Gabby said extending her hand to the older woman. The relief she felt was indescribable. She had a feeling that she was going to like his mother. "But Reid didn't mention anything about your coming for a visit."

"Please call me Lily. And he didn't know until I showed up yesterday. I sold my property in Hawaii and decided to spend some time with Reid before I decide where I want to settle. And I wanted to see his new ranch. Come into the kitchen and we can talk over a nice cup of tea," Lily said ushering Gabby into the other room. "Have you had lunch yet?"

"No, I've been in town shopping and haven't had time."

"Why don't I fix us a sandwich to go with the tea and cookies?" Lily said beaming.

Autumn McCullah



Gabby smiled back. “That sounds wonderful. I was shopping with my sister-in-law who happens to be pregnant. She has some pretty strange eating habits now. Like sardines and sauerkraut,” she shuddered again at the thought.

Lily laughed. “That sounds horrible, but I have no doubt that it tastes like heaven to her. Will this be your first niece or nephew?”

“Oh no. I have four brothers and between the two oldest I have five nephews and two nieces. Sam is the only bachelor, but he’s getting married in November. My mom and dad dote on their grandchildren and the kids adore them,” Gabby said with obvious pride.

“I wish that I’d had at least one more child, but it just wasn’t meant to be. Reid missed out not having a brother or sister,” Lily said with a touch of sadness.

“Believe me, having brothers isn’t all that great. It was like having six parents. Everyone told me what to do and what not to do all the time I was growing up. They still try, but I won’t let them boss me around now,” Gabby confessed. But in truth, she couldn’t imagine what it would be like without having her big bossy brothers around, even being the pain in the neck that they were most of the time.

Lily placed a plate of sandwiches in the middle of the table along with teacups and a plate of cookies. “I hope you like tuna fish sandwiches because Reid doesn’t have much in the way of food here,” she said taking the seat across from Gabby.

“This is great,” Gabby said reaching for half a sandwich. “Umm, do you like to cook? From what Reid has told me I would think you would have a chef.”

“Oh, we did when his father was alive. When Jason was out of town, I would feel free to indulge my cooking desire. And our chef was a treasure and taught me a great deal. Since I’ve been on my own, I much prefer to cook for myself. Do you like cooking, Gabby?” Lily asked politely.

Gabby choked on a bite of sandwich. “No, not really. To be honest, I’m a disaster in the kitchen. And do you know that Reid actually asked my opinion about the kitchen in his new house? Of course at the time he wasn’t aware of my lack of knowledge in that particular area.”

“I take it he’s aware of that lack now?” Lily asked intrigued by this beautiful young woman. She was so natural and unassuming. She hadn’t been happy about his engagement to Marla, but she had a feeling that she was going to be delighted to have Gabby as a daughter-in-law.

Gabby folded her hands in her lap. “I’m afraid to say that he had a sampling of my culinary skills or lack of...and lived...just barely.”

“Reid speaks very highly of you, so it didn’t send him running for the hills, Gabby. That should tell you something,” Lily observed watching the color rise in Gabby’s cheeks.

The mention of hills made Gabby recall how they’d spent the hours before dinner and throughout that night. She stuffed the last of her sandwich into her mouth as an excuse so she wouldn’t have to reply. She wasn’t ready to admit to herself how she felt about Reid let alone to his mother. Not yet. So she changed the subject looking around the small rooms. “This bunkhouse isn’t very big, Lily. I know that my parents would love to have you come and stay with them. We’re only about fifteen minutes away...at least the way I drive,” she amended.

Autumn McCullah



Lily reached across the table to pat Gabby's hand. "That's very thoughtful of you, dear. But I'm very comfortable right here. I've even mastered the use of that old relic of a stove. The first batch of cookies were charcoal, but I've got it all figured out now."

"The offer will be open if you change your mind," Gabby assured her.

"There is something that I would like to ask you, if you don't mind," Lily confessed looking a little sheepish. "Reid and I had dinner in town last night with Griff Palmer. He seems to be a nice man. Has he lived here long?"

"Griff has lived here all his life. His wife died about ten years ago. They didn't have any children and his only sister lives in Virginia. He's great!" Gabby expounded.

"We had a lovely time. I'm having dinner with him tonight."

"That's wonderful," Gabby said honestly. "Get him to sing for you sometime. He has a beautiful voice and plays a mean banjo and guitar. I don't know if Reid has told you, but during the summer we put on musical shows in the park in town on Friday or Saturday nights. This Saturday is country night. I hope you'll be there?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything. It sounds fascinating. No wonder Reid loves it here so much. I..." Lily was interrupted as Reid entered the house.

As Reid rode into the corral he saw Gabby's car and sighed with relief. He'd missed her; hearing her laughter, her voice and her touch. And he had to admit that it was a relief to know that she was safely back from the cabin. It was irrational, but if he had his way, she wouldn't be making any more solitary trips up there.

He took the steps two at a time in his hurry to see her. When he opened the door the first thing he heard was laughter, his mother's. It wasn't the artificial social laugh that he'd become accustomed to growing up. This was warm genuine laughter and it warmed his heart.

Stepping into the small kitchen he found his mom and Gabby chatting over tea. "Is this a female gathering or can a mere man join in?" he asked giving Lily a kiss on the cheek before leaning down to gently press his lips to Gabby's. He had the satisfaction of seeing the color rise in her cheeks.

"Oh, I think we can let you join us, Reid," Lily chuckled seeing the blush his kiss had produced in her visitor. "Wash your hands and I'll get you a cup of tea, a couple sandwiches and some cookies."

"You drink tea?" Gabby blurted. Her brothers always asserted that tea was a woman's drink.

"Sure do, piglet. I acquired a taste for it when I went to school in England. But I must admit that mom's cookies are the best part."

As Gabby watched him wash up at the kitchen sink she realized that there was much that she didn't know about Reid McAllister...where he went to school, his favorite foods or colors. What kind of books and magazines did he read? She knew he could cook, but did he prefer eating in or out in restaurants? "You went to school in England?" she asked really curious now.

"I took some post graduate courses in international business there. It was wonderful especially the trips I made outside London. Have you ever been there in your travels?" Reid asked sitting down and accepting the cup from Lily.



"Only once, but all I saw was part of London," she replied an unconscious wistfulness coloring her voice. She'd always wanted to see the countryside, but hadn't managed to get back there again.

Reid heard the unspoken longing. "We'll make a trip over there one of these days. I know the best places to go for beautiful scenery and marvelous accommodations.

"You take a lot for granted," Gabby snapped to cover her confusion. The thought of taking an extended trip with Reid was more than appealing. It conjured up all sorts of pictures in her mind. But that would be paramount to making a commitment. And she wasn't ready for that yet. Things were happening too fast for her peace of mind. *Yeah, right! Tell that to your body*, she thought.

"And you underestimate me, piglet," Reid replied lifting her hand to his lips.

She tried to snatch her hand away, but he held it hostage in his much bigger stronger one. "Did anyone ever tell you that you're bullheaded and a bully?"

"No, because I'm a real loveable guy. And you know that you love me!" Reid laughed loving the mental battle he saw reflected in her eyes.

"Big, bossy and outrageous is more like it!"

"And you love it," he said softly pressing his lips to the palm of her hand.

A discreet cough made them realize that they weren't alone. "If you two have had enough tea, I'll clean the pot," Lily told them straight-faced, although it was difficult to keep the laughter from her eyes. This was the one...this was the woman Reid had been waiting for all these years. And Lily couldn't have been more pleased.

Gabby snatched her hand away pushing her chair back. She glared at Reid. Her dark eyes deepened to an even darker hue as he just smiled at her. "Lily, please come to dinner tonight. I know my mom will want to meet you. And you can come too," she directed at Reid as an after thought.

"Oh, I'm sorry Gabby. But I have a date tonight," Lily replied with a quick glance at her son.

"Date? With who?" Reid bellowed. His mother on a date?

Gabby grinned. "Good for you, Lily!"

"Griff Palmer. He called early this morning to ask me out," Lily said with just a hint of color rising in her cheeks.

"You just met him last night, mom. Don't you think that you're..."

"Oh stuff it Reid! Your mother is a grown woman. And Griff is one of the nicest men I know."

"Well, it's not your mother going out with him," Reid huffed but with less vigor.

"I should hope not! My dad has this thing about mom dating other men," Gabby managed to bite out.

Lily laughed as she patted Reid's arm. "She's right, son. I can take care of myself. And I do like Griff. Now, I'll leave you two to sort out your dinner arrangements while I go and get ready for mine." With this parting shot, Lily strolled from the room humming to herself.

Gabby stopped her before she left the room. "If you can't come tonight, you and Griff could come tomorrow," she offered. "I know my parents will want to meet you."

"I'll talk to Griff tonight. Have fun you two," Lily laughed heading for her bedroom.

Autumn McCullah



Reid looked at the empty doorway then back to Gabby with a bemused expression on his face.

“It will be fine, Reid. You can come to dinner tonight and tell me more about England. If you want to, that is? Dinner’s at six.” Was she over-stepping the line in assuming that he wanted to be with her? He was obviously shocked...no concerned about his mother dating Griff. He really was a big softie and this endeared him to her even more.

“I’ll be there. Maybe we can take a walk after dinner and be alone for a while?” he added hopefully. He had the horrible feeling that in the next few days it was going to be difficult to get her all to himself. Just how true that was to be he discovered early the next day.

Autumn McCullah



CHAPTER 14

Reid and Jake rode back into the corral at twelve thirty that next afternoon. They were late for lunch and both were hungry. They'd moved the six new horses he'd bought to a new pasture and then gone to check on a couple of the new calves. Mother and children were doing fine.

Now, as Reid looked across the drive, there was another strange car in front of the bunkhouse. Did someone put up a sign on the main road to draw people in here? *If Marla is back, I'll strangle her with my bare hands*, he thought glaring at the car.

In the corral, Jake took charge of Dorado. "If you don't get rid of that scowl boss you're gonna' scare the horses."

"Sorry, Jake," Reid said absently as he turned to go see about his new company, whoever they may be. "I'll be ready to ride out to the west range after lunch. I didn't like the looks of that new calf. We might have to bring her in and get Dr. Black out here to see what's wrong."

"Just yell when you're ready," Jake drawled leading the two horses into the stable.

As Reid neared the bunkhouse he noted that the car had rental plates, so whoever was here wasn't a local. He had a great deal to do on the ranch besides over seeing the construction of the new house before he left for New York in a few weeks. He wouldn't mind visitors at all under different circumstances. But now was not a good time.

Entering the living room he found Stan ensconced in his recliner reading the local paper. "Company!" Stan grinned lying the paper aside, extending his arms out to his sides. The look on Reid's face was priceless. He and Anna were only going to stay a couple of days. They couldn't wait any longer to meet this Gabby of Reid's. He got out of the chair to greet his friend.

"Stan? What brings you out of the big city? No problems I hope?" Reid said wrapping the shorter man in a bear hug. "Is Anna with you?"

"Yes she is," the object of his question announced coming from the kitchen wearing jeans, a silk shirt and hiking boots.

"I'm dirty, or I'd give you a hug," Reid said smiling. "You look great!"

"Oh what's a little dirt among friends. Come here," Anna ordered reaching up to wrap her arms around his shoulders as she kissed his cheek. "I haven't seen you in ages."

"You didn't mind hugging me and getting me dirty," Stan protested.

Autumn McCullah



"You're a man. We don't mind a little dirt," Reid shrugged.

"Speak for yourself. I'm a very sanitary person."

"Oh hush up or I'll tell him about time you..."

"I'm quiet woman. Keep your tales to yourself," Stan warned, but his eyes twinkled with laughter.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" Reid asked combing his hand through his hair. "And is my mom here?"

"Your mother was picked up about ten minutes ago by a very handsome man. Griff Palmer is certainly taken with Lily," Anna told him smiling. "And we didn't know until very early this morning that we were coming. It was a spur of the moment decision."

"We talked about it and decided we couldn't wait any longer to see your Wyoming ranch, its new house and Gabby. Not necessarily in that order. So we grabbed a flight, rented a car and here we are," Stan declared. Reid looked a bit ruffled and Stan wasn't sure why.

"So when do we get to meet Gabby?" Anna interjected.

"Mom went out with Griff...again?" Reid ran a hand through his hair. "She just had dinner with him last night. And we had dinner with him the night before that." He was having a difficult time reconciling himself to the fact that his mother was an attractive desirable woman. She was his mother after all, not some...some.

"Yo, Reid! Earth to Reid!" Anna laughed. "Reid, your mother is entitled to some happiness. I only met your father a few times, but he wasn't the warmest person I've ever encountered. Excuse me for being blunt."

"No offense taken, Anna. I'm well aware of what type of person my father was and how he treated mom. I just don't want her to get hurt." But if you don't take risks, how can you know if something is important to you? Or someone?

"Lily can take care of herself, Reid. She didn't survive all those years with Jason McAllister for nothing. I say she should go for the brass ring. And if it's Griff Palmer, more power to her," Stan remarked looking from his wife to Reid.

"You're right. I'm just being over-protective," Reid admitted with a lopsided grin. "Now, you were asking about Gabby. We're all having dinner at her parents home tonight."

"We don't want to interfere, Reid. Stan and I will check into a motel and see you tomorrow," Anna offered. "After all, we didn't give you any warning of our arrival."

"Sorry, no motels," Reid told her openly grinning now. "And I don't have room in the bunkhouse since mom moved in. I'll call Gabby's mother. They have a huge house and I'm sure that she'd be more than happy to put you up."

"Oh Reid, that would be an imposition," Anna said on a sigh.

"Not in this part of the country." He went to the phone and dialed the Stoner number. As luck would have it, Amanda answered on the second ring. He explained the situation and asked his favor.

"Of course you must bring them right over. We have plenty of room and would love to meet Stan and Anna. I'm looking forward to meeting your mother this evening too," Amanda declared warmly.

"Is Gabby there?"



"Yes, and so are most of the grandkids. They're outside somewhere. Do you want to bring them over now so they can get settled in before dinner?" Reid had talked about his friend and his wife so Amanda was anxious to meet them.

"We'll be over in about half an hour if that's okay?" Reid offered.

"See you then, Reid. I'm looking forward to meeting them."

"Room and board all taken care of and you get to meet Gabby as well," Reid said replacing the receiver. "Her parents are Amanda and T.J. Stoner and are terrific people. You'll like them." And they're going to be my in-laws he almost blurted, but thought better of it for the present, although he knew that both Anna and Stan were aware of his plans.

Reid drove his truck while Stan followed in his rental car over to the Stoner ranch. He helped Stan carry their suitcases up the steps to the front door.

Anna was bewildered as she surveyed the sprawling house. "This is magnificent! I've seen pictures of log homes, but I've never been in one before. And your place is going to be even grander."

Just then Amanda opened the door. She'd been watching for their arrival. "Please come in," she said stepping aside so they could enter just as T.J. strolled out of his den

"Anna and Stan Jenkins, these are Gabby's parents, Amanda and T.J. Stoner." Reid said making the introductions. Everyone shook hands.

"We had no idea that there were no motels in Bentridge, Mrs. Stoner," Anna began. "I can't thank you enough for putting us up like this."

"Yes, I'm afraid that we left Los Angeles without much thought except to see Reid. I'd never make a good travel agent," Stan confided.

"We're glad to have you. And we're very informal around here. Please call me Amanda," she said warmly. "Reid and Stan, why don't you take the luggage up to the blue room at the far end of the hall? It has its own bath and a small sitting room so I think you'll be very comfortable there."

"While you get settled, I'll get Ida to make up a pitcher of lemonade. Meet you out on the patio when you're ready," T. J. offered.

Less than ten minutes later they were all settled out on the patio facing the array of outbuildings across the expanse of the huge lawn. There were trees on the other side of the large house and at the back. In the distance were mountains. It was a breathtaking sight.

"You said Gabby was out with the kids?" Reid asked once they were seated.

"I called down to the barn and Ned told me they were trying to catch a runaway piglet. We can walk down that way if you would like to stretch your legs?" T.J. offered.

"I could use a walk," Anna said smiling.

"Let's go then," the older man said pushing back his chair. As they slowly strolled down the private road he pointed out the various buildings.

They had just rounded the barn and were heading towards the back area when a line of mud encrusted beings rounded the far corner. They were prancing up and down and laughing. The group stopped short upon seeing the adults in front of them.

Reid groaned.

T.J. smiled.



"I thought you said Gabby was back here?" Stan asked looking at the two other men.

"She is," Reid said shaking his head.

"Where?" Stan and Anna echoed.

Reid ran a hand over his face. "See the two tallest in the middle? She's the one on the left." He couldn't be sure because of the mud covering them from head to toe, but his guess was that it was her nephew Sam on her right with Kyle, Franklin and James filling in the group. Then he blinked. Was that little Brie on the end?

Anna tried to not smile but it just wouldn't be contained. She was grinning as this unsightly group approached.

Stan looked at Reid. "I knew you preferred the outdoor type," he commented formally then spoiled it all but bursting out with a hearty laugh.

"That's my Gabby," T.J. said proudly. "Always in the middle of noise or dirt. If I had a dollar for every ounce of dirt that girl brought into the house, I could buy the state and have some left over for part of another."

Just then Brie broke free of the group and rushed forward. "Uncle Reid," she gushed wrapping her muddy arms around his legs. "We caught the piglet. He almost got away but Aunt Gabby cornered him so Sam could grab him."

Reid knelt down on one knee to be eye to eye with the little girl. "Did you get him back with this mother?"

"You bet!" Brie said giving him a muddy kiss on the cheek. "Hi," she said looking up at Stan and Anna.

"Hi, yourself," Stan laughed. "Like pigs do you?"

"They're okay. But they sure make a lot of noise when they don't want you to catch them," Brie said thoughtfully.

The remainder of the group drew abreast of T.J. and his guests. "We have company, Gabby. These are friends of Reid's, Stan and Anna Jenkins. This is Gabby, or I think that's her under the crud."

Gabby decided to brazen it out. She started to extend her hand, then thought better of it. "It's nice to meet you both."

"You know, I've heard about mud being good for the complexion. Is Wyoming mud therapeutic too?" Anna asked with a smile. Oh, she liked this young woman. Anyone who could crawl around in mud, and then be presented to guests and act so natural about it, had to be special. Reid was going to have his hands full with this young woman and she had no doubt that he would love every minute of it too.

"Best to be had," Gabby assured her laughing. Her small perfect teeth showed white against her muddied face. *No Marla type here*, Gabby thought happily. This was a warm intelligent woman and she liked her instantly.

"Reid's told us a lot about you, Gabby. But he didn't mention that you were into nature to this degree," Stan interjected.

"Didn't you, Reid dear," Gabby said closing the small distance between them. Before he could react, she jumped up wrapping her arms around his neck to give him a warm but very muddy kiss. The kids began to giggle and the adults burst into laughter.

When the kiss ended, she tried to slide down his body, but he held her pressed to his side with one strong arm. His face and clothing had absorbed some of the mud from

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hers. He looked deep into her eyes but he spoke to T. J. "Isn't there a horse trough around the corner?"

"Sure is. Help yourself," T. J. said with a twinkle in his eyes.

In the blink of an eye, Reid scooped Gabby up into his arms and headed around the corner with the kids laughing and squealing behind him.

"Reid McAllister, you put me down right now! Don't you dare..." was as far as she got before he unceremoniously dumped her into the trough. She came up sputtering and brushing the hair from her face. "You...you brute," she yelled at him splashing water in his direction.

"You didn't think your mother would let you back into the house covered in mud like that, did you? I just did you a favor, piglet," Reid grinned cheekily. He leaned over to rinse off his hands. Just then Kyle and Franklin leaped into the trough sending a wave of water right into his face.

Gabby was pushed under the water but came up laughing and began to splash him again. Reid jumped back just as Brie and James joined the others. There wasn't much room in the trough with Gabby and all the kids but that didn't stop them from laughing and splashing each other.

Stan and Anna stood back with T.J. to watch. Reid's friends were laughing so hard that they had to dab at their eyes. Stan looked at Reid's filthy clothes now muddy and wet and laughed all that much harder.

T.J. determined that most of the mud had washed off the kids so he stepped in closer. "All right now you little ones. Out of that trough and come with me. We'll see if we can get you washed up and changed before your parents get here. Reid, I'll leave Gabby to your care." With this he began herding the kids towards the house. Stan and Anna left with him.

"Dad!" Gabby called but he didn't turn back. Then she looked at Reid and didn't like that gleam in his eyes. "You can just go home and get cleaned up too, McAllister. I believe you and your mother are having dinner with us tonight," she stated trying to ease up and out of the trough.

"Not quite so fast, piglet," he said pushing her back down into the water.

Her eyes widened as he raised a leg over the side into the trough. "What are you doing?"

Reid stepped into the now muddy water and sat down pulling Gabby forward to rest against his chest. "I'm getting cleaned off, piglet. And since you put most of the mud on me, you can help clean it off."

"I will not," she snapped. "Besides, Brie did some too!"

"But Brie is a child and didn't know any better. You did!" Reid said drawing her face up to his.

"Reid I..." His lips covered hers, swallowing whatever she had been about to say. Gabby's mind shut down and her body took over. Running her hands through his thick hair she pressed closer deepening the kiss. Bringing her knees up she straddled his thighs.

Reid was on fire. Vaguely he wondered why the water wasn't boiling by now. His large hand cupped the back of her head holding it captive as his lips moved boldly over hers, loving their softness and taste that was uniquely Gabby. His other hand moved



under the water to caress her nicely rounded bottom and, at the same time, pressed her closer to his hardness.

Gabby had just begun to work at the buttons on his shirt when she heard a familiar voice.

“Jasper, think we ought to throw a bucket of ice on those two?” Jeb cackled as he led his horse out toward the south corral. “Looks like Gabby girl has finally got herself a man.” Jeb had worked on the Stoner ranch for forty years. He’d watched each of the Stoner children grow up, and was particularly fond of Gabby.

Jeb’s voice was like a dash of cold water for both Reid and Gabby. They broke apart as if by mutual consent suddenly realizing where they were and what they’d been doing.

Gabby’s cheeks were aflame. Embarrassment made her voice sharper than intended. “Will you get off me?” she demanded.

“Darlin’, if you look down you’ll see that this time you’re the one on top,” Reid drawled. “I can’t get up until you do.” But then he didn’t know if he could stand. He had a terrible ache and that bucket of ice sure sounded pretty good about now.

Gabby pushed against his chest giving herself the leverage she needed to rise to her feet sloshing water with every move. In a few seconds she was out of the trough. It hadn’t been the most graceful exit, but at least she was back on solid ground. She looked down at herself and groaned. Her shirt clung to her like a second skin and so did her jeans.

Just then Reid stepped out of the trough and Gabby couldn’t help but laugh. He looked just as bad as she did with his dripping clothes and his hair all disheveled and wet. “You’re a mess!”

“I’ll say this for you, piglet. When you’re around I never know what’s going to happen. You never cease to surprise me. By the way, I like the way that shirt clings to your body.” If any of the people he’d known in Los Angeles could see him now, they wouldn’t believe their eyes. The international business tycoon Reid McAllister wallowing around in a horse trough was not something any of them would be able to envision. Until today, neither had Reid. But he’d thoroughly enjoyed it.

Gabby quickly crossed her arms over her chest. Then she sighed dropping them again. “Are you going to stand there all day and let the air dry you off, or would you like to come inside and change?”

“I just came to introduce Stan and Anna to your folks. Now I have to get back to the ranch. But I’ll see you at dinner.” He and Jake had to check on that calf.

“Well at least let me get a towel for you to sit on so you don’t ruin the seat in your truck,” she offered as they began walking towards the house. She grinned at the sloshing sound his boots made as he walked.

As they crossed the road to the house, Reid laid his hand on her shoulder halting her. “I have something in the back of the truck that I can sit on. And I really do have to get back to the ranch. I just followed Stan and Anna over here to meet your parents. And you should know that you’re the main reason Stan and Anna are here in the first place.”

“That makes me feel much better,” she replied rolling her eyes heavenward. “I must have made a great first impression. They must think I’m a nut case.”

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Reid grinned. "You are, but I love you all the more because of it." Gabby opened her mouth to reply but at that moment he leaned down to cover lips with his. "I'll see you at dinner." Then he turned and headed for his truck parked a short distance away.

Gabby stood staring after him for several minutes. Why did he have to be so nice? Why did he have to have such a warm marvelous sense of humor? If he'd been the jerk she'd first assumed she could have resisted his advances. But no...he had to be intelligent, thoughtful and kind. And he loved children!

Marriage had never been one of her top priorities. Maybe that was why she had set such high expectations for a man. That way she would be safe from ever having to face the prospect of becoming seriously involved. Now she had to be honest with herself and admit that all of her essential qualities had been met in big incredibly handsome Reid McAllister. There just wasn't anything to dislike about him...except his tendency to boss her around. Maybe she should keep that trait in mind the next time he kissed her. "Yeah right!" she muttered under her breath as she sat down on the steps to remove her water-logged shoes and socks. Stepping inside the mudroom she grabbed a towel from the cupboard to absorb some of the water still dripping from her clothing. Then she hurried up the back stairs hoping to escape to her room undetected.

That evening her brothers were taking their families to a fair over in Birchfield so all the kids were gone except for the baby. Christa was only four and a half months old so Amanda had gladly offered to keep her for the night. T.J. had fed her some cereal then Gabby pestered him until he let her give the baby a bottle.

Christa wore a one piece yellow sleeper dotted with tiny sunflowers. She'd had her bath and smelled of baby powder. Gabby carried her to the rocking chair next to the closed patio doors and sat down. Christa's large green eyes were wide with anticipation as they looked up at her aunt. Then her little bow lips turned up into a smile and Gabby's heart melted. "You are so beautiful," she said kissing the soft baby cheek and nuzzling her neck. Christa gurgled happily reaching for Gabby's long braid that had flipped over her shoulder.

"Oh no you don't," Gabby laughed flipping the braid back over her shoulder. Then she settled Christa in her arms and presented the bottle that the baby latched on to as if she were starving. As Gabby held the bottle Christa wrapped her hand around one of her aunt's fingers and sighed as she ate.

As Gabby watched Christa, she felt a longing to have a baby herself. She loved children and assumed that someday she would have a family of her own. But if not, then her nieces and nephews would be enough. But now she wasn't so sure. This desire grew as she slowly began rocking and singing softly to the sleepy baby.

This was how Reid found her fifteen minutes later. He had arrived right behind Griff and his mother. T.J. had opened the door and led everyone out to the patio where he was grilling steaks and chicken. After saying 'hello' to everyone, Amanda told him where to find Gabby.

He stood in the open doorway mesmerized by the picture she made with the light from the setting sun streaming through the patio doors. She and the baby seemed encased in a bubble of light. Gabby's head was bent as she sang. One hand gently caressed Christa's smooth cheek as she continued to rock the now sleeping baby.



Reid felt a tightening in his gut. This was how he wanted to see her, only with *his* child in her arms. In his mind he could see her pregnant with his baby, her abdomen rounded and full. She would sleep cradled in his arms, safely tucked close to his body as they slept. He smiled as he thought about feeling their baby move and turn within her body. Just the mere thought of placing his hands on her stomach to feel the baby made his smile widen. Maybe it wasn't only women who had biological clocks that began ticking frantically? He was thirty-six years old and he'd finally found the woman to share his life with and to make babies with. And he was ready!

She was unaware of his presence for several minutes as he continued to just watch this miracle called woman...his woman. She was smart, funny, kind and loving and he adored her. He smiled as he watched her. Gabby might not be very big but he knew that she would be an extremely protective mother. Heaven help anyone who tried to come between her and her child!

He was still smiling when she looked up. No more mud! Her long strawberry blond hair was in a long braid. She'd changed into a full skirt of soft green with a matching ribbed top. She wore white canvas slip on shoes and looked fresh and beautiful. Gabby smiled back and she had no way of knowing that her brown eyes reflected the same longing that possessed Reid. His smile widened as he stepped further into the room.

"Can I hold her?" he asked kneeling down in front of the rocking chair. He reached over to remove the empty bottle from Christa's mouth. She hadn't been sucking, but as soon as the bottle was removed, her little lips made sucking motions before stilling.

"Do you want to sit here?" Gabby asked starting to stand.

"No, I'll just stand." Reid took the small bundle from her arms. He'd held her before and was still amazed at how little she weighed. He hefted bags of feed that were triple her weight. She felt so small and fragile in his arms. "She sure is a pretty little thing. Wade is going to have his hands full when Christa get into high school," he stated looking at Gabby. "Same with Tom and Brie. Now there's one little girl who will be giving the boys a run for their money."

"Brie is special, isn't she?" Gabby laughed.

"They tell me she takes after her Aunt Gabby."

"Then she has a wonderful role model," Gabby said pushing the rocker back into the corner by the door.

"I'll have to talk to your dad about that. He might not view your younger years in the same light," Reid teased.

"I'll have you know that I was a model child!"

"Now why do I have a difficult time believing that?" Reid snorted. "Don't forget, I've talked to your brothers."

"And you go by their distorted version I have no doubt. I bet they didn't tell you how bossy and mean they were to me? They thought they were my father and could tell me what to do. So naturally I rebelled at that."

"As I said, I'll talk to your parents. I'm sure they'll..." was as far as he got because Stan interrupted from the doorway.

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"Hey you two, dinner is about ready. Amanda sent me in to find you," he said coming to stand beside Reid. "Anyone ever tell you that you're a natural?" he asked nodding at the baby in Reid's arms.

"Naturally. Everything I do is perfection. I'm a paragon of masculinity. I'm a skilled and thoughtful lover. I'm..."

"I'm going to be sick if this outpouring of masculine conceit continues much longer," Gabby contended with a grimace. The man was too much. Trouble was, he was right, especially that part about lover. She reached for the baby hoping her face wasn't getting red. Just thinking about making love with Reid again made her flush.

Stan roared with laughter then quieted when he realized he might wake the baby. "It is getting rather deep in here, Gabby. Remind me to wear my waders next time I compliment him," he said nodding at Reid.

"Better make that hip boots," she said smiling sweetly as she left the room to put Christa to bed.

Later that night, Reid stood at his bedroom window looking out into the darkness. Dinner had been wonderful as usual. No one besides Gabby's brothers could grill like T.J. Amanda and Lily hit it off immediately spending most of the evening talking, that is when Lily wasn't sitting close to Griff. It was obvious to everyone that those two were enamored with each other and delighted about this turn of events. It was only Reid who frowned now and then when he saw his mother wrapped in Griff's arms. This was taking some adjustment on his part.

Anna and Stan happily gave their approval about Gabby as soon they'd had a moment alone with Reid after dinner. Stan because he'd finally met a woman who wasn't crawling all over Reid to gain his attentions and actually sassed him; Anna because they had so much in common despite the age difference. And Reid was special to her, so any woman who could make him smile and laugh, as he did so often now, was okay in her books. At least that's what she'd told him when he was getting ready to leave.

While the table was being cleared and coffee and dessert readied, Stan and Reid had gone for a stroll down towards the main barn. Stan had used the excuse that he needed to discuss a business issue the Reid. But as soon as they were out of earshot he got directly to the point. "Does Gabby know anything about your plans to accompany her to Madagascar yet?"

"No! And she won't until she gets to New York. I told you that. Why?" Reid asked somewhat puzzled by Stan's interest.

"Well, now that I've actually met the young lady, I don't know how she's going to take that little surprise. Are you sure that you know what you're doing? It could all blow up in your face," Stan warned. It was plain that Reid was deeply in love with Gabby, but he wasn't quite so sure about her. And he didn't want to see Reid hurt again.

Reid actually smiled. "Oh, she's going to be mad as hell. But I happen to know that this trip is something she's planned for and looked forward to for a long time. She won't back out no matter what. Even if it means that she has to become my wife."

"She could make your life hell after the marriage. Ever think of that?"

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Reid shook his head. “Gabby’s not like that. Besides once we’re married, I’ll be by her side constantly during the expedition, day *and* night. It can get pretty cozy in a sleeping bag in a tent at night.”

“Well, I wish you luck. And Anna told me to tell you that you had better not do anything to hurt Gabby. She’s taken quite a liking to her already,” Stan said as they turned to retrace their steps back to the house.

There was a full moon that acted as a backdrop for Cody and Florence’s house just beyond the bunkhouse. Reid studied it now with a critical eye and made a decision. As soon as his house was completed, he’d get Florence looking at house plans. He tried to concentrate on that project but Gabby kept popping into the picture. Try as he could, he couldn’t keep her from his thoughts. Damn but he wanted to be alone with her! Tonight had been fun, but they hadn’t had much time for just the two of them.

At least now he had tomorrow to look forward to and that made him smile. Amanda and T.J. were taking Stan and Anna on a sight seeing tour of the area and planned to be gone most of the day. They had invited Lily and Griff but those two had plans of their own. This left Reid free to spend the day, or part of it anyway, with Gabby. She had rehearsal in town in the morning but promised to be home by one. They were going riding and he’d already asked Florence to pack a picnic lunch. With this thought to warm him, Reid climbed back into bed and tried to get to sleep.



CHAPTER 15

Gabby had only been home about fifteen minutes when she heard Reid talking to Ida as she descended the stairs after changing her clothes. When she entered the kitchen Ida was in the process of handing a foil wrapped bundle to Reid. He had told her not to worry about food because he would have Florence fix up something for them. Now she wondered what Ida was up to.

“What’s that?” Gabby asked grabbing an oatmeal raisin cookie from a plate on the counter. She noticed that Reid was also munching on one.

“I know you said that Florence was making lunch, so I made something for your dessert. They’re my chocolate fudge bars with plenty of nuts,” Ida said smiling up at Reid. “All men love chocolate.”

“So do women,” Gabby said trying to reach around Ida to grab one on a plate.

Ida slapped at her hand. “Those are for you brothers. Besides, you don’t want to spoil your lunch. Now get out of here so I can get back to work.” Ida ushered them out of the back door.

Gabby and Reid stood on the porch looking at each other. Reid spoke first. “Why do I have the feeling that we’ve just been thrown out of your house?” he asked with a lopsided grin. Right now he didn’t care where he was as long as Gabby was by his side.

She looked up at him with a smile of her own. “Ida’s not the most subtle person I’ve ever met. I think this is her way of getting us alone.”

“Remind me to send her some flowers,” he replied taking her hand as they started across the yard to the waiting horses. “Hope you don’t mind, but I had Pegasus saddled so we could leave as soon as you were dressed. We only have a few hours before you have to be back to get ready for tonight. And I don’t want to waste any time.”

“Then let’s hit the trail McAllister. Besides, I’m famished. What did you bring for lunch?” she asked mounting Pegasus.

“Fried chicken, homemade biscuits, fruit and a bottle of wine. And the fudge bars,” he added. “We won’t have a long ride before we can eat.”

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"Where are you taking me anyway," Gabby asked as they rode side by side heading back towards Reid's property.

"Know that small old cabin up in the north side of the ranch? Near that small lake?"

She nodded, remembering swimming in that cold water when she was much younger. She and Carolyn Putnam used to ride up there and swim in their underwear. Their parents would have had a fit if they'd known about it.

"There's a cluster of trees on the west side of the lake with a view of the mountains that is fantastic. What better place to enjoy the company of a beautiful lady and good food?" He'd also brought along a nice thick blanket to lie on.

They rode in companionable silence until they came to the small lake. Gabby hadn't been up here in several years. She gasped at the beauty of her surroundings. The water on the lake was so still it looked like glass. From their position facing the mountains she could see their peaks, and the trees across the way reflected on the surface of the water. It looked like a picture postcard. "Oh Reid, this is beautiful! I'd forgotten how lovely, how peaceful it was over here. Carolyn and I used to swim in that lake. The water is freezing so you have to just jump in, but it was wonderful as long as you stayed under the water."

"I came across this spot a few weeks ago and fell in love with it. We'll ride around to that clump of trees on the far side. Then you can decide where you want to spread the blanket for our feast," Reid said leading her to the left and around the water.

While Reid unsaddled the horses, Gabby located a smooth shaded place under the trees a short distance from the water's edge. She spread the blanket, then retrieved the saddlebag that contained their meal and laid it on the edge of the blanket. She walked to the edge of the lake breathing in the clean scent of the trees and air. She heard Reid behind her just before his arms came around her drawing her close against his body. She almost melted into his warmth.

When his lips brushed against the side of her neck her knees almost buckled. Her head dropped to one side allowing him easier access to her throat. His lips were warm and whisper soft against her skin. "I've missed you," he said huskily turning her around in his arms. His large hands cupped her face. "Bentridge might be a small town but there have been too many people around lately. There's been no time or place for us to be alone. I've discovered that I don't like sharing you with anyone. I've been told once or twice that I'm a selfish bastard. Maybe they were right. I want you all to myself," he groaned as his mouth slanted over hers in a kiss of possession.

Reid pulled her up against his rock hard body; one strong arm holding her tight against him as his other hand cupped her bottom bringing her closer to his hardness. One kiss, one touch and he was on fire. He lifted his head briefly to look down into her chocolate brown eyes and saw his own need reflected there. Once again his mouth covered hers, his tongue teasing her lips apart before delving in for a full tasting.

Gabby wrapped her arms around his waist pulling his shirt up to touch his bare back. She felt his muscles tighten under her exploring fingers. She wanted to touch more of him. Bringing her hands forward she began unbuttoning the front of his shirt. When her fingers touched his masculine nipple he released her lips on a gasp of pure pleasure. She took advantage of this to press her lips to the broad expanse of bared chest and was

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rewarded with a low moan. She wasn't sure if it was hers or his, but it didn't matter. Her hands trailed down his chest to the buckle on his jeans where she hesitated.

Reid was breathing heavily as he scooped Gabby up into his arms striding back toward the trees and the blanket. He stopped at the edge of the dark blue material letting Gabby slide to the ground. Then he gently reached out to undo the buttons on her blouse. Slowly he slid the material down her arms before pulling it off and dropping it onto the blanket. His fingers deftly worked at the front clasp on her bra. That flimsy scrap of material was quickly discarded. His large hands cupped her firm small breasts, kneading slowly before rubbing the hardened nubs with the pad of his thumbs.

Gabby didn't know how much longer her legs were going to hold her upright. She felt her breasts swell under his masterful touch; felt that coil begin to tighten in promise of wondrous delight. He bent as his lips covered one rosy peak drawing it deeply into his mouth. She watched as he suckled greedily. Her head fell back as the pleasure became almost unbearable. When he reached down to unzip her jeans she was beyond caring about anything except him and the heights of pleasure they were going to share. The jeans wouldn't pull over her boots so he lowered her to the ground before pulling them off for her. Then he peeled the jeans from her slender legs. She wore only skimpy peach silk panties.

When he pressed her back down on the blanket she wrapped her arms around his neck pulling him down with her. The weight of his body was a pleasure all by itself. She pulled his mouth to hers arching her back to get closer to him. The feel of her naked breasts pressed against his bare chest made her want to feel more of him. He kissed her eyes, her nose and her lips before moving down her throat to her breasts. He laved the hard buds as if they were treasures before moving down as his tongue circled her navel.

Gabby gasped. "Reid!" she cried when his fingers brushed aside her panties to cup the apex at her thighs. As he stroked her, she writhed under him gasping as his fingers stroked that magic nub. Unashamedly she arched her back inviting this intimate touch. She was breathing heavily as she clawed at his shoulders wanting, needing to feel the length of him against her body.

Sensing her readiness, Reid stopped only long enough to rid himself of the rest of his own clothing before covering Gabby with his body. He entered her with one hard thrust evoking a sigh of wondrous delight from them both. She arched upward trying to deepen his penetration. Reid smiled against her lips as he withdrew before plunging forward once again.

Gabby felt herself spiraling towards that pinnacle of pleasure with each deep thrust as Reid's chest caressed her breasts. She ran trembling hands over his hair-roughened chest, down to just below his waist and back up again. With each touch of her hands against his bare skin Reid plunged harder and deeper. When she traced his nipple with her tongue he lost control. He clutched at her long hair pulling her head up to receive his kiss. She felt the coil burst into a rainbow of tingling pleasure as her body went rigid mere seconds before Reid drove deep into her woman's warmth before collapsing on top of her.

Their breathing was harsh and seemed unnaturally loud in this private quiet glade. Gabby ran her fingers through his hair loving the feel and fullness. She couldn't have moved if the blanket had caught fire. Every muscle in her body must have done a meltdown. She had no idea that making love would be this wonderful. She'd never met



anyone before Reid who had even come close to making her more curious about it. It was only this man who had the magic touch to make her want to know more, to experience the pleasure and warmth shared by a man and a woman.

She loved his touch; she loved his intelligence and humor; she loved his kindness and understanding; she loved... Her mind froze. No! She wasn't ready for that commitment. And that's what love was...it was a commitment. When you said those words to someone it was like saying a vow or so she truly believed.

Reid sensed a change in her. He raised up on his elbows to look down into her flushed face. "Regrets?" he asked tentatively. "I love you, piglet. I think I have from the moment you pushed me into that pool," he admitted gently pushing the hair from her face.

Gabby stared into his gorgeous green eyes. She wet her lips with the tip of her tongue. "No regrets," she whispered. "It was wonderful. You make me feel so whole, so complete." She traced the square line of his jaw with a finger.

He kissed the tip of her nose. "When someone says 'I love you', it's okay to repeat it back to them," he teased watching her closely.

She looked away before facing him once again. "I do care for you, Reid. But talking about love for me is a commitment and I don't know if I'm ready for that yet." She looked down at their naked bodies still joined and sighed. "That must sound strange under the circumstances. But that's how I feel and I can't change. It's so easy and convenient to say those words, especially in the heat of passion. They're just not words to me, Reid. They have true meaning. I'm probably not making any sense."

Now it was his turn to sigh. This wasn't what he wanted to hear, but she was being completely honest with him. And if he considered what he knew about her and her background, she wouldn't be making passionate love with him if she didn't truly care. If there was one thing that he loved about her, it was her honesty and her devotion to those she cared about.

"I won't say that I'm not disappointed. But I think I understand where you're coming from, piglet. When you finally say those three little words to me, that will make them all the more precious." He kissed her eyes and the side of her mouth. "I'm a patient man and I'm not going anywhere."

Gabby grinned up at him. Her eyes held a devilish glint that made him frown. "I know you're not McAllister," she murmured against his lips. Then she wrapped her legs around his hips. "I'll make you one promise now. You're going to be very tired when we ride out of here."

His smile of delight could have lit up the Grand Canyon. "You think so, do you?" He was so happy that he wanted to laugh; he wanted to shout it to the world.

She could feel his male hardness filling her and she smiled as she began rocking slowly. "Have somewhere else you'd rather be?"

Reid took a deep breath forcing his lungs to work. He was already hard and aching. "Only buried deep inside you, piglet. Only right here," he said against her lips as he proceeded to make slow passionate love to the only woman who could ever share his life.



A short time later they sat facing each other on the blanket practically inhaling the tasty chicken and biscuits Florence had provided. Gabby closed her eyes as her teeth bit into the tender piece of white meat. She sighed in pleasure.

Reid smiled his own satisfaction as he watched her eat. "Work up an appetite did you?" he teased taking a bite of the fluffy biscuit. She looked so adorable sitting there wrapped up in his shirt. It was so big on her that he had to roll the sleeves several times so she could use her hands.

"I don't think food has ever tasted so wonderful," she mumbled around the bite of chicken. She gave him a saucy smug smile. "If I wasn't so hungry I don't think I could have summoned up the energy to move."

He laughed. "I'll take that as a compliment, piglet. I'm feeling pretty wonderful myself." It dawned on him then that it was true. He truly felt whole and happy and...content for the first time in his life.

For her part, Gabby was having a difficult time concentrating on the food even as hungry as she was. Having Reid's broad expanse of naked chest just in her line of vision was distracting to say the least. Maybe donning his shirt hadn't been such a good idea after all. If he were covered she wouldn't be tempted to crawl over the blanket and have him for lunch. *Get a grip, Gabby* she thought to herself. *This lust for lunch could easily become habit forming.*

When they were done eating, Reid stowed everything back into the saddlebag. Gabby sat finishing her glass of wine. She licked her lips before addressing the subject that had been on her mind for over a week now.

"Reid, I have a favor to ask of you."

He picked up his glass to take a sip. "It's yours if I can. What do you want?" he asked curious now.

She glanced over at Dorado and Pegasus. They were standing side by side near the water. "Pegasus has never mated. If it's okay with you, I'd like her to mate with Dorado. Do you think he'd mind?" Gabby asked tentatively.

Reid glanced over at the horses. Dorado had inched up close to Pegasus. "I don't think he'd mind one bit. While you're on your trip, why don't you leave her at my place? Cody can keep an eye on them for you."

Gabby's smile was beaming. "That would be terrific." She looked back to the horses. "They'll have such a beautiful baby."

Reid felt himself harden as he watched Gabby as she thought about their horses. As he watched, she reclined on one elbow her legs stretched out, but only a portion showing from the shirttails. Gabby's babies would be beautiful too. Gabby's and his. The mere thought made him smile. He wanted her again. This had never happened to him before. In the past once he'd made love to a woman, he'd been content. Hell, he'd already made love with her twice and here he was ready again.

Tossing his wine aside he lie down next to Gabby.

She looked up at him unconscious of the dreamy invitation in her dark eyes. All she was aware of was the warmth from his big body engulfing her and the gleam in his green eyes, dark as a storm filled sea.

He moved one large hand and began to unbutton the shirt. Once this task was complete he slowly spread the sides of the shirt wide allowing his eyes to feast on what no other man had ever seen. Taking only seconds he pulled off his jeans before covering

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her body with his. His large hands cupped her face as he rained kisses over her eyes and lips. "You may be a little late getting back home, piglet," he said hoarsely.

Gabby sighed into his mouth. "They can start the show without me."

For some time, the only sounds in that small-secluded glade were their sighs of pleasure and delight as they were carried on the soft breeze through the trees.

Reid was still whistling after his shower as he dressed for the show in town. Gabby wasn't going to be late for the show, but they had returned later than planned. He'd wanted to pick her up but she insisted that since she had to be there early, she should drive herself. He didn't argue with her but when it came time for her to drive home, he planned to follow her right up to her front door to be sure that she got home safe.

He found his mother in the kitchen. It still amazed him at the change in her since she'd come to Bentrige. She even appeared younger, more vibrant than he could ever remember seeing her.

"Reid, I have a favor. Could I ride into town with you? Griff wanted to pick me up, but I told him it was ridiculous for him to drive all the way out here when you would be coming into town anyway."

"Sure mom. You didn't even have to ask." He hesitated. "You're spending a lot of time with Griff." It was a statement and a question all in one.

Lily had been anticipating this from her son. She smiled. "Reid, Griff is such a wonderful man. I never knew that such men existed. He makes me laugh. He makes me feel special just because I'm me. I don't have to have pretend to be someone that I am not." She took hold of his hand. "For the first time in my life I'm having fun. I'm fifty-seven years old and it's taken me this long to discover something that most people take for granted. Does that make any sense to you?"

Reid thought about his father, about his rigid sense of business first. He nodded. Now that he really thought about it, he could never remember seeing his mother so at ease with people and her surroundings. She seemed truly happy for the first time in his life. If Griff were responsible for this, then more power to him. He thought about Gabby and how much she'd changed his own life in a short time. "It makes perfect sense, mom. I don't think I knew what being really happy meant until I came here. But you haven't known Griff all that long and I don't want you to get hurt."

"There's one thing that I've learned, Reid. If you don't take risks, you'll never learn and never chance the wonderful experiences that I'm living now. For close to forty years I lived the neat safe life that your father set for us. It's taken me until this past year to learn that I can step outside the perimeters he set and live a life of *my* choosing. And it's wonderful!" She wasn't ready to tell him that Griff had already asked her to marry him. She'd told Griff that she needed more time, but in reality, she'd already made up her mind to say yes. Her only regret was that she'd wasted so much of her life trying to live up to someone else's standards.

Reid hugged his mother close. "Be happy, mom."

Lily smiled up at her son. "Does Gabby realize that she's off the marriage market yet? Or are you still going slowly?"

"She's still fighting her feelings but I have no doubt that she'll come around," he told her confidently. But deep inside there was just the tiniest shred of doubt. Why

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couldn't she commit to him fully? He didn't know what he would do if in the end Gabby refused to live with him as his wife. Reid pushed these bothersome thoughts aside to concentrate on his mother. "You look wonderful, as usual, mom."

Lily laughed as she twirled around to show him her dress. The theme for tonight, appropriately enough, was romance and more formal than any of the other shows. She wore a long delicate lavender dress. The full skirt had accordion pleats and a simple top with cap sleeves and a square neck. Her only jewelry was matching lavender earrings. "I asked Amanda what would be appropriate for tonight and she assured me that this was fine. And I have a surprise for you later."

"What kind of a surprise?" Reid asked not sure if he liked the sound of that or not.

"You'll just have to wait and see," was her curt reply. She eyed his dress slacks and pale green long sleeved shirt. "Are you going to wear a tie and jacket?"

"Nope. Tom told me they were optional because most of the men consider dress slacks as formal in themselves." He would take the jacket if she insisted, but he didn't really want to wear one. Reid was relieved when Lily made no further comment. "If you're ready, we can leave now," he said extending his arm to her. Then arm in arm they went out to his waiting car.

As soon as they arrived at the park, Griff was there to steal Lily away. Reid just shook his head as he watched them walk towards the gazebo. Then he spotted Gabby talking to Devra and Doc Shanahan. He smiled. He couldn't help it. She looked so beautiful in a long dress of green and white gingham with matching green shoes. Her long hair was pulled back with wisps of curls caressing her cheeks. No matter what Gabby wore she looked wonderful. Even in mud. This thought made him smile even more.

She spotted him and waved.

"You clean up pretty good McAllister," she grinned when he joined them.

"I was going to say the same about you Stoner," he returned. Then he turned to Devra and Doc. "I hear that the music tonight is going to be extra special."

Devra gave him a saucy grin. "Romance is in the air tonight. I hope your waltzing is up to par?" With this parting shot she winked before heading for the gazebo.

Doc laughed. "Plenty of singing and dancing tonight. Don't forget to ask him," he said to Gabby before he too walked away leaving Reid and Gabby alone.

"Ask who what?" Reid asked narrowing his eyes. He hadn't liked the sound of that.

She batted her eyes trying to appear innocent. It didn't come off.

"Out with it, piglet. What are you up to?"

"Now don't say a word until I'm done. Next week is the last show and it's the talent show."

Reid started shaking his head.

"I said let me finish," Gabby said with her hands on her hips. "Ned Black's wife, Susie, is due to have their baby and it looks like it could be next week. Doc and I always do a duet at the talent show and he wants to know if you can fill in for him this year? And don't tell me that you can't sing because I've heard you, and you're great," she told him emphatically.

"Gabby, I don't sing in public. And I haven't in years. I'll coach any sport you want; I'll help build anything; I'll be in a rodeo, but don't ask me to sing," Reid stated

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just as emphatically. He'd sung in a group in college for a couple of years, but that was a long time ago.

She just looked up at him with those deep brown eyes. "Your mother said that you used to sing. Why can't you do it this one time? Please? We'll pick a real easy number, I promise."

He was going to have to talk with his mother. He wondered what else she might have told Gabby. Then he grinned. How could he say no to her? He loved music and he loved her. In Bentridge they went hand in hand. "You make it something real easy, piglet," he relented running his hand over his hair. "How do I let you talk me into these things?"

Gabby reached up to kiss him lightly on the lips. "Because you're wonderful! I have to get ready but I'll see you for the dancing. Mom and dad are sitting over in the middle about half way up," she told him before dancing away towards the other performers.

Doc Shanahan began the show singing 'What Kind of Fool' and did two other ballads. Then Devra took the spotlight in a long sapphire blue dress with a high waistline to accommodate her growing figure. She sang 'I Believe' and had everyone on their feet at the end of the song.

Several others sang songs from Broadway shows or old Hollywood musicals. Even the younger children in the audience appeared spell bound with the music and singing. Reid was really enjoying himself. Then he sat bolt upright in his seat when Griff walked into the spotlight with Lily. His mother sang? He recalled hearing her humming once in a while, but he didn't think he could ever remember her actually singing. Griff put his arms around Lily as they began singing 'For Me and My Gal'.

As they sang, Reid couldn't keep the grin from spreading across his face. His mother was actually performing in public. And she was damned good too! When the song ended he was the first on his feet as everyone clapped.

T.J. leaned over to whisper to him once they sat back down. "Wait until you hear Amanda and me next week. I sound like a bullfrog with a cold, but if I stay further back from the microphone what you hear is mostly Amanda singing. And she's got a terrific voice. Gabby takes after her mother, thank goodness!"

"You don't sound as if you mind getting hauled onto the stage," Reid commented with a smile at the older man.

"Nah. If they can stand to hear me croak why should it bother me? Years ago Amanda pestered me until I said yes. Now it's kind of fun," T.J. told him with a wink.

Reid frowned. He looked at T.J. "I think I've been had. Your daughter has me singing with her next week."

T.J. slapped his knee laughing. "Told you she was like her mother. Never a dull moment and that's a fact."

Just then the object of his thoughts walked onto center stage. Her first number was 'My Man'. Reid sat mesmerized. Lord but could she sing! Her voice rang clear and pure. He glanced at T.J. and thought he saw some moisture in the older man's eye.

Her final song was rousing rendition of 'Treat Her Like A Lady'. When the last notes wafted away on the wind everyone was on their feet and clapping. Gabby took a bow and left the stage. Seconds later all the performers returned for a final bow.

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The remainder of the evening would be devoted to dancing and eating. Tables had been set up to the right of the gazebo with coffee and soft drinks and all kinds of snacks and pastries. Reid was ready for something cold to drink so he went to find Gabby so they could get something together. The rest of the evening he spent dancing with his ladylove.

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CHAPTER 16

Reid stood looking out of the hotel window. He'd been in New York for two days. Gabby was due to arrive in less than an hour and the closer this meeting came the more concerned he became. He had no doubt that she was going to be furious with him and, if he was going to be honest with himself, she probably had every right. But he just couldn't let her go off on this trip by herself, especially since they'd become lovers. He needed her in his life. And he needed to be in hers whether she was ready to admit it or not.

He'd met with the team leader, Jim Birch, several times and liked him. He was a no nonsense man who expected the members of his group to follow his orders. Where they were going was not going to be a walk in the park, and if you didn't follow the recommendations of an expert, you could get into serious trouble. Reid could tell that Jim wasn't too sure about this situation between him and Gabby, but he was following orders from those above him, namely Kevin Jennings and Nolan Pharmaceuticals.

Reid smiled as he recalled the talent show last Saturday. It had been a resounding success. And his duet with Gabby hadn't been as difficult as he'd imagined it would be. They'd sung 'Friendship' and he'd actually enjoyed it. All of the Stoner grandchildren had sung 'Row Row Your Boat' and another group of youngsters had performed a perfect square dance number. Amanda and T.J. had sung 'Sentimental Journey'. Reid thought that T.J. sounded pretty good. At least he hadn't sounded like a frog.

The past week had been pretty hectic. Gabby had a lot of loose ends about her book to clear up, and he had a lot at the ranch to cover with Cody before he'd left for New York. Cody was the only one who knew what Reid had planned. He'd had to tell him because he was going to be gone much longer than the few days everyone else believed. Reid couldn't just dump all that on Cody after he'd left. The older man was pleased about Reid and Gabby getting married. He just wasn't too sure about the way Reid was going about it because he didn't want either one of them to get hurt.

Reid had asked Gabby to come over to the ranch several times to get her opinion on different things about the new house...tile...colors...and furniture for the master

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bedroom. He figured that she could do the rest of the house after their marriage when they returned home. Of course he hadn't been able to tell her that.

Reid glanced down at his watch...almost noon. He took a deep breath, turned and went out the door heading for Jim's suite down the hall. Gabby would be meeting him there soon. Then the fur would start to fly.

Gabby's flight and arrival in New York was uneventful. After reclaiming her luggage she hailed a cab and headed for her hotel. They would be leaving for Africa very early the next morning. During the cab ride she reviewed her checklist to be sure that she hadn't forgotten anything. Most of the supplies were being handled by the expedition leaders, so all she really had to tend to was personal items and her stock of film. Her cameras were safely packed in her carry-on case. There was no way she was going to leave them with her regular luggage.

Once at the hotel, a porter carried her bags inside. When Gabby approached the front desk and gave her name, she was told she had a message. The stylish young woman in the blue and green suit gave her a folded piece of paper. It was from Jim Birch asking her to come to his suite for a meeting as soon as she arrived. It was urgent! Gabby frowned. She hoped there wasn't some snag in the plans that would delay their trip. Shrugging she picked up a pen to sign in.

"You have already been registered, Miss Stoner. You are in suite 5-B," she said handing Gabby the room card for the door.

Gabby glanced down at the message in her hand. It did say urgent. "Please have my things taken up for me." She handed the porter a generous tip before heading for the elevator. Jim was on the same floor so she rode up with the porter and her luggage.

She stopped at 5-A and rang the bell. A tall man in jeans and a white tee shirt opened it almost immediately. His dark brown hair was fashionably long and streaked with gray, as was his mustache. She guessed he was in his late forties or early fifties.

"Mr. Birch? I'm Gabby Stoner," she said extending her hand. It was engulfed in his large tanned one.

He smiled extending his hand. "Good to meet you at last, Gabby Stoner. Please, come in." He held the door so she could proceed him into the living room. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"No thank you. I'm fine. Your note said it was urgent that I see you immediately. I hope there are no problems about the trip?" she asked hopefully.

He motioned for her to sit on one of the plush sofas. "Not a problem exactly. Well, I guess that depends on how you look at it," he amended running a hand through his hair.

Gabby was confused. Jim appeared ill at ease for some reason. And it wasn't exactly a problem, but yet it apparently was one. "Suppose you just tell me what has come up and we'll discuss it," she told him plainly.

"Okay. The expedition has had a change in backers. Or I should say that the major portion of the backing has come from one source and they've requested a say in how the trip is handled. I guess that there is no easy way to say this, Gabby. Their recommendation is that there will be no unmarried women on the trip. Especially a young attractive woman. They don't believe it would be safe or in the best interests of



the expedition.” Jim could feel the heat rising in his face. He’d rather face a herd of charging rhino than be here right now.

Gabby just stared at him for several seconds. “That is the biggest load of crap I’ve ever heard,” she snapped getting up to pace on the other side of the sofa. “What has my not being married have to do with my qualifications? That is discrimination if I’ve ever heard it. Who are these new investors? I’ll talk to them myself.”

She hadn’t heard the door open but saw Jim turn to look towards the other side of the room. Her mouth dropped open.

“I’m the investor, Gabby. Thank you, Jim. I’ll take it from here,” Reid said as he covered the distance to come and stand next to the sofa.” He could see Gabby gearing up and didn’t see any reason for the other man to have to hear what he knew was coming.

“I’ll be making some calls in the lounge downstairs,” Jim said as he made a hasty retreat.

Gabby could only stare for several long seconds. Then the implication of what Reid had said hit her. “You’re one of the investors? But all this time you never said one word about being involved?” Something wasn’t quite right here and she had the sinking feeling that she wasn’t going to like what he had to say.

“I wasn’t involved until about six weeks ago,” Reid said softly.

“Six weeks! Why didn’t you say something?”

“I thought you might be upset at the news. And since our relationship was so new, I didn’t want to rock the boat,” Reid hedged. But it was the truth up to a point. He knew that he’d have to make a complete confession, but he hoped to drain off some of her anger before they reached that point.

“Why would it upset me? I’ve been on expeditions before and knew who the backers were. I even met most of them.”

“This was a special circumstance, piglet,” Reid explained taking a chair across from the sofa.

“What makes this one special? It’s rather a straightforward trek into the forest of Madagascar. We don’t even have to have much special equipment.”

“*You* make this one special,” he drawled staring deep into her brown eyes.

“Me? I’m just a photographer and writer. I’ll...” she stopped to stare down at him. “Unless...*you’re* the one behind this marriage rubbish! Aren’t you?” Gabby snapped. She began pacing around the room.

“It was one of the stipulations that I insisted on, yes.”

“One of them! I take it there are more than one? Please do enlighten me, Mr. McAllister. Or do I have to wait for Jim to do your dirty work for you?” she all but shouted.

Reid took a deep breath. “There’s only one more.” He stopped to study her. Lord but she was beautiful! Her long hair was pulled back into a long braid down her back. She was wearing khaki slacks with a white ribbed pullover shirt and white canvas shoes. She looked fresh and vibrant. And mad as hell.

“And?” she asked tapping her foot on the thick white carpet.

“I go on the trip with you,” he said slowly.

“What?” she gasped. “Why in the hell would you want to do that? You do realize that we’re going into the jungle. There won’t be any luxuries there. I can’t



understand why..." she stopped her pacing to glare at him. "Why the marriage part, Reid?"

He stood then to stand closer to her, but she backed away putting the sofa between them. "I couldn't let you go off alone, piglet. I have to be with you," he said raising his hands then dropping them to his sides.

"You could just go along then. Why the marriage part? And don't try to skirt around the subject. You're the one who brought it up and we're going to get this cleared up now!"

"You're right. I could have just gone along, but I'd have to sleep in a separate tent. And I want you by my side day *and* night. The only way to accomplish that is for us to get married," he said closely watching for her reaction. "And I do love you, piglet. Love makes a man do things that he normally wouldn't even consider," Reid said reaching for her hand.

Gabby stepped back out of his reach. "If you really love me, you wouldn't have gone behind my back this way. You really are a jerk, Reid McAllister! And here I was beginning to think you were someone special." All of a sudden she wanted to cry and wasn't quite sure why.

"I do love you. Would I go to these lengths just on a lark? Think about it, piglet. What we've shared has been more than special; it's been extraordinary in every way. When we said goodbye at the airport you said that you were going to miss me. Did you mean that or were you just pretending?" he asked pointedly.

"Of course I meant it," she hissed. "I don't say things that I don't mean. And honesty means a great deal to me. And you haven't been honest. If you were, you would have said something to me about this back in Bentrige," she told him accusingly.

"Maybe I should have. But I didn't. So we have to work with the situation now," Reid stated quietly.

Gabby eyed him warily. "Okay. If you made that rule about marriage, then you can change it."

"No."

Gabby glared at him. "No? Why not? Because let me tell you, I'm going on this expedition whether you like it or not." Now her stubborn streak came surging to the surface. This trip had been set for months and she wasn't about to let Reid McAllister or anyone else ruin it for her.

"If you don't marry me, you won't be going anywhere but back to Bentrige," Reid told her bracing for the backlash.

"I don't have to marry you or anyone. This isn't legal and you know it," she said sticking out her chin.

Reid smiled and shrugged. "So sue me. By the time it gets into court, the expedition will be history."

"You're an ass!"

"Marry me and go or be stubborn and stay here," Reid said simply folding his arms across his chest. Two could play at this game.

"There are always other options. We could..." was as far as she got before he interrupted her.

"There are only two options in this case, piglet. Marry me or not marry me. You have to decide now."

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A thought hit her and she smiled. “We would need a marriage license and there isn’t enough time since we leave in the morning. So you’re options have been narrowed down to only one. I go unmarried.”

Reid grinned now. “I have the license and a judge lined up at city hall to marry us at four thirty this afternoon. Back to the original two options open.”

“You’re just like my brothers, always thinking that you know what’s best for me. Well, I’m a grown woman, Reid, and I won’t be bullied. You had no right to make all these plans behind my back,” she railed at him as she stalked around the room. She felt like throwing something at him but knew that wouldn’t help the situation. Might make her feel better, but it wouldn’t solve a thing.

She knew he was right about a lawsuit. It wouldn’t do her a bit of good now. Then an idea began to take shape. She could be just as devious as he had been with her. Gabby went to stand to look out the large window as her mind raced to formulate her plan.

“Marry me, piglet,” Reid said from directly behind her.

She hadn’t heard him cross the thick carpet. Sticking out her chin, she turned to face him. “All right, I’ll marry you, Reid. But it will only be for the duration of the expedition and...and it will a marriage in name only. And you will not say a word to my family about this. Because when we return to New York, we can get it annulled without anyone every knowing about it.”

Reid grinned and looked at his watch. “Do you want to change before we leave for the court house? We really don’t have much time.”

“I see no reason to dress up. Do you? Let’s get this over with so we can get ready to leave in the morning,” she said shortly. Now that she’d agreed, she was somehow disappointed that they would be married all alone with just the judge and a couple of witnesses. Oh hell, what did it matter? It wasn’t going to be a real marriage anyway.

The judge who married them was very impersonal, as were the two secretaries who witnessed the ceremony. When it was over, Judge Marshall shook their hands and wished them the best before he returned to his courtroom. Gabby stood like a statue not sure what to do next.

“We’re having dinner with Jim and three other members of the group at seven, so we’d better get back to the hotel,” Reid said placing his hand under her elbow to lead her out of the judge’s chambers. “We’ll have time to change before we’re due in the dining room.”

“Our first appearance as man and wife?” Gabby snipped, then wished she could call the words back.

“Something like that,” Reid said guiding her out of the building and into a cab. He could barely keep the smile from his face. She was his wife!

The ride in the cab back to the hotel was a silent one, but not uncomfortable. Both Reid and Gabby were lost in their own thoughts and concerns. When they reached the hotel Reid paid the cab driver then helped Gabby out of the car. He took her elbow in his hand to guide her into the building.

They rode the elevator up to the fifth floor. Gabby headed for suite 5-B and was somewhat disconcerted when Reid followed her. She pulled out the room card and

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opened the door before turning around to make some comment to him. To her amazement, he pushed past her into the foyer.

"Excuse me! This is *my* suite, McAllister. And I don't recall inviting you in," she snapped. The last thing she needed was to be alone with him now. She was still angry and her feelings of betrayal were raging against any other feelings she'd had for him.

Reid removed her hand from the door before closing it and setting the lock. "Sorry, piglet. This is *our* suite. As in yours and mine. As my wife your place is by my side. We need to establish our relationship as a couple for the others on this trip. I want it clear from the start that you're under my protection."

Gabby spun around, her dark eyes flashing. "That's the biggest load of chauvinistic bull crap I've ever heard in my entire life. I can take care of myself, McAllister. I did it very well before you came along, and I can do just fine now. And I want my own room!" she demanded trying to get by him to the door.

Reid had chaired meetings with corporate heads and financial barons from around the world without any qualms. It had been challenging. But this confrontation with Gabby had him on the edge. His entire life was at stake here and now. He placed his arm around her slender shoulders to guide her into the living room. "You will stay here, Mrs. McAllister. Not only because it's where you belong, but because there aren't any more rooms available. This hotel is booked solid," he lied hoping that she wouldn't call the front desk to verify his assertion.

She shrugged his arm away and stomped forward to stand on the far side of the room. Her eyes shot daggers as he closed the distance between them. "I would never have guessed that you could be this devious. You have no right to take over my life!"

"This is only for the one night, piglet. As I recall we spent a night together up at your cabin," he reminded her and was rewarded as she blushed at the memory.

"That was different," she stammered.

"How was it different?" he asked softly.

"I thought you were nice," she answered lamely.

"I am nice," Reid said taking her hand in his raising it to his lips.

Gabby gulped. It was difficult to maintain her anger when he was touching her like this. And she wanted...no...she needed to be angry at his high-handed methods. So she snatched her hand away. "If you were nice you wouldn't have schemed behind my back. We might be legally married, but that doesn't mean that I have to like it. And where I sleep is my concern, not yours!"

Reid could sense her inner conflict and tried not to let on how pleased this made him feel. So he tried another tactic. "Let's agree that you have no choice but to share this suite with me due to lack of other accommodations. And it is only for tonight. Let's get ready for dinner now and talk about the sleeping arrangements later."

Gabby gave him a scathing look obviously not trusting him. She glanced at her watch. They didn't have much time before they were due to join Jim and the others for dinner. They were eating an early dinner because they had to be at the airport at six the next morning. She snatched up her handbag as she turned towards the bedroom door. "I hope that I'll be allowed a little privacy so that I can change?" she challenged him.

Reid nodded. "The room is all yours, piglet." He smiled as the door slammed behind her. He'd been showered and ready for over an hour so he could give her the

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privacy she demanded. Besides, he correctly guessed that it would be in his best interests to stay on this side of that door for the moment. But after dinner...well, that was a different matter.

Gabby stood silently at Reid's side on the ride down in the elevator. Reid took that time to admire his new wife in her simple black dress with a long black and white vest. She looked elegant and totally delightful. He reached down and took her left hand in his feeling the wide gold band he'd placed there a short time ago. She looked up at him.

"We're married, piglet. Jim is the only one who knows that we've *just* been married, so we need to act as if we enjoy being together, and are comfortable with each other."

"I'll be a lot more comfortable when we're on our way to the airport tomorrow. Then I'll be able to concentrate on my work and try to forget what a jerk you turned out to be," she hissed just as the doors swept open. She stepped out looking around for directions to the dining room.

"This way," Reid said taking her arm. "The food is excellent here. You should enjoy it." He wasn't all that hungry, at least for food. He was having a difficult time keeping his mind off of the coming night.

After giving his name, they were led to a large round table in an alcove off to the right. Gabby recognized Jim Birch, but not the other three men with him. They all stood when Gabby stepped forward.

"Gentlemen, may I introduce Reid and Gabby McAllister. Gabby is our photographer and doing a magazine article on the lemurs." Jim said with a smile.

The first man extended his hand to Reid and then Gabby. "I'm Mark Weldon, the zoologist. Welcome aboard."

The second man was Steve Hampton, a botanist; the third man was Allen Deacon, an ecologist. They were all dressed in suits and each one looked totally uncomfortable as if the clothing was something alien to them.

Gabby smiled recognizing that look from her brothers. "Please be seated. I don't know about you, but I'm starved."

Everyone sat obviously relieved to be able to relax. After ordering, each one discussed their particular field of expertise and what they would be looking for in Madagascar. It was Allen who finally addressed Reid. "What is your area of interest in that country?"

Gabby cocked a brow curious to see how he answered that question.

Without batting an eye Reid spoke up. "My wife. I had no desire to be separated from her for such a length of time. So here I am. I've done some studying on the country and it really does sound fascinating. I was relieved to read that there are no poisonous snakes harmful to man on the island. Although the thought of one of those giant grasshoppers or large millipedes doesn't thrill me very much," he laughed.

"I'm hoping to pick up some of the herbal lore. There are plants there that grow no where else," Steve told them as he took a sip of his wine.

"Is it true that many of the plants and trees are only found there and no where else in the world?" Gabby asked intrigued.

"True. Because of Madagascar's isolation from the mainland for millions of years this has allowed old species, extinct elsewhere, to survive. And unique new species have

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found a foothold and thrived,” Allen told her. “Unfortunately, as in other parts of the world, the encroachment of humanity is destroying much of this rare environment.”

The dinner turned out to be very pleasant. Gabby found her traveling companions to be intelligent and passionate about their individual fields of study. Although she had done some extensive reading on the lemurs, she knew that she had much to learn. Just over dinner Mark had added immensely to her font of knowledge.

Since she was a professional photographer, she had been approached about taking some pictures for them when the opportunity arose, which she readily agreed to do. She would gladly take any amount of photographs in an exchange of information.

It was just eight o'clock when their party broke up after agreeing to meet in the lobby at four-thirty in the morning. It had been a long day and exhausting in several different ways. Gabby was silent on the ride up in the elevator. She didn't speak until they had entered their suite and Reid had closed and locked the door.

“There are several large comfortable sofas here that you should find satisfactory for the night. I'll just say good night now,” Gabby announced before turning to flounce into the bedroom.

“Can I at least use the bathroom? I'd like a shower tonight since we're leaving so early in the morning. I promise not to be long,” he said trying to gauge the expressions on her face.

“I was going to have a shower,” Gabby said startled by his request. It made her remember the time at the cabin when they had showered together. She hoped that her cheeks weren't flaming.

“We could take one together,” he suggested softly. He was pushing his luck but he couldn't seem to stop himself. She was obviously trying so hard to remain aloof and, he hoped, failing miserably.

“I don't think so!” she snapped then immediately regretted her tone.

“I didn't think you'd agree to that. Is it okay if I get my robe and travel kit from the bedroom? I can use the bathroom off the foyer here. It has a shower stall,” Reid told her softly. All of a sudden a cold dousing of water sounded pretty good. It was that or he'd really make her angry by forcing the issue about where he was going to sleep. And he wasn't quite ready for that...yet.

“Of course you can. And I'll get you a pillow and blanket,” she offered sweetly.

Reid gathered his things and retired to the other bathroom. After he left, Gabby went to the bedroom door only to find that there was no lock. “Oh great!” she muttered leaning against it as if her puny weight would act as a barrier. She was too tired to worry about that now. A shower and sleep was what she needed most right now.

In the other bathroom, Reid closed the door before turning on the shower. Then he took out his cell phone and punched in some numbers. “T.J...it's Reid,” he said when the call went through.

“You back from Los Angeles?” the older man asked.

“No. And that's one of the reasons I'm calling. I'm in New York.”

“Are you seeing Gabby then? I know she'll be happy to see you before she leaves,” T.J. told him with a smile in his voice.

“It's a bit more than that, T.J.” Reid hesitated. “Gabby and I were married this afternoon.”

“You what?” T.J. all but shouted into the phone.

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Amanda who had been listening from her place on the sofa jumped up to come and stand by her husband's desk. "What's wrong?" she demanded.

T.J. waved his hand for her to wait. "I couldn't be happier, son. Can I talk to Gabby?"

"That's a little difficult right now, T.J. You see I...I sort of bullied her into the marriage using my clout as the major investor for this expedition. And she's not real happy with me right now," Reid admitted waiting for his new father-in-law to explode. But to his amazement, T.J. burst out laughing.

"I'll be damned! Never thought I'd meet the man who could put one over on my girl."

"Gabby doesn't want anyone to know about the marriage because she only married me saying that it would be in name only. Her plan is to have it annulled as soon as we get back to New York."

"And you have no intention of letting her get away with that, I hope!"

Reid smiled and relaxed. "No sir, I don't. I love your daughter. And she will be my wife for at least the next fifty or sixty years if I have my way."

Amanda was pestering T.J. wanting to know what was going on. "Just a minute Reid." Then to Amanda, "Reid and Gabby were married today." He went on to explain the circumstances.

Amanda reached for the phone. "Let me talk to him. Reid? I hope you know that she has a family back here who would like to see her walk down the aisle. She's the only daughter we have, so while you're away I'm going to plan a wedding for right here at the house."

"That sounds wonderful to me, Amanda. I hope you're not too angry at the way I manipulated the situation?" He thought the world of Gabby's parents and didn't want them to think badly of him.

"Well, I would have liked to have a wedding in the usual way, but we'll do just fine all the same. You just be sure to let me know when you get back to New York so I can have everything arranged before you get back here. We'll have the wedding take place immediately upon your return to Bentrige."

"We should be back around the twenty eighth. I will call when I know our exact time of arrival. And Amanda, thank you for being so understanding. Will you call my mother and fill her in on everything?"

"Of course, as soon as we hang up. Reid, please good take care of my daughter. I won't worry now that I know you'll be with her," Amanda said as tears began to form. "Here's T.J.," she said handing the phone back to her husband.

"See you when you get back Reid. You take care now," he said.

"Thank you sir," Reid said before turning off the phone. He only felt a little guilty about calling her parents. Gabby had told him not to tell anyone. But he hadn't agreed, so technically he hadn't broken any promise. And he had to tell her parents. It wouldn't be fair for them to find out any other way. Hopefully by the time they returned home, it wouldn't matter to his new wife anyway. He stepped naked into the shower thinking about the night ahead and smiled.

Gabby had only been in bed a few minutes when the bedroom door opened and Reid strolled in wearing only a towel slung low around his hips. For a few seconds she

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could barely breath. He was so gorgeous with his broad muscular shoulders and arms. And the length of long thick legs revealed by the skimpy towel made her mouth run dry. She finally found her voice. "What are you doing in here?"

"Going to bed with my wife," he said grinning as he approached the huge bed.

"Like hell you are!" she snapped. "We agreed that you would sleep on a sofa."

"No *we* did not agree. You said that there were several here that I could choose from. I never said that I planned to sleep there." So saying, Reid stepped to the side of the bed, dropped the towel and crawled under the covers.

"Well then I'll sleep on a sofa," Gabby hissed as she tried to move to the other side of the bed to get up.

Reid had anticipated her move as he threw one of his legs over hers. Before she knew what was happening, he reached down and pulled her tee shirt over her head. "You won't be needing that, piglet," he whispered as his mouth descended to her shoulder.

Gabby sighed as the familiar feel of his weight pushed all other thoughts aside. Then sanity prevailed. She tried to push him away. "We agreed that this marriage was going to be a business arrangement," she reminded him in a rush.

"Wrong again, piglet. You brought that up, but I never agreed to those terms. From now on you sleep in my arms," Reid murmured against her soft skin. His lips trailed from her shoulder to her neck before slanting over her parted lips. She tasted warm and sweet. It had been a while since they'd made love and he ached for her as a man starved.

Gabby made one last attempt to escape the feel of his long body as she tried to press down into the mattress away from him. But his weight and warmth followed her down. The heavenly feel of his wonderful body put her mind on autopilot while her body rushed into overdrive. She wound her slender arms around his neck deepening the kiss. The marvelous spiral had already begun to form. She sighed as his tongue caressed her lips apart before delving in to slide along hers, tasting and feeling.

She ran her hands along his back feeling his muscles tighten under her touch. When she drew her foot up the side of his leg, she had the satisfaction of hearing him groan. Then he moved down to knead her breasts as he laved first one hardened nub and then the other. Gabby arched up as her own groan filled the silence of the night. Her fingers fanned through his thick hair as his mouth closed over one rosy peak. She clutched at his shoulders as he continued to worship her with his lips and mouth until she was unable to lay still. She pulled at his shoulders and arched up to get closer to his hardness.

Reid was on fire. He was so hard and ready; he was in pain. When he moved up to cover her lips, her hands moved down between their bodies to cup his hardness. He groaned into her mouth. The feel of her small soft hand on him was driving him mad, and he didn't know how much longer he could wait.

When she cried out his name, he drove deep inside her womanly warmth. They moved as one as they rode that glorious spiral united, until they climaxed together sighing a shared pinnacle of pleasure.

When Reid collapsed on top of her, Gabby clung to him. She loved him. It was as simple as that. It was something that she hadn't bargained for in her well-ordered life. Even loving him as she now admitted to herself, she didn't know if she was ready for that kind of commitment. Her parents had shown her what a loving relationship was and

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should be if both parties were to be happy. Was she ready for that? Was she prepared to give up her work, or at least the traveling portion of it, to stay by Reid's side? Until she could answer that question honestly, she couldn't bring herself to tell him how she felt. And he was bossy and possessive just like her overbearing brothers. Could she live with that?

Reid moved onto his side drawing her close against his chest. He raised her face to look into her deep brown eyes. "I love you, piglet. No, don't say anything," he said when she started to speak. "I can wait until you're ready to say the words. I want them to have true meaning. It's enough right now that I can hold you all night."

"You're going to make me cry," she whispered against his shoulder.

"If you cry I'll just have to make love to you again, piglet," he said smiling into her hair.

"Promise?" she sighed as sleep overtook her.

Reid looked down to see her eyes close and a contented smile curve her lips. "Oh, yes, that's a definite promise," he whispered as he closed his eyes drifting off to sleep with pictures of his Gabby filling his thoughts and dreams.

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CHAPTER 17

Reid stretched after getting out of the taxi in front of their Hotel. They had been up since four thirty Thursday morning and in the air for over fourteen hours the day before when they'd landed in Johannesburg, South Africa. Add the time it had taken to check through the airport after landing almost ten at night Eastern Standard Time, and they hadn't gotten to bed until almost six yesterday morning. They had slept for the better part of today and gotten a late flight into Antananarivo in Madagascar. But they were still tired and were thankful that they had the next day to recover before they left for the northern part of their journey.

Gabby, who had fallen asleep on the ride from the airport to the hotel, was slower to get out of the car. When she did Reid put his arm around her. "I feel like I could sleep for the next twelve hours," she said yawning.

"Let's get checked in and get to bed. This traveling is more tiring than hard labor," Reid said with a chuckle. The others in their group had pulled up in their taxi and were collecting luggage. Reid instructed a porter to proceed with their luggage into the hotel.

At the front desk Reid told the clerk that they were Monsieur and Madame McAllister and discussed their reservation in fluent French. Gabby stared at him in wide-eyed amazement.

Reid glanced down at her. He grinned and winked. "Not too shabby for a jerk from Los Angeles, huh?"

She grinned back at him. "Fantastique, monsieur," she replied. "Not bad at all McAllister. Speak any other languages that I should know about?" This man continually surprised her with his intelligence and knowledge.

"Spanish and a bit of Italian to get by," Reid said turning to sign the register. "Any foreign languages I can expect to get cussed out in from time to time, piglet?"

"Same as you, but I've had this urge to learn Russian," she told him with an innocent smile.

He frowned down at her. "If you learn Russian, so will I. Can't let you get ahead of me. Besides, I want to know what you're saying to me at all times."

They were shown up to their room where Gabby took a quick shower before climbing into the huge bed. She was fast asleep when Reid came out of the bathroom. Throwing the towel onto a nearby chair he climbed into bed drawing her into his arms. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he draped one of his long legs over hers and was asleep in less than a minute.

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They slept until almost ten the next morning. The group would have the rest of the day to do some sight seeing but would have to be in bed early that night. They were scheduled to leave early tomorrow morning.

After a hearty breakfast, Reid and Gabby strolled around looking into various shops. Gabby found some embroidered table linens and dark chocolate candy that she wanted to purchase for gifts for the family. After discussing it with Reid, she decided to wait until they returned for the flight home. They had no place to store any gifts and it wouldn't be practical to carry them with along on the trip into the forests.

All too soon early the next morning, they were all packed into two buses. Most of the gear went on one bus while all members of their group rode on the second one. It wasn't a modern bus by any means and the seats seemed smaller than Gabby remembered from previous tours she'd undertaken. She glanced over at Reid noting that he seemed a bit uncomfortable with his long legs drawn up instead of stretched out in front of him. She grinned as she leaned over to speak to him above the noise and jostling of the vehicle. "Sometimes having shorter legs has its advantages. A bit cramped are you? If you had stayed at home and not interfered, you would be much more comfortable right now."

"But then I wouldn't have had our wedding night or that marvelous shower with you this morning, now would I?" he gloated. "I can take a little discomfort if it means I can be with you, piglet."

She pursed her lips. "Do you always have to have an answer?"

He lifted her hand to his lips. "I try, piglet. I do try."

"I had noticed that annoying habit of yours, but I shall try to ignore it from now on," she said reaching for one of her cameras. If she concentrated on the scenery maybe she could pretend that he wasn't sitting so close to her. Unfortunately his remark about the shower this morning stuck in her mind as she replayed her wanton behavior under his expert hands and lips. Gabby didn't know how much longer she could keep from telling him that she loved him. His manipulation of the circumstances that allowed him to come on this trip still rankled. If she confessed her feelings now, he'd know that he'd succeeded. She wasn't going to make this easy for him. But every time he touched her or kissed her, she forgot to be angry and floated along on the cloud of desire he created. It just wasn't fair. Why did he have to be so nice? But then if wasn't nice, she wouldn't have been attracted to him in the first place.

She shook her head. This was getting her nowhere. Reid had leaned over the aisle to say something to Frank Graham, the geologist. Gabby raised her camera, focused and got a good shot of Reid's profile. He turned back to her and she quickly snapped another picture. She had a good eye and knew the camera would love those sculptured masculine features, dark hair and magnificent green eyes.

Reid quirked a brow. "Getting the first pictures for our family album, Mrs. McAllister?"

"Hardly. Just getting my equipment ready in case something truly inspiring shows up," she said haughtily. He was conceited enough in her opinion. She wasn't about to encourage him more.

"Ouch! And here I thought my classic beauty was inspiration enough."

Gabby couldn't help it. She burst out laughing. He was too much. "Oh King Apollo, child of mighty Zeus, I think the world has enough pictures of you."

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“Apollo, huh? Does this mean that you’re going to feed me nectar and ambrosia?” Reid asked trying to leer but his eyes held laughter.

“No! But I just might shoot you in the butt with your own bow and arrow.”

“Now is that any way to treat a god. You know that I’m also known as the god of music?”

Gabby shook her head. “You’re good McAllister, but not *that* good.”

“I’ll have you know that I bested Pan in a musical contest once.”

“What did you do, hit him over the head with his own lyre?” Gabby laughed. She loved this good-natured banter. If anyone was listening they probably thought she and Reid were crazy.

Reid placed his hand over his heart in mock dismay. “You wound me, fair goddess. My skill with the lyre was the only weapon in my contest with Pan. Do you know that Apollonian means harmonious, ordered and balanced in character? I’m quite a catch!”

Gabby rolled her eyes. “I’ll reserve judgement on the catch part. But you certainly are a character, Apollo. Now read a book or something so I can check my cameras.”

“I’m too big to throw back,” Reid whispered in her ear. “Besides, you’ve had your wicked way with me.” He was pushing her but couldn’t seem to stop. He loved her smile, her wit, her intelligence, her humor...hell...he adored his new wife.

She laughed. He was so ridiculous. “Will you please try to be good?” she hissed.

He leaned closer to her. “I thought you said that I was good, piglet?”

She bit her bottom lip. “If you don’t stop, I swear I’ll break this camera over your big fat head!” *Imagine being stuck with this clown for the next fifty years*, she thought. Then in the next instant decided that it wouldn’t be such a bad idea after all.

“If you’re going to resort to name calling, then I’m going to take a nap,” he said stiffly. Then he reached over to give her a brief kiss on her parted lips. Reid scooted down in the seat, closed his eyes and tried to relax.

Gabby put her elbow on the window resting the side of her face in the palm of her hand. This was going to be a long journey.

It was late afternoon when they reached their first destination, Mahavelona. In the morning they would travel a short distance up the coast before leaving the buses to travel inland on foot. They stayed at a small hotel and had an early night so they would be ready to leave early the next morning.

The next afternoon they stopped about noon to eat and begin their hike inland. The others in their group were Elaine Carson a freelance photographer. She was married with two grown children and three grandchildren. There were two graduate students, Mike Stuart in botany and Tom Hughes in zoology. Frank Graham was the geologist. Betty and Paul Rich were addicted to unusual vacations and had made special arrangements to join the party. Their two resident guides were Roger and Emile who were friendly and helpful. Gabby had already spent some time talking with Emile about the various species of lemur on the island.

As they prepared to set off, Gabby repacked her two cameras in waterproof containers in her backpack. They had made arrangements to leave their heavier suitcases at the hotel in Antananarivo and had taken only a couple of changes of clothing. This

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would mean washing almost every evening but it was better than carting around an unnecessary heavy load.

They hadn't been on the trail long when they came across a newly fallen tree. Reid went over first then simply reached over and picked Gabby up in his arms to lift her over. "I could have climbed over on my own, McAllister," she grumbled as the others laughed.

Reid shook his head. "Faster this way," was all he said as they started off again. He stayed close by her side. Not just because of the terrain, but also because he didn't particularly like the way Tom Hughes looked at Gabby. If he read the kid right, he was already half in love with her. Reid noticed that the Hughes punk took every available opportunity to talk to her.

Their group stopped shortly before sunset to make camp. The guides had the small lightweight tents up in no time and began preparing the evening meal. Gabby and Elaine took this time to scout around the area and take some more pictures while Reid and Jim kept watch over them. They sat around the fire talking for a while after eating before turning in for the night. The tents were scattered around the campsite with Reid's set off from the rest away from the fire.

With an electric torch, Reid led Gabby over to their tent, unzipping it to let her enter. She quickly slipped off her hiking boots as soon as she got inside. There wasn't much room to move around, so she set her boots off to the side. Then she slipped out of her khaki pants and underwear. She would sleep in her tee shirt because the nights were still warm. The sleeping bag was lightweight and wouldn't be too warm. Reid scooted in next to her undressing much as she had done a minute earlier.

It was then that she realized there was only the one sleeping bag. "Where is your sleeping bag?" she asked looking around the dimly lit tent. She didn't see anything stored in a corner.

"You're in it, piglet," he said grinning as he pulled off his pants. Taking hold of the side of the sleeping bag he rolled in next to her. "In case you hadn't noticed, this one sleeps two."

"Reid McAllister, you are the most devious, the most..." Her mounting tirade was cut short as his mouth closed over hers. In one swift movement he had her tee shirt pulled over her head, casting it aside to land on top of his discarded clothing.

He pulled her close against his naked body; hungry for the feel of her skin next to his; hungry to be deep inside her glorious warmth. Last night they had been so tired that they'd fallen asleep as soon as they'd climbed into bed. He'd watched her all day, had taken any opportunity to touch her even if it had been to help her over or around some obstacle. Now they were alone and he was going to make love to his wife.

He released her lips, trailing small kisses down the side of her neck.

Gabby sighed. In the darkness, his hands were everywhere, rediscovering the soft fullness of her breasts, the silky skin of her abdomen and the soft mound between her legs. Of their own accord, her hands caressed his shoulders before trailing down to his buttocks. She smiled against his shoulders at his soft groan of pleasure. "Why didn't you tell me about the sleeping arrangements?" she managed to whisper.

She felt his soft laughter as he moved to lie on top of her.

"I told you that I wanted you by my side day and night, piglet," he said hoarsely. "You really do have to pay more attention to what I say." His lips moved down,

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unerringly latching onto a turgid nipple, laving it lovingly with his tongue before taking all of it into his mouth.

"You're right," she gasped as spirals of pleasure coiled deep inside her. She would have to try to recall every conversation they had ever had in order to prepare herself for any future surprises. Later. "Two can play at this game, McAllister," she moaned as he slid deep inside her warmth.

The velvet darkness of the night and the cacophony of calls of the forest inhabitants surrounded Reid and Gabby as they made love beneath the jungle canopy. He brought her to that glorious pinnacle time and again before they plunged over the precipice together. He moved off of her tucking her close against his side. "I love you, piglet," he whispered against her hair.

Her only response was to press a kiss to his bare chest.

They had been out for about six days when it began to rain in earnest. Because of the cloud cover, they were in almost complete darkness during the steady rain. Their guides seemed undaunted as they moved forward. Tangled boughs and vines throbbed with the calls and rustling of unseen forest life. Gabby got some wonderful shots of lemurs caught in the beam from an electric torch.

On the seventh day she noticed that Reid appeared to be frowning whenever she looked at him. When they stopped for a meal she cornered him. "What is wrong with you today? You look like you're mad at the world."

He glared across the make shift camp. "Why don't you tell that Tom Hughes to take a hike?" he snapped.

"Tom? What's he done?"

"Every time I turn around he's by your side. It's obvious that he's after you. And don't tell me I don't know what I'm talking about. I was that young once." Reid knew that he was being unreasonable but couldn't seem to help himself. Gabby might be his wife, might share his tent, but she still hadn't said anything about loving him. And it was beginning to drive him crazy.

Gabby just stared at her husband. "Are you out of your mind, McAllister? All we talk about are the lemurs and the other animals we've seen. He's a fountain of information on the subject."

"He's young and has the hots for my wife. And it's not just lemurs that he has on his mind," Reid almost snapped. They were standing off to the side and he didn't want to cause a scene.

"Tom has not made any remarks that would lead me to believe he's interested in me that way. And he's too young for me anyway. In case you hadn't noticed, I go for older men!" With this parting shot, she went to sit with Betty and Paul to eat her meal. He followed her, but was quiet letting the others do all the talking.

Everything came to a head on one of the last days of the trip. It had been raining pretty steady every day. They were taking a river route back down to the coast. The two inflatable boats were readied and the gear stowed. Jim and the guides were concerned because these rivers that flow to the east coast were shorter and ran swifter because of the elevation. With the added rain from the past week it was possible that they might run into some rough water.



Gabby was somewhat dismayed when she was put in the boat with Jim, Emile and four others. Reid and the rest of their group were assigned to the other boat. They had been on the river for about three hours when the current began to increase. She wasn't too concerned until she heard the sound of rushing water ahead. She'd been on rafting trips before and knew she had to hang on and follow instructions, so she wasn't really scared.

Reid was in the boat about seventy feet ahead when she saw it disappear beneath white water. Her breath caught in her throat as she waited for it to reappear. It took many long drawn out seconds before she spotted it again surging down the swollen river quickly lengthening the distance between them. The last thing she registered before their own boat plunged over the rocks was that Reid was no longer in his boat.

"Reid!" she screamed as her boat rocked and bucked against the raging water. She held on for dear life all the time scanning the water for some sign of her husband. At one point she thought she saw something in the water off to their left. When she automatically tried to get up to get a better view, Jim yelled at her to stay put. "But Reid!" she shouted into the wind. Then the worst was behind them as they sped after the first boat that had rounded a bend in the river and was lost to sight. "Jim!" she yelled in a panic now. "Reid fell out of the boat." She started to get up but he pushed her back down.

"We'll pull in as soon as we find a safe landing. Reid's a strong swimmer, or so he told me. He's undoubtedly downstream waiting for us," he told her hoping it would be true. Reid was a large powerful man. Jim hoped that he was an equally powerful swimmer.

Gabby didn't find his words comforting. They were rapidly going downstream. What if he was still back there? Her mind jumped from one horrible scenario to another as she watched and prayed for a place along the shore to put into. She loved him and had never had the courage to tell him. What a coward she'd been! And for what? She'd gone into jungles, gone on deep-sea dives and repelled down mountains. And here she was afraid of three little words. He had to be all right! He just had to be so she could tell him how much she cared. How much she loved him...

When they rounded the next bend in the river, she saw the first boat pulled up along the shore. Her eyes filled with tears when she saw Reid sitting on a rock with a blanket wrapped around him. Almost before her boat touched land she was out and running towards him.

Reid stood when he saw Gabby. He knew he'd frightened her, and that he deeply regretted. But accidents happen.

She raced up to him eating him up with her eyes the whole way. His smile was her undoing. Her small fists pounded against his chest. "Don't you ever do that to me again! Do you hear me, McAllister? I don't ever want to be without you!" All the time she kept hitting him as tears poured down her cheeks.

Now Reid's smile was broader. He clasped her hands against his chest to still their movement. "Are you ready to say it now, Mrs. McAllister?" he asked softly staring deep into her chocolate brown eyes. Everything he felt for her was laid open in his flashing green eyes.

"I love you," she whispered.

"I didn't quite hear that."

Autumn McCullah



"I said, I love you, you big idiot," she shouted at him and then promptly burst into sobs once again.

Reid drew her against his chest cradling her head in his large hand. "I've waited a long time to hear those words from you, Mrs. McAllister. I think I fell in love with you the day you pushed me into the pool."

She sniffed. "You fell," she corrected him. Needing to be closer she wrapped her arms about his neck and her legs around his waist and clung to him as if she would never let him go again.

Reid was the happiest man alive. It was worth a dunking in the river if it finally got his Gabby to admit to loving him. He couldn't seem to stop smiling and didn't care what anyone thought. He knew he was going to have a few bruises from his run in with a couple of good size rocks, but it had all been worth any discomfort.

"Why didn't you ride in the boat with me in the first place," she sniffed. "Then this would never have happened. I could have lost you forever." She began to cry again and buried her face against his neck.

Reid lifted her chin so he could see her face. "We knew that the water was running high. If we were in the same boat and something had happened, I would have been frantic trying to find you, piglet. This way, I just had myself to worry about. I was pushed along at a pretty good clip, but I did see your boat make it past that bad spot. Then it was just a matter of finding a place to climb out onto dry land."

"Well in the future, you will ride with me if I have to climb into your pants with you," she told him sternly. This man was not going anywhere without her. Ever again!

His smile broadened. "You can climb into my pants any day, Mrs. McAllister."

"You know what I mean, Mr. McAllister. And I mean it. We're in the same boat."

"Amen to that!" Reid said with a broad smile and a hearty chuckle.

Just then Jim joined them having allowed them some time alone. He'd heard her last words. "It should be fine from here, Reid. If you're up to it, we can make another couple of hours before we put into camp for the night."

Reid's arms tightened around Gabby. "Jim, right now I think I could walk the entire way back and not tire a bit." He gave Gabby a quick kiss on the lips before he turned, still holding her wrapped around him, and walked back towards the waiting boats.

Autumn McCullah



CHAPTER 18

Autumn McCullah



They had been back in New York for two days now. Reid had been on the phone with Stan and Cody a great deal of the time clearing up anything that required his attention. He'd also gotten a call through to T. J. giving him their time of arrival tomorrow back in Bentrige. Gabby was not aware of that call.

Gabby worked on her article. She had placed her own call home just to let her parents know that she was safely back. As she hung up the phone it dawned on her that Reid hadn't told her how he had explained his prolonged absence from the ranch. And her mother hadn't made any reference to Reid, which seemed unusual. She looked at her husband who was reading a newspaper on the sofa.

"Reid? Where are you supposed to be?"

He looked up from his paper clearly confused. "Right here as far as I know, piglet. Why?"

"I mean, where do Cody and everyone else in Bentrige believe you have spent the last three and a half weeks?"

He'd wondered when this question would come up. "They know that I went on the expedition with you. Everyone is aware that I love you and couldn't let you go alone."

"But just now, mom didn't say a word about your being with me." Gabby frowned. Something wasn't quite right here. She smelled a rat...a six foot three inch rat. "I thought I told you I didn't want my family to know?"

"That was about our marriage, piglet. Look, your parents and your brothers really worry when you go off on these trips. My telling them that I was going along this time helped to relieve some of that worry," he told her hoping it would satisfy her.

Gabby couldn't argue with that logic. But she still frowned at her husband. She knew from past experience that he could be up to something. Trouble was, she didn't know what.

Reid shrugged trying to appear nonchalant. "Maybe she was waiting for you to say something. Your mom is a very special lady," he added hoping to distract her from the subject. It didn't work.

"But she is not dumb or shy, Reid. That just isn't like her," Gabby told him slowly.

Reid folded his paper before putting it on the coffee table. "Your mother is a very astute lady. She probably suspects that we were more than just on the same trip together, piglet. She wouldn't just come out and ask you if we were lovers, would she?"

Gabby shook her head. "No, neither one of my parents would interfere or cast judgement."

"So, we can assume that she was waiting for you to tell her. Why didn't you?"

Gabby chewed on her bottom lip. "I don't know how mom and dad will take the news about our marriage, I guess. They won't be upset that we got married. It's just the way it happened without any of them present. Besides, it's not something that I wanted to tell them over the phone."



Reid nodded. "I can understand that. And I'm sure they will too." He looked at his watch. "If we're going to have dinner with Jim and the others, we'd better start getting ready." This was going to be a going away dinner since they'd all be going their separate ways in the morning.

Gabby raced for the bedroom. "I get first dibs on the shower," she yelled over her shoulder. She dashed into the bathroom, slipped out of her shorts and top before stepping into the shower stall. To her amazement, Reid was right on her heels.

"I like to practice water conservation," he growled against her neck.

"Yeah right!" she laughed.

Reid took the soap in his hands and worked up lather in both hands. Gently he cupped her breasts rubbing the soap over her rounded mounds. He watched as she took a deep breath closing her eyes with a soft womanly smile curving her tempting lips. "Your breasts seem fuller, piglet, and the nipples are darker than normal. When did you have your last period?" He continued to lather her shoulders, arms and neck. Suddenly he felt like shouting at the top of his lungs with happiness.

Gabby stared at him at first not registering what he was asking. Then her eyes widened. Her mind raced to remember when she'd had her period. She couldn't be sure without checking her calendar, but she knew it was weeks before they left for Madagascar. "Pregnant?" she whispered in awe. But why should she be surprised. They made love almost every night. A soft smile curved her lips at the thought of Reid's baby. She looked up into his green eyes, made darker by the mounting passion she now recognized. "Would you be upset if I am?"

"Besides being married to you, nothing would please me more. Remember when we made love down by the lake? You were so beautiful, so loving. As I poured into you I thought about making a baby. I have a feeling that's when it happened, piglet." He hoped that she would be as happy about the prospect as he was. He'd rushed her into marriage and gotten her pregnant right away. He was ready for this change in his life and he hoped that she was also. "How about you? This will mean a big change in your life."

Gabby took the soap and slowly began to rub it on his chest. Her smile was full of mischief. "I'd like at least three children, McAllister. Think you're up to it?" was her answer.

"Oh, I think I'm up to it, Mrs. McAllister," he said with his mouth covered hers. And he began to prove it in the most delicious way possible. They were almost late for dinner.

Cody was there at the airport to pick them up when they returned home the next day. The cab of the dark blue pickup easily sat all three comfortably, especially Gabby since the seat was pushed back as far as it would go to accommodate the large men on either side of her.

When Cody turned up the lane leading to her parent's home, she saw several cars parked around the house but didn't give it much thought. Her parents had visitors almost every day, plus someone in the family usually put in a daily appearance.

It wasn't until they entered the large foyer and all of her family yelled "congratulations" that Gabby realized something was going on.

"What?" she gasped not sure what was afoot but pretty sure that Reid had a hand in it somewhere.



Little Brie threw her arms around Gabby's waist. "Thank you, Aunt Gabby!"

Then she launched herself at Reid who scooped her up into his arms. "Now you're my Uncle Reid for real? Right?"

"You bet, sugar," he grinned giving her a kiss on the cheek.

Gabby's eyes narrowed. "*You* told them?" she said accusingly. "When?"

Reid tried to draw her closer to his side, but she pulled away. "I called your dad the night we got married. I didn't want them to find out some other day, darlin. And I assured him that I would look after you."

Amanda stepped forward taking Gabby's hand. "Reid is right, dear. This time we weren't on pins and needles waiting for you to call when you returned to the states. We knew that he was looking out for your safety."

As Gabby looked at her mother, all the fight went out of her. Until this minute she hadn't realized how much her parents and the rest of her family must have worried about her when she was gallivanting around the world on her numerous adventures.

She looked up at her husband. "Are you always going to go behind my back or can we come to some understanding? You are the most impossible man!" Then she laughed. "And I adore you."

Wade gave a bark of laughter. "Now that we have that settled, can we get on with the festivities?"

"Here, here!" Stan chimed in. He and Anna had flown in for the wedding. Stan would be standing in as Reid's best man.

"Not quite. There is just one more thing," Reid said as he knelt down on one knee in front of Gabby. "Gabrielle Stoner McAllister, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife, my friend, my lover and the mother of my children?" His green eyes shone with all the love he held in his heart as he slipped a huge pear-shaped cut diamond engagement ring on her finger. He turned her hand over placing a kiss to her palm.

If Gabby hadn't loved him before, she would have then. The big jerk...but he was her jerk. Her bottom lip quivered, as she felt an urge to cry overtake her. She stared down into his eyes and knew she would love this wonderful man forever.

"Come on squirt, say yes and put the poor man out of his misery," Tom urged.

"Then we can get this show on the road," Wade added laughing.

"Yes...yes...yes!" she said throwing herself into Reid's arms. Then she looked over at her mother and at Lily who were both beaming. "Are we having a party?"

"No dear, a wedding," Amanda laughed. "You are our daughter and we *will* see you married."

"We're having a wedding here?" Gabby gasped in delight.

"That's right. In less than two hours our guests should be arriving," T.J. stated proudly. The ladies in his family had out done themselves in planning the wedding in such a short time and he was delighted. And even more delighted with his daughter's choice of husband. Reid was a fine man and he knew that he was just what Gabby needed in her life.

Now Griff stepped forward with his arm around Lily's shoulders. "We have an announcement of our own to make. Lily and I were married three days ago in Las Vegas."

"That's wonderful," Gabby gasped. "I'm so happy for both of you," she said giving them each a hug.



Reid was speechless for several seconds. His mother...married! And she hadn't even known Griff all that long. Then he thought about Gabby and realized that he was in no position to criticize or be judgmental. His mother looked radiant and happy, really happy and that's all that mattered.

He embraced his mother in a big hug as he looked at Griff. "You take good care of her," he said extending his hand to the older man.

"I intend to, son."

"I wish we could have been there for your ceremony," Reid told his mother.

Gabby heard the disappointment in his voice and instinctively she knew what to do. "You still can. We can have a double wedding right here," she announced with a big grin.

"Oh Gabby, this is your day with Reid," Lily protested.

"No, it's a family day and you and Griff are part of the family now. Make her say yes, McAllister," Gabby said turning to Reid.

Lord how he loved this woman of his. "She's right, mom. You might as well agree because she'll badger you until you do."

"Come on, Lily," T.J. jumped in. "This way I can walk down the aisle with a beautiful woman on each arm. She's your wife, Griff, tell her to agree," he laughed slapping his old friend on the back.

Griff saw the shine of tears in Lily's eyes. She wasn't used to such an outpouring of love and that was something he intended to change. "I'd gladly say our vows again if you will," he told Lily wiping the tear from her cheek.

Lily looked over at Gabby. "If you're sure?"

"You bet I am, Lily. If I have to do this a second time, so do you."

"Good. Now that we have that all settled, I want the ladies upstairs. T.J, you're in charge of the men. Reid, your clothes are laid out in Ida's room. She'll show you where," Amanda said taking charge of the situation.

Gabby and Lily were quickly ushered upstairs. Gabby had to shower and have her hair styled while Lily just had to change into the soft ivory dress she'd chosen as mother of the groom. Now it would also be her wedding dress.

An hour later Sierra helped Gabby on with the wedding dress her mother and Lily had chosen for her. She loved it and it fit perfectly as if it had been made just for her. The white floor length dress was satin and tulle with an empire bodice, short sleeves and square neckline. The back dipped in a low vee with a satin bow at the waist. In her ears she wore Aunt Frieda's pearl earrings.

She sat at the dressing table as Devra and Kate put the finishing touches on her hair. Aunt Frieda came to sit next to her. "Look at me child," she said firmly.

Gabby turned to look at her great aunt. By this time she knew what to expect and she wasn't disappointed.

Frieda stared long and hard into Gabby's eyes. Then she chuckled as if very pleased with what she saw. "I said he was the one," she almost cackled. Then she leaned closer to whisper for Gabby's ears alone. "You make a fertile pair. It will be a boy, just like his daddy."

Gabby just stared open-mouthed as Frieda patted her hand before getting up to leave. How did she know? A doctor hadn't even confirmed it yet. She and Reid had agreed not to tell the family until they were absolutely sure. Aunt Frieda seemed to see



things and know things that no one else did. A boy! Gabby smiled at the picture of Reid with a son. He would be a wonderful father. Just like T.J. had been to her and her brothers.

Frieda motioned to Sierra. "Come and help me down those stairs. They seem to get steeper every day and these old bones are mighty brittle." Sierra took the older lady by the arm and slowly led her out of the bedroom.

Gabby's elbow length veil was held by a V-band made of satin leaves accented with pearls. When Devra had it in place to her satisfaction, she stepped back to admire her handy work. "You look beautiful," she told Gabby. "Reid is going to be speechless when he sees you."

"That will certainly be a first," Gabby laughed. She stood so everyone in the room could see their completed project...her.

Amanda put her fingers to her lips. "My baby is getting married," she said close to tears. She knew that they were already legally married but for her, this would be the real wedding. One with all of their family and friends present.

There was a knock on the door just before T.J. entered the room full of women. If he felt out of place, he didn't show it. "They tell me it's time to get started."

Amanda gave Gabby one last hug and kiss before she left the room with Kate. Sierra was the bridesmaid and Devra the maid of honor. Brie was the flower girl. She was downstairs waiting with her father.

T.J. took Gabby's hands in his. "I'm truly proud of you, Gabby. You're smart and good and you have a kind heart. Your mother and I have had some worrisome times with all of the traveling you've done over the years. But we knew this was something that you had to do. Now you've chosen a fine man to share your life with. I love you, baby."

This was a long speech for T.J. and it made Gabby want to cry. Instead she reached up to kiss him on the cheek. "I love you too, dad. I'll try not to worry you too much in the future. Okay?"

"Okay. It will be up to Reid to keep you in line now," he said grinning.

"Keep me in line, huh? That should be interesting," she told him with an impish grin of her own.

T. J. extended an arm to Gabby and then one to Lily. "If you're ready ladies, I believe there are gentlemen down on the patio waiting to claim their brides." He led them down the stairs and out to the patio doors off the family room.

An arbor had been set up at the far end of the garden with seating on either side. All of the chairs were filled and many people were standing. The wedding march began to play over the speakers as Brie stepped forward to lead the bridal party. Sierra and Devra and finally T.J. followed her with Gabby and Lily.

There were murmurs of approval as the two brides walked down the aisle between the chairs. Most of the people there had known Gabby all of her life. And although Lily was a newcomer to Bentrige, she had already formed a fast circle of friends who were pleased with her marriage to Griff Palmer.

When Reid saw Gabby on her father's arm, his heart leaped into his throat. Lord but she was beautiful! Had any bride ever looked so delicate and captivating? Her smile was radiant as she looked at him waiting for her, waiting to announce before all of their assembled friends and family that they were man and wife.

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The vows had been spoken and Reverend Martin gave his blessing on the two marriages. “Ladies and gentlemen, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Griff Palmer and Mr. and Mrs. Reid McAllister.” As the two couples made their way back up the aisle everyone was on their feet smiling with a few tears here and there.

The entire back yard was set up with tables. Ida, with some help from friends, had enough food set out to feed a small army. There were centerpieces with yellow and white roses on each table. Tom was manning the bar where beer and wine were being served.

Gabby and Reid had just finished eating although neither could say what it had been. They only had eyes for each other. He had just informed her that they were going to spend the next three days up at her cabin. Three long days and nights. “Do you think we might make it out of the cabin this time to look at that stream you claim is so good for fishing?” Reid whispered close to her ear.

She gave him a saucy grin. “I wouldn’t make any promises, McAllister. Besides, you don’t do too well around water. You keep falling in.”

“The first time doesn’t count. I was pushed,” he stated with that wicked twinkle in his eye.

“You fell.”

Before they could continue with this, Wade stood to make an announcement. “Gabby’s brothers and I have a special wedding gift for our sister. We put a lot of thought into it and hope that it will mean as much to her as it does to us.”

She eyed her older brother warily. “What is he up to?” she asked turning to look at Reid.

He shrugged. “This is as much a surprise to me as to you, Mrs. McAllister.”

Then Tom, Nathan and Sam all stepped forward. Sam was carrying something in his arms. “From all of us with love. We know this has special meaning for the two of you.” Sam opened his arms to present Gabby with a little pig with a big pink bow around her neck.

Gabby covered her mouth with hands but couldn’t keep the laughter from erupting. Reid’s smile was wide as he took the small pig from his new brother-in-law. “I can’t think of anything more appropriate,” he laughed.

Just about everyone was looking puzzled. A pig for a wedding present?

Wade explained to everyone’s delight. “Reid’s pet name for Gabby is ‘piglet’ because she’s the runt of the litter. By the way, this little one is the runt of her litter too.”

When the laughter died down someone called out. “What are you going to call her, Gabby?”

She was petting the little pig that looked adorable in her pink bow. Gabby cocked her head to one side in contemplation. “I think her name shall be Tulip,” she finally announced. “A cute flower from my blooming idiot brothers,” she added as everyone broke into laughter once again.

Reid handed Tulip back to Sam who was going to care for her until they returned to set up residence in their new home. Then he claimed his wife for another dance. Holding her close in his arms he couldn’t believe how fortunate he had been to first see her in Los Angeles, and then to actually meet her in Bentrige. “I love you, Mrs. McAllister,” he said against her hair.

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She looked up at him, her eyes shining with happiness. "I love you, Mr. McAllister. Do you think they would miss us if we sneaked away early?"

"The truck is packed and ready whenever you are, piglet." As much as Reid had enjoyed the party, he wanted to be alone with his wife even more.

"Then let's go say goodbye to our parents," she said pulling him towards the table where they were chatting.

If she and Reid had thought they could get away unseen, they were mistaken. Word spread faster than a forest fire so that everyone was out in front to wave goodbye to the wedding couple. As Reid sped down the lane to the main road, the racket from all the tin cans tied to the rear of the truck was deafening. Gabby burst out laughing. "One guess who was behind that?"

"Your brothers," he guessed rightly. "Well just wait until Sam's wedding. I'll have a chance to get even." After stopping to remove the source of the noise, they continued on their way. Reid wanted to get to the cabin before full dark because of the road conditions.

He smiled down at Gabby nestled close to his side. "Happy?"

"Unbelievably so. I'm so glad that you moved to Bentrige, or we might never have found each other again," she sighed putting her head on his shoulder.

"I fell for you in an instant, piglet."

"You fell into the pool."

"You pushed me."

"You fell."

"Pushed."

"Fell."

As the truck lumbered over the uneven road their laughter floated on the cool breeze through the trees. An owl hooted at this unusual sound before turning its attention to the small moving object on the forest floor below.

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EPILOG



Ten years later: Reid folded the newspaper he'd been reading and laid it on the table next to the sofa. A warm fire was burning in the large fireplace across the room. He watched his three sons lying on the floor a short distance away. His heart swelled with love and pride.

James Thomas was just over nine years old already and almost as tall as his mother was. This was something that delighted James no end. The twins, Cole Griffin and Lane Samuel, who were six, were coloring and drawing as they lay sprawled out on the rug. James had his nose buried in a book. All the boys were going to be big like their father and uncles. They also had their father's black hair and green eyes.

Just then a small whirlwind blew into the great room wearing a one piece green sleeper with horses on it. Ponytails bobbing she plunked down in the middle of James' back. "Read to me," she demanded of her big brother as she waved a book at the back of his head.

"Get off me, Mandy!" Her name was Amanda Lily but the boys had shortened it to Mandy in short order after she was born.

"Please read," she persisted remembering to say please this time. She was only two and a half years old but she'd been talking since she was eighteen months old.

"Okay. Just get off my back," James said resigned to do her bidding.

Mandy scooted off onto the rug and handed her book to James. Then she curled up next to him using Tulip as a pillow. The pig just grunted before going back to sleep.

James began to read. It was Mandy's favorite story about a little boy and his friend, an invisible bear. Everyone had read it to her so many times that they almost knew it by heart now. He was halfway through the story when Reid saw his daughter's eyelids droop. A minute later and she was asleep.

Reid watched the slow movement of her breathing. She was a miniature Gabby from her strawberry blond hair to her tiny feet. And she had her mother's energy and curiosity, something that he was sure was going to give him plenty of gray hair as she grew older.

Gabby's parents and Lily and Griff had become fast friends and did a lot of traveling together now. Every time they returned from a trip they had plenty of presents for all of the grandchildren. Sam and Sierra had added two boys to the list and were expecting a little girl in about six weeks.

The only cloud had been losing Aunt Frieda two years ago. Two weeks past her one hundredth birthday she'd passed peacefully in her sleep. But she'd been active and alert right up to the end. She'd chuckled when Mandy had been born and delighted to tell Reid that he would truly have his hands full now.

Gabby stood in the doorway checking on her brood. Being a wife and mother was the most important part of her life now. Oh, she still wrote her novels, but her photography was limited to her home ground in Wyoming, unless they took a family vacation somewhere. She grinned at Mandy using Tulip as a pillow once again.

Still smiling she walked over to the sofa and sat astride Reid's lap. "*Your* daughter painted one wall in the bathroom with your shaving cream," she whispered close to his ear.

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“That’s just her artistic talent showing,” Reid replied trying not to smile. “We can’t be too hard on her. It seems that I remember your dad telling me about the time you used mustard and grape jelly to draw a mural on a wall in the dining room.”

“I don’t remember that. But I’m sure I was punished,” she said staring him in the eye. “The mess has been cleaned up but I think you should have a talk with Mandy about not touching your things, or anyone else’s without permission. I made her help with the cleaning and you can reinforce that with your talk.” She knew he was a marshmallow where Mandy was concerned. But he would do what must be done.

“Anything you say, piglet. Have I told you lately how much I love you?” he asked nuzzling her throat as she leaned forward to wrap her arms around his neck.

“I think you might have said something about that last night. But I never get tired of hearing it.” She ran her hands through his hair as she nibbled on his ear.

“Keep this up, Mrs. McAllister, and everyone will be going to bed extra early tonight,” he growled. He hadn’t known that such happiness could exist. He loved this spitfire of his more each day.

“Promise?” she asked as her lips found his.

Cole looked up from his drawing. “Ugh! They’re kissing again!” Then he jumped up and launched himself onto the sofa next to his parents. Lane was quickly followed by James. The shrieks of laughter woke Mandy who made a hole for herself among the bodies to join the free-for-all.

The last thing Reid thought about before he was dragged onto the rug was to give thanks that the Bentrige Magic had guided him to this special place and this special woman. He was indeed a wealthy man.