

NEVER AGAIN

By

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Sage groped in her handbag for the keys to her apartment. A tremendous impending feeling of doom or anxiety had plagued her since leaving New York this afternoon. Once her plane landed in Chicago the feeling intensified. Abandoning the attempt to find her keys, she rang the doorbell. Her mother should be home from work by now and could let her into the small but comfortable two-bedroom apartment they shared.

She waited a minute and then rang the bell a second time. No response. The feelings of dread suddenly settled like a rock in the pit of her stomach. Quickly resuming her search for the blasted keys, she finally located them in the bottom of her handbag, under the stack of mail she'd hastily shoved inside on her way up to the apartment. Quickly opening the door she dropped her suitcase on the floor with a resounding thud.

“Mother?”

No response. Sage hurried through the peach and green living room to the kitchen. It was empty. Retracing her steps she raced down the short hallway to her mother's bedroom. Empty. She looked around feeling uneasy but didn't see anything out of place. It wasn't until she turned to leave the room that she noticed her father's picture was missing from the nightstand. That picture had sat in the same place since just before her father had died. The frame may have changed at one time but its place of prominence never had. At the same time she realized that the top of the dresser was empty...no hairbrush or bottles of lotion her mother preferred.

“Don’t panic,” Sage muttered. But that was easier said than done as she pulled out the dresser drawers only to discover that almost all of the contents were gone. A quick search of the closet revealed that only a couple of old dresses remained. Sage slumped down on the side of the bed. Where could her mother have gone? But more to the point, why had she left? This just didn’t make any sense.

The kitchen! That was the one room that her mother claimed was hers alone. She loved to cook and bake. That was one reason she still worked part time at a bakery just around the corner. The small sparkling clean kitchen was barren of food at least in the refrigerator. Her mother had obviously cleaned it out before leaving. She was meticulous about things like that since she abhorred a mess of any kind and had always been cautious about keeping food very long before throwing it out.

Sage’s heart leaped into her throat when she saw the envelope propped up against the teakettle. With trembling hands she picked up the cream colored envelope with her name written in her mother’s small neat writing. After removing the sheet of paper she began to read.

Her legs threatened to give out from under her as she groped for a chair to sit down before she fell down. Sage read her mother’s letter for a second time trying to come to grips with its contents. Her mother had left Chicago! What was she thinking leaving all of her family behind? How could she just quit her job and leave town like this? It was so out of character for the woman Sage had known and loved for the past twenty-five years.

Sage was terrified for her mother and where she could be. Cheyenne Mendoza was seventy years old and, as far as Sage was aware, had never traveled anywhere on her own. She read the letter a third time. *My dearest Sage, I realize when I made my plans two months ago that you of all my daughters would be the most distraught. But I am counting on your understanding and patience. This is something that I have wanted to do all of my life. Now that your two sisters are married and you are settled in a good job, I feel free to pursue my own dream. I’m going to be looking for a job on a ranch. You know how much I love to cook and the idea of cooking for a group of people thrills me, Sage. Tell your sisters that I’m doing fine and not to worry. I’ll call you tomorrow night and give you all the details about my new life out here in Utah. All my love, mother.*

Sage snorted. “Tell my sisters not to worry. Obviously they haven’t so far.” Her fear quickly escalated into anger at her two older sisters, Helene and Dallas. They had assured her that they would check on mother to be sure she was doing okay while Sage was away. Helene lived further away but had said she would call daily while Sage was in New York. Dallas just lived thirty minutes away and had promised to check in daily either by phone at the apartment or at the bakery where their mother worked. Or had worked. Surely if their mother had told them what she had been planning one of them would have tried to stop her. Or would they?

She thought about her sisters and their elevated life styles. They had both married very well and had large homes and two children each. They did a lot of entertaining and were members of several clubs and committees. But just because they led such a hectic social life didn’t mean they couldn’t find the time to care for their mother! It had been just Sage and her mother since she had been very young so naturally she felt very protective of her. Helene and Dallas both told her that she tended to be overly protective of their mother. But Sage didn’t agree. She had only been nine years old when her father

had died unexpectedly. Helene had already been married at the time and Dallas had married two years later. So for the past fourteen years Sage and her mother had shared the second floor apartment. Cheyenne had never been away before. The place felt empty as if something important was missing. Sage stalked back into the living room.

Sitting on the peach sofa, Sage reached for the phone to call Dallas. She'd call her cell phone first since her sister was rarely home this time of the day. Sage was about to hang up and try her home phone when Dallas picked up. Sage could hear laughter in the background.

"Dallas, this is Sage. How could you let mother go off alone like this. You and Helene you said you would take care of her while I was gone," Sage raged almost out of control.

"What are you ranting about Sage? Mother has gone away with Ethel and Fran. They went to Rockford to visit Ethel's sister," Dallas replied a bit stiffly. In her opinion, Sage worried far too much about mother. "She called the morning you left so I wouldn't worry. She said it would be lonely without so this was a good time for her to take the trip."

"She did not go to Rockford with anyone, Dallas. She's quit her job at the bakery and gone out west someplace. She's moved to Utah! In the brief note she left me she said she's going to get work on a ranch! As a cook! And she didn't say where she was in Utah so I have no idea even where to begin looking," Sage almost cried.

"Calm down, Sage. Did she say anything about calling?" Dallas wanted to know.

"She said she would call me tomorrow night."

"Well, you'll find out then where she is and how she's doing," Dallas said almost nonchalantly. She did care about her mother but knew she was an adult and could take care of herself. In her opinion Sage was a bit irrational where their mother was concerned.

"And in the meantime I won't be able to think about anything but where she could be or what she's doing. I don't know how much money she had. Does she have enough to eat? And does she have a place to stay?"

"Look, if she said she was going to get a job on a ranch, then she might have had the job all arranged. You don't know. And mother would not go off without sufficient funds to get her situated. So you don't have to worry about her sleeping out on a park bench somewhere. Although why she wants to live out in the country, and I mean country, I don't know," Dallas said with distaste.

"You know she has always been fascinated by the old west. She's read everything she could get her hands on about ranching and farming. Grandmother Kumi got her interested in the American west when she was a child," Sage said in her mother's defense.

"I remember all those stories, Sage. But I can't imagine why mother would want to leave Chicago to actually go live out there. But it's her decision and there really isn't much you can do about it especially if she really has a job. If she said that she'll call tomorrow night, then she will. And then you'll find out all the details. Now I must run. Call me after you talk to her and fill me in on the details." With this the line went dead.

Sage sat staring at the phone several seconds before turning it off and lying it on the table next to the sofa. She stood and began pacing as she mumbled aloud. "Just relax and wait for the call, Sage. Mother will tell you where she is living and you can just go

to work and forget about her welfare. Like hell I will!" She picked up the phone to call Helene.

When her sister answered, Sage didn't waste time. "Helene, mother has moved out west. She's moved to Utah all by herself! Did you know about the story she made up about going to Rockford?"

"Hello to you too Sage dear. But yes, I did know about it. She called me the day before she left. And what do you mean she's moved? It was supposed to be a short trip with some friends of hers," Helene said thoughtfully.

"She made up that story to throw you and Dallas off the trail. And it worked."

"And that upsets you? Sage, she's seventy years old and if she wants to follow her dream, then more power to her," Dallas laughed. "I wouldn't be surprised if she buys an authentic western outfit too."

"I don't see anything funny about this. We don't know anything about this man she's working for or about his ranch, or..."

"Sage, mother is practical if nothing else. If she set out on this adventure, you can be sure that she had it all well planned out. She waited until you were out of town and thought to make up that story about going away with friends to give her time to get away. And it worked. She's probably fine and having the time of her life," Helene said trying to comfort her younger sister.

"But she's seventy years old! And she's never been out of Chicago except with dad when we went on trips. She's never been away on her own. Anything could happen to her," Sage argued. "When she calls tomorrow, I'm going to insist that she come home immediately." She was closer to their mother because of all the time they spent together, just the two of them in the small Chicago apartment. She knew that Dallas and Helene loved their mother. But they just didn't understand.

"There's no need to get all worked up over nothing. But I should warn you that if you tell her to come home, you might have a fight on your hands. If she's made up her mind about living out west I have a feeling that nothing you can say will budge her from her new home. Let me know as soon as she calls. And don't spend the night worrying. I'll talk to you tomorrow," Helene said before hanging up the phone.

Sage sighed as she laid her phone back down on the table. Was she being overly protective? It had been just the two of them for so long now and she felt responsible for her mother. She had to admit that Cheyenne was in excellent health. She had more energy than a lot of people half her age. Her mind was as sharp as it had always been and she certainly didn't look seventy. Sage absently wondered what someone should look like at that age. She shrugged and got up to go unpack her suitcase. The apartment seemed empty without her mother there to talk to.

The past evening had dragged by. Sage hadn't slept well, partly from worry over her mother's whereabouts and partly because she wasn't used to being alone in the apartment. It wasn't as if she was afraid of being on her own. It was just that her mother had always been there. She couldn't remember that last time she hadn't been there at night.

Once she'd unpacked last night, she had gone through the stack of accumulated mail only to discover a letter from her mother. Ripping it open, she'd read the brief note. *"Just a note to let you know that I have a job! I'm actually working on a cattle ranch,*

Sage. Isn't it wonderful? I'm cook and housekeeper, although there is a woman who comes in once a week to do the heavy cleaning. The men here are absolutely wonderful. They adore my cooking so you can imagine how that makes me feel. I'll tell you all about it when we talk. Love, Mother." There was no return address and the stamp was smeared so she couldn't read the city in Utah where it was mailed. Damn! Knowing her mother had a job should at least have made her rest easier about the status of her living conditions, but it didn't.

Sage got up before the alarm went off even as tired as she was and went into work early. At least at work her mind would be occupied with other things that would keep her from worrying. It had worked up to a point. But some little thing would remind her and then it would be difficult to dislodge the worry once again.

Now she paced the living room waiting for the phone to ring. Her mother hadn't said what time she would call. Sage had hoped that she might call her at work because she had her cell phone number and her work number. But no call had been forthcoming. Now it was after seven that evening and still no call. She hadn't eaten dinner so she went out to the kitchen to find some fruit. She ate the banana and grapes without tasting them. It could have been paper for all the attention she paid to what she was doing.

By nine that night Sage was almost in a panic. She had visions of going to the police to report her mother as missing. She knew that someone had to be missing at least forty-eight hours before they would take a report. But where would they begin to look for her. *Utah* covered a vast territory. Where did you begin to look for a four foot eleven inch seventy year old woman in the vastness of ranching country?

She began pacing the living room and hallway wondering what she should do if her mother didn't call. She'd just reached the end of the hallway when the phone rang. Sprinting into her bedroom Sage snatched the phone and pushed the on button all in one movement. "Mother, where are you? And why have you waited so long to call? I've been worried sick!" she all but cried into the receiver not giving the person on the other end time to say a word.

"Sage Mendoza?" a deep drawl questioned from the other end of the line.

She drew in a deep breath. "This is she but I can't talk now. I'm waiting for an important phone call," she said and started to end the connection.

"I'm calling for your mother, Miss Mendoza. I'm Quinn O'Shea, owner of the Circle Q ranch just outside Chance, Utah." He could hear the panic in her voice and regretted it. This had been a miserable day and he hadn't looked forward to making this phone call. He felt guilty enough without some panic-stricken emotional woman making it any worse.

"Where's my mother? Why can't she call me? I want to talk to her, Mr. O'Shea. And right now or you had better have a damned good reason," Sage snapped gripping the phone with undue force. Then she gasped as a thought struck her...*what if she'd been kidnapped?*

"Cheyenne is fine, Miss Mendoza. She had a little accident, but she is fine," he said trying to calm her down.

"An accident? Why wasn't I notified immediately? I'm her daughter and you should have called me. I don't know how you do things out in Utah Mr. O'Shea, but here we..."

“Miss Mendoza,” he roared. “Cheyenne was stung by a bee and had an allergic reaction. I thought it best to deal with that instead of calling one of her darling daughters to get permission to take care of her. For your information, we had what we needed to take care of the reaction but I insisted that she see a doctor, so I took her into the clinic in town and Dr. Smith thought it would be best to keep her overnight just for observation. I’ve been with her and she asked me to call. Well I’ve made the call and she’s going to be fine.” With these last words, Quinn replaced the receiver with more force than necessary. He was mumbling to himself as he turned to leave the phone booth. “Damned city women are nothing but hysterical screeching banshees.” He’d only taken a couple of steps when he sighed stopping in his tracks. The woman was upset. She obviously cared a great deal for her mother. And he knew from all that Cheyenne had told him that she and this daughter were very close.

With a sigh he returned to the phone booth. Using his calling card he redialed Sage’s number. She picked it up on the first ring.

Sage just stared at the phone listening to the ominous dial tone. He hung up on her! He just hung up! The rat! Tears formed in her dark eyes. Her mother was in a clinic somewhere in Utah and she couldn’t talk to her to assure herself that she was truly okay.

When the phone rang for the second time she almost dropped it in her haste to answer it. “Yes?”

“It’s Quinn again. Look, I’m sorry about that but this has been less than a pleasant day. I know that you’ll want to talk to your mother. I’m afraid that I didn’t give the time difference any thought or I would have tried to call earlier,” he explained hoping she wouldn’t fly off the handle again.

Sage was momentarily taken aback. Was he actually apologizing? She was mature enough to realize that she hadn’t been on her best behavior either. “Thank you, Mr. O’Shea. I would really like to talk to her myself. I don’t know if she told you but she left Chicago while I was out of town on a business trip. The note she left me didn’t say exactly where she was going. All it said was that she would call me tonight.”

Quinn smiled. He had become very fond of Cheyenne in the short time she’d been working as his cook and housekeeper. All of the men had become very protective of the best cook they had ever had. Cheyenne Mendoza might be small but she knew what she wanted and went after it. “Your mother is really some woman,” he admitted. “She can cook rings around most of the women in the area.”

“I agree. But she is seventy years old and we worry about her because she won’t admit that she can’t do something. She just goes ahead and gives it her best shot,” Sage said worrying her bottom lip.

Quinn frowned. “What’s wrong with that? I don’t think age should matter. Cheyenne is sharp as a tack mentally and is physically able to do a lot more than a great many people younger than she is. She wants to learn to ride.”

“She what?” Sage exploded. “I hope you told her that it was out of the question. I will not have my mother thrown from some bucking horse and breaking bones. At her age...”

“At her age she should be doing what she wants to do and is capable of doing, Miss Mendoza. *If* I teach her to ride, you can be assured that it will not be on a bucking

bronco but a quiet suitable mount. Now do you want the clinic number?" he asked all in one breath.

"Yes! Please give me the number. I hope to convince her to come home where she belongs. Where she will be safe!" Sage replied biting back the words she wanted to say. She couldn't afford to make him angry enough hang up on her again, at least before she got the clinic number. His voice was clipped as he gave her the number. She repeated it back to be sure that she'd gotten it right. "Thank you, Mr. O'Shea. I appreciate you taking care of mother but I will handle things from here." With this, Sage disconnected the call.

Quinn stared at the phone. How could someone as nice and wholesome as Cheyenne have a daughter like that? He left the phone booth and headed for his truck. So she would handle things from Chicago. He wondered how she planned on doing that since he was due to pick up Cheyenne in the morning and take her back to the ranch.

Sage took a deep breath and dialed the number Quinn O'Shea had given her. It was picked up on the third ring. When she asked to speak with Mrs. Mendoza she was put right through.

"Hello?" Her mother sounded anything but sick. She sounded positively cheerful.

"Mother? Are you okay? You had me worried sick. Why did you leave like that?" Sage asked in a rush. She slumped down on the bed with relief at hearing her mother's voice.

"I'm fine, Sage. I don't know why they are keeping me here overnight. Quinn took care of me after the bee sting and I didn't really see any reason to come to the clinic. But he wouldn't listen to me. So here I am. How are you? Did you have a good business trip?" she asked knowing full well that Sage was upset with her on several levels.

"Mother, why did you go out there? If you wanted to take a trip, I would have been more than happy to take you," Sage stated with a sigh.

"I know dear. But it would have only been a short trip. You know how much I've always wanted to move, especially to a ranch. I knew you and your sisters wouldn't agree so I avoided an argument. I'm a grown woman and I can do as I please. And this move pleases me very much," Cheyenne said with determination. "Quinn and the boys are just wonderful."

"So wonderful that you ended up in a clinic!" Sage snorted.

"Now, they had no way of knowing there was a nest of bees in the roof of the chicken coop. When Quinn realized what had happened he had Colt and Parker out there removing the nest and spraying to be sure there are no more in or around the out buildings," Cheyenne stated in Quinn's defense. She had become very fond of him. There was a sadness about him that made her want to make him smile. They had talked since she'd gone to work for him and learned more from Slim. Quinn carried around a huge ball of pain that he had to learn to let go. But she was not the one to tell him that. It would take someone special. From the moment she'd met Quinn O'Shea she'd felt an immediate attachment. The more she got to know him the more she pictured him with Sage. Cheyenne's mother and her grandmother had keen insights into the future. And Cheyenne was her mother's daughter not only in her interest in the west but in all ways.

“It’s too dangerous out there for you. Please come home!” Sage pleaded. “Dallas and Helene are worried about you,” she hedged trying to make her mother see reason.

“I find *that* hard to believe,” Cheyenne replied with a laugh. She knew her daughters...all of them. Dallas and Helene loved her, but they were both wrapped up in their own families and their busy social lives. Sage, on the other hand, was devoted to her and that was beginning to worry Cheyenne. To date, her youngest daughter had not met a man who could hold her interest for more than a few weeks. Oh, she had quite a few admirers, but no one who had become important in Sage’s life.

Sage tried another angle. “Look, you don’t know anything about this Quinn O’Shea. You’ve only been out there a week. It can’t be safe for you out on a ranch surrounded by men.” Then a thought hit her. “Unless his wife is there?” she finished on a more hopeful note. At least if there was another woman around, she would look after Cheyenne.

“He’s a widower, Sage. His wife was killed in an automobile accident three years ago. And give me some credit for being a good judge of character. Quinn is a good man,” Cheyenne was quick to defend her employer.

Sage rolled her eyes, but of course her mother couldn’t see that. Seeing that she was getting nowhere she made a quick decision. “I’m coming out to see you mother, just as soon as I can get a flight. And don’t tell me not to bother because it won’t work.”

“I’d love to see you, Sage. But I should clear your visit with Quinn. I’m not sure how he will take to having a guest in the house on such short notice,” Cheyenne replied hoping she had kept the smile out of her voice. She knew that Quinn had no objection to a visit from any member of her family. As a matter of fact, he had already suggested that one of her daughters might want to come to be assured that Cheyenne was okay. But she knew Sage and if she thought there was an obstacle in her way, she’d find a way around it. She was always the one who wouldn’t believe something couldn’t be done until she’d tried it for herself.

“Well, I don’t care if he wants visitors or not. I don’t have to stay in his house. There must be a motel or hotel close by where I could stay. I’ll worry about that when I get there. You just take care of yourself and I’ll see you soon.” Sage disconnected the call before her mother could add further argument against her trip to Utah. She’d be damned if she’d clear a visit with her own mother with Quinn O’Shea or anyone else!

CHAPTER 2

Cheyenne glanced over at the man behind the wheel of the big dark blue truck and smiled. She had been fortunate indeed to find a job with Quinn O'Shea. He was certainly a man who needed looking after in more ways than one, at least in her opinion. Maybe she hadn't known him very long, but her instincts told her Quinn was a lonely man who had a lot of sadness bottled up inside of him. He might be fighting his own inner devils but with those who worked for him, he was kind and fair, always ready to do his share of any big job. This made her remember the twins.

"Who is looking after Kate and Cody?" It broke her heart to see how those youngsters strived to gain their father's attention. For some reason, Quinn didn't show any interest in them beyond their immediate needs. Oh they didn't go without food, clothing or anything that money could buy. But he never gave of himself.

"Parker is watching them. They're fine," he stated flatly.

Cheyenne raised a brow but didn't comment when Quinn glanced over at her.

"Are you comfortable?" Quinn asked changing the subject.

"I'm fine. You know, there was really no need for me to spend the night in the clinic. Now you have had to make another trip into town just because of me," Cheyenne reminded him. She wouldn't push the subject of the twins knowing from past experience that it wouldn't do any good.

"It's no problem, Cheyenne. I'd rather err on the side of caution where you're concerned." He had no idea that she was seventy years old until she had told the nurse who had helped to fill out her personal information on the admitting form. She certainly didn't look much over sixty if even that. And she was such a little thing too. Every man

on the ranch already adored her and not just because of her fabulous cooking. She seemed to have taken each one of them under her wing, treating them as she would her family. Even he wasn't exempt from being told to wipe his boots or wash his hands before coming to the table to eat. She treated him much the same way she treated Kate and Cody. His heart contracted with suppressed longing as their serious little faces filled his mind.

"If you're referring to my age I'll box your ears, young man. I'm just as agile now as I was when my children were young," she told him a bit indignantly.

Quinn couldn't restrain the smile as he took his eyes off the road to look at the dainty Asian lady sitting on the wide seat. Her feet didn't even touch the floorboard. "Then how come I had to help you into the truck?" Actually he had picked her up and placed her on the seat in the cab. Her legs were much too short to allow her to get in by herself.

"Humph! If you drove a normal size vehicle there wouldn't have been any problem. This blue monster is so far off the ground it's more like flying than driving." That wasn't exactly true but she loved to tease him sensing that he had little laughter in his life. Quinn had a beautiful smile, but it didn't make an appearance very often. She was determined to see it in use more in the future. Those twins needed to smile more too.

"Maybe I should have brought a horse and buggy?" Quinn suggested trying not to grin.

"Now that would have been wonderful. Do you really have a buggy? Oh, I would love to take a ride like that someday! It must have been exciting to travel by horse and carriage without all the hustle and noise of cars and trucks." Cheyenne's mother had been fascinated by the old west and had encouraged her daughter's interest so that today she was a walking talking encyclopedia on ranching and geography of the western states. During the early years of her marriage, Cheyenne and Tomas had made a few trips with the girls to Wyoming and Colorado. It had been their dream to settle out there somewhere, but Tomas had died unexpectedly leaving Cheyenne to raise her family alone. Her dream had been put on hold, but not forgotten. Now she was in Utah and her job on Quinn's ranch was everything she had imagined. Having tasted the peace and quiet of country life she knew she could never return to Chicago. That thought reminded her that she still had to inform Quinn that Sage would be coming to visit.

"I think we can arrange something for you," Quinn said shaking his head. He still couldn't reconcile this petite Asian woman and her desire to live and work on a ranch. But he was grateful because she was the best cook he had ever had. And that was saying a lot because Ina had been great. And she was great with the kids also, much to his relief. This past week they hadn't gotten into as much mischief as usual.

"There's something that I have to tell you, Quinn. My daughter, Sage, called me last night."

"She's not happy about you working out here," Quinn supplied. Sage Mendoza didn't sound anything like her mother on the phone. Where Cheyenne was soft spoken Sage had been a shrew. But then he had to admit that she had been concerned about her mother and where she had run off to all by herself.

"How did you know? Never mind. You spoke to her yourself last night. She said she's coming out here to see me and take me back to Chicago. I know it's an imposition, but I would like her to stay at the ranch and see how wonderful it is. That way

she can see that I can take care of myself,” Cheyenne stated staring straight ahead. “I want you to know that I will not be returning to the city no matter what Sage says.” She wanted to reassure him that she wouldn’t be leaving him after a few weeks.

Quinn frowned. The shrew was coming to Chance? Hell, he shouldn’t be surprised. She had been so upset last night when he’d talk with her that it was a wonder she hadn’t shown up at the clinic first thing this morning. He wasn’t sure how he felt about having a stranger stay at the ranch, especially a young woman. He didn’t have time to play host to a prissy city woman who would undoubtedly complain about the lack of fashionable restaurants and nightclubs. But he knew this was important to Cheyenne. “Of course she must stay at the ranch,” he assured her. “Is she as interested in the West as you?”

“Oh my, no! Well she did grow up on all the stories I read to her and she did enjoy the trips we made when she was a child. Sage works for an interior-decorating firm. She has worked her way up to assistant to the head decorator,” Cheyenne told him with pride evident in her tone. Of her three daughters she was closest to Sage, but then it had been just the two of them since Tomas died. The last year or so she had begun to worry that her youngest daughter was never going to find someone with whom to share her life. Cheyenne had reason to believe that she was responsible for this lack of enthusiasm. If only Sage could be made to realize that she could lead her own life and let her mother lead one of her choosing!

Quinn groaned inwardly. Great! He just hoped his houseguest didn’t expect him to escort her to town every night because it wasn’t going to happen. They worked hard and were up early every morning, so just about everyone one the ranch was in bed by ten o’clock each night. Then a thought hit him. The twins! They would probably drive her off the ranch and back to Chicago in short order.

Almost before he had stopped the truck, Cody and Kate bounded out of the kitchen door running down the sidewalk. “Cheyenne!” the screamed in unison their faces lit with radiant smiles.

Quinn rounded the truck to open the door and lifted Cheyenne to the ground. Immediately the twin threw themselves into her arms. “We missed you! Are you okay?” Kate wanted to know.

“Slim and me sprayed all around the buildings, even the house so you don’t have to worry about bees anymore,” Cody announced proudly.

“I am just fine and was in no real danger thanks to your father,” Cheyenne said directing her attention to Quinn. Her efforts to have the children acknowledge their father’s presence didn’t work as she had hoped.

“Parker helped us bake some cookies for you,” Kate stated with a mere glance at Quinn. She waited for him to say something, but when he didn’t she continued. “Most of them are brown, but a few are black and brown.”

“But they still taste good,” Cody rushed to assure her.

“Well now why don’t we all go in and have some with milk? Or coffee for the adults?” She began to usher the children toward the house but turned to address Quinn. “Are you coming?”

“No. I have things to do. You go along, but don’t over do it today,” he instructed curtly before turning to walk toward the barn. It hadn’t taken long for the twins to latch onto Cheyenne and become her devoted admirers. But isn’t that what he wanted? Now

that he had someone to take care of Kate and Cody, it freed him to devote his time to the ranch. It also meant that he didn't have to play father. The stab of guilt he felt about that still appeared more often than he would like. Hell if he were honest with himself, it never went away. But that was his problem and something he had to live with.

After Cheyenne and Kate entered the kitchen Cody hung back a little longer watching as his father stalked off towards the barn. What he wouldn't give to be able to throw himself into his arms as he and Kate had done with Cheyenne; to be held in his strong arms and hugged close as he used to do when they were younger. Cody didn't understand why their father didn't have any time for them anymore. He knew that Kate felt the same. Sometimes if it was storming his sister would come to his room and they would talk huddled in his bed. Once during an especially bad summer storm Kate had been crying and wanted them to go to their father's room. They had actually crept down the hall to his door, but hadn't had the courage to go in. He would probably only have growled at them to get back into their own beds anyway, or at least that was what they'd believed at the time.

Quinn quickly saddled Thor and headed out to the north pasture where Will and Lester were working. He needed some hard labor to keep from thinking. But the long ride out left his mind free to roam as it latched onto the night Cheyenne had appeared on his doorstep with bags in hand.

He and Slim had been in the kitchen after the kids had eaten and gone riding with Parker. He thought he had used considerable restraint when he had managed not to slam the door behind the last applicant who had responded to his newspaper ad. Long angry strides carried him back down the hall to the kitchen at the back of the large rambling ranch house. He slumped down in a chair resting his elbows on his knees as he ran his hands over his face. "Where in the hell do these women come from? And why bother answering an ad for housekeeper when you can't really cook and you don't like children? It's not what they want and they know it even before they get here!" he almost snarled.

"Last one didn't fit your needs, I guess?" Slim chuckled from his place by the sink where he was working with the coffee maker. No one knew exactly how old Slim was and he wouldn't tell. But he'd been on the *Circle Q* ranch as long as Quinn could remember.

"You could say that!" Quinn snapped. "Look, I'm sorry Slim. This isn't your fault and I shouldn't be taking it out on you." Slim Jager had worked for Quinn's dad and now he worked as ranch foreman for him. He had almost been like a second father to Quinn. "I just want Ina back."

"Well, you can't have her. She's gone to live with her son so you'd better get over it," Slim snorted. He missed Ina too. She had been the cook and housekeeper on the ranch for as many years. And what a cook! And she had taken complete care of the twins since their mother had died three years ago. But for the last two weeks they had been reduced to eating their own cooking. And that wasn't so good. Poor Parker had been delegated to look after Cody and Kate, which was quite an undertaking since hardly a day went by when those two didn't get into some kind of trouble.

"I know that Ina's daughter-in-law's illness means that they need her with them. But I am so tired of these women who wouldn't know which end of a broom to use who keep wasting my time by applying for the job," Quinn protested as he accepted a mug of

coffee. He tried not to grimace after taking a sip. How much coffee did Slim use? You could strip paint with the stuff.

"I didn't see this last one. What was her problem?" Slim wanted to know. "Maybe you're just being too picky. Couldn't hurt to give one of them a try."

"This last one, Claudia Richman, wouldn't have known how to clean a house if her life depended on it. Her fingernails were so long she could use them to turn steaks on the grill. And they were painted bright red. And she squeezed my knee!" Quinn added with indignation. He wasn't used to forward women. Well, not that forward anyway.

Slim chuckled, then burst out laughing.

"I don't see anything funny about that?" Quinn said frowning.

"It's that thick head of brown hair and those big brown eyes of yours. They make a woman do all kinds of crazy things, I guess," Slim laughed feigning a swoon. "Maybe I should take over the interviewing so you won't be compromised."

"Oh shut up!" Quinn snapped but softened it with a grin. It was hard to stay in a bad mood around Slim. "Maybe I will hire the next one who shows up and let you deal with her. I can stay safely hidden out in the bunk house and let you stay here."

"Hell, you don't spend that much time at the house anyway. Your dad was a workaholic but you put him to shame. You need to get a social life, boy. And I don't mean one date every two or three months either," Slim said refilling his mug. "And those two youngsters need you. I know you're not blind. Surely you can see how much they want to reach out to you? It's been three years since the accident and..."

"We've been down this trail before, Slim. I'm in no mood to hear it again," Quinn replied quietly. He knew what Slim said was true. But he just wasn't interested. He'd been led down the matrimonial road once. That was once too many in his book. The ranch and the work involved was challenging and fulfilling. He didn't need nor want anything more. As for the twins, well he would see that they never lacked for anything, but he couldn't forgive Sharon for her deceit.

But there were women who thought that Quinlan O'Shea did need more and were more than willing to be a part of his life. The tall handsome rancher could have his pick of any women in and around Chance, Utah. He wasn't unsocial; he just wasn't interested in romance or establishing any permanent relationship. Commitment was no longer part of his vocabulary. Women couldn't be trusted.

Quinn walked to the sink to rinse out his coffee mug. "We got work to do instead of sitting around here talking." Slim followed him to the sink to rinse his mug and then the two men headed for the back door just as the front doorbell rang.

"Want me to get that?" Slim asked cocking a bushy brow.

Quinn sighed. "No. I'll get rid of whoever and meet you out by the barn." If this was another applicant he had an urge to just tell her that the job had been filled and forget the whole matter. He was grown man and could take care of a house. Maybe not as well as Ina, but he could manage. But then he remembered the children and knew he had to find someone.

He flung open the front door and stared...at thin air. All he could see was Ben Thompson's truck heading back down the drive. Then a slight movement caught his eye and he looked down. He blinked. Standing in front of him was a small Asian woman of unknown age with a suitcase in one hand and a flowered tin in the other. Her hair was

pulled back in a bun at the nape of her neck; her face was unlined by age and her eyes twinkled when she smiled.

“I’m here for the position of housekeeper,” she announced stepping forward.

Quinn automatically stepped back to allow her to enter. When she passed him to enter the foyer, he realized how tiny she was. She barely reached the middle of his chest.

Cheyenne sat her suitcase down on the floor before turning to the tall young man. “I’m looking for Quinlan O’Shea,” she announced in a pleasant soft voice craning her neck to look up at him. *He has nice eyes*, she thought. *But they look sad as if some tragedy has hurt him deeply.* “I’m Cheyenne Mendoza,” she said extending her hand.

“I’m Quinn O’Shea,” he told her softly his large hand swallowing her small one. He blinked again. That name certainly didn’t fit this little woman. “Ma’am, this is a large house and it’s a lot of work. There’s also the cooking for my crew and me. And then there are two eight-year-old children to care for. Are you sure that this is the work you’re looking for?” he asked not sure why he was elaborating about the hard work involved. The house was large but he was a neat person so it didn’t need a whole lot to keep it up. Now the cooking and the twins was another thing.

She waved a tiny hand at him. “I’m used to hard work. I actually prefer it. You get soft if you just sit on your duff all the time.” Sage had been after her to retire this past year but she couldn’t bring herself to do it. She loved to read and sew, but you couldn’t fill the days with just that to occupy your time. Cheyenne was in good health and loved to work.

Quinn rubbed the back of his neck and tried not to grin. *Sit on your duff?* That wasn’t an expression he would expect to hear coming from this woman’s lips. “Can you cook? There are seven men to cook for every day plus the kids. That’s breakfast, lunch and supper and packed lunches for those out on the range all day.”

“Oh, that shouldn’t be any problem. I’ve been told that I could make a feast out of a garbage bin. And I’ve been working in a bakery for the last five years so if any of you has a sweet tooth, I should be able to satisfy that easily enough. I’ve come a long way Mr. O’Shea, and I don’t have anywhere to stay. We could agree on a trial period to see if my work is acceptable, if that would be all right with you?” Cheyenne stated with her arms wrapped around the flowered tin. The she remembered the object in her hand and opened it. “Here, have a cookie. They’re my special peanut butter and chocolate ones.”

Quinn reached for one of the tasty cookies. Before he could comment on Cheyenne’s suggestion, Slim rushed into the foyer. He took a bite as Slim skidded to a stop by his side. Quinn’s taste buds sprang to life as the marvelous flavor of the cookie enveloped him. He almost sighed with delight.

“Boss, we got trouble out on the west range. Fence is down and those calves are out.” He stopped short upon seeing the small woman with Quinn. “Sorry ma’am, I didn’t see you there,” he said touching the brim of his hat.

“That’s quite all right. Have a cookie,” she stated thrusting the tin at him. “Why don’t you two run along and take care of those calves and the fence. I’ll get settled in the kitchen and see about dinner.”

Quinn was at a loss. In all honesty, he was quite taken with the petite lady. And they did have to move fast. “Okay, we’ll have a two-week trial, Mrs. Mendoza. There are plenty of bedrooms upstairs. Just pick an empty one for your use. Leave your

suitcase down here and I'll carry it up when I get back. Or there's a suite off the kitchen you might prefer? The kitchen is in the back."

"I'm sure I'll be fine, but those calves won't be unless you get moving," Cheyenne said ushering the two men down the hallway.

"Thank you, ma'am," Slim said waving a cookie as he turned to leave. He took a bite. His eyes opened wide in surprise and delight. "This is the best darn cookie I've ever had. I hope you hire that lady," he told Quinn as they hurried out the back door. "What's her name again?"

"Cheyenne Mendoza," Quinn said with a grin. "Unusual name for an unusual lady if I'm not mistaken. But right now, we have work to do."

Cheyenne didn't wait for Quinn to carry her suitcase upstairs. She had been a widow for sixteen years and was used to doing things for herself. *My this is a large house*, she thought as she walked down the long upstairs hallway. There appeared to be six bedrooms and a full bathroom. When she discovered that there was a back staircase leading down to the kitchen, she decided on the suite off the kitchen. It was a lovely room painted a soft yellow with daisy wallpaper on the wall behind the bed. It had its own sitting room and bathroom making perfect for her needs. And it was where she could keep an eye on the kitchen.

It didn't take her long to hang her clothes in the closet and put the rest of her things in the dresser drawers. Picking up her stack of aprons, she left her room to inspect the kitchen. And she was delighted with what she found. It was a huge country kitchen with pots and pans hanging over the center-cooking island. Plants lined the bay window with the inviting pine trestle table that looked to sit at least ten people. She wondered where the kids were that Quinn had spoken about. The house was quiet so she was sure they were not home. Well, she would find out soon enough.

Rubbing her hands together she began inspecting the cupboards and freezer. She'd be cooking for seven big hungry men so she had better get started. As she worked preparing the chicken she felt only a small prickle of guilt over her precipitous departure from Chicago.

She knew that Sage was going to be upset when she returned home and found the note she'd left. But this was something Cheyenne had wanted all of her life. Her mother had been fascinated by the American west and had instilled that love in her daughter. The only times she had been west were the two times she and Tomas had been able to take their girls on a real vacation. They'd saved for three years for a trip to Yellowstone National Park. Tomas had bought her some books about the west, ones that she hadn't read or had in her library and over the years she had read them so many times that she almost knew them by heart.

Well, she had just had her seventieth birthday and figured that if she was ever going to experience living on a ranch, now was the time. The last few years she had subscribed to eight different newspapers from Wyoming, Colorado, Nevada and Utah. She loved reading anything and everything about ranch living. So when she spotted the ad for a housekeeper in Chance, Utah, it was too good to pass up.

Her daughter, Sage, had a business trip planned and would be gone a week. So that night Cheyenne had made plane reservations for Salt Lake City to leave several hours after Sage left for New York. Sage tended to fuss over her and was going to hit the

roof when she discovered what her mother had done. But that was just too bad. Now here she was...and it was even better than Cheyenne had ever imagined.

Five hours later Quinn had finished putting away the tools in the shed. He was tired and hungry. He wondered how Mrs. Mendoza had managed while he'd been gone. He had never done anything like this before...gone off and left a complete stranger alone in his house. But unless she'd had a van and a gang waiting outside, he didn't think she was capable of walking off with much if that had been her objective. He shook his head. No, she was not that type. He smiled as he remembered how she'd just marched in telling him she was there for the job. What the hell! If she could cook, the job would be hers.

Shadow, a gray wolf he'd raised from a pup, trotted along by his side. Since Quinn had been the one to feed the pup, slept with him and tended to his every need when he was small, the wolf now trailed him wherever he went. It hadn't taken him long to name him Shadow since he'd almost tripped over him every time he made a move. Shadow was devoted to Quinn but reserved with most other people. He knew all the men who worked on the ranch but was leery of strangers. Shadow loved children and was unduly gentle around them. He adored the twins and tended to be extremely protective, especially with strangers around. It was then Quinn remembered he hadn't told Mrs. Mendoza the kids were out with Parker. He shook his head at his own preoccupation with things. He liked to think that if Kate and Cody had been in the house, he would have taken the time to introduce them to the new housekeeper. But in his present state of mind that wasn't a certainty.

As they headed for the house Quinn didn't even give Shadow's presence a thought until they entered the kitchen. He felt Shadow stiffen by his side before slowly stepping forward. Mrs. Mendoza!

Shadow stopped short upon seeing a strange person in his house. Moving slowly forward he sniffed at her shoes before sitting down to look up at this new person.

Cheyenne loved animals but they hadn't been able to have cats because Tomas and Helene were allergic to them. Dogs were just too big for their apartment. But this animal was absolutely beautiful and so big! His legs and belly were white while the rest of his fur was gray, white, black and a smattered of brown. She knew that if he stood on his hind legs that he would be much taller than she was. "Aren't you magnificent?" she said in awe of this grand creature. She held out her hand that he sniffed then licked with a big wet tongue. Gently she reached out to pet the top of his head.

Shadow all but moaned in pleasure at her gentle contact. Quinn was stunned. He had never seen the wolf show anyone such adoration. Not even him. The wolf was almost smiling, if an animal could be said to smile. "Mrs. Mendoza, this is Shadow," Quinn told her watching as she continued to stroke the animal.

"He's a beautiful dog. And so big!" she replied not looking up from her new friend.

"He's a wolf, not a dog. They're not as docile or trusting as dogs," Quinn warned her.

"Oh, he's a lovely baby, aren't you?" Cheyenne directed to the wolf as she scratched behind his ears.

"Hey, what smells so good in here?" Slim said pushing his way into the kitchen. "I'm so hungry I could eat the hind..."

“We get the idea, Slim,” Lester said pushing in behind him. He stopped short upon seeing Cheyenne with Shadow. “Well I’ll be damned. Never saw that wolf take to anyone like that before.”

By the time Cheyenne looked up from petting Shadow the kitchen was filled with men. There were seven including Quinn. Then two small bodies pushed their way to the front of the group. They all looked hungry if she could go by their expectant expressions. The table had been set so all she had to do was put the food into bowls and plates and put it out.

Everyone had washed up before entering the house and the unbelievably wonderful aroma in the kitchen had his or her mouths watering.

“What smells so good?” Kate asked staring at the strange lady.

“Who are you?” Cody demanded, but he was eyeing the table wondering what they were going to have for dinner.

“Watch you manners,” Quinn bit out more harshly than intended. “Cody, Kate...this is Mrs. Mendoza. She’s going to be staying with us for a while,” he said in a softer tone.

“I hope you two like cookies because I have a nice warm batch ready for after dinner?” Cheyenne told the youngsters. They were adorable children dressed in jeans, plaid shirts and boots.

Their eyes widened in anticipation. “Hello,” they replied quickly sliding onto their chairs at the table.

“Everyone sit down,” Cheyenne ordered as if talking to a group of children. “The food is all ready. I hope you all like roast chicken and mashed potatoes.” As she talked she placed three large platters of roasted chicken in the middle of the table. At each end of the large table she put a big bowl of mashed potatoes and a gravy bowl. This she followed by a platter of corn on the cob, hot fluffy biscuits and fresh cooked broccoli. Several large pitchers of iced tea and one of cold milk sat in the middle of the table along with some fresh sliced tomatoes and cucumbers.

Slim reached for a biscuit as soon as he sat down and took a bite not bothering to put any butter on it. He rolled his eyes heavenward as he groaned in pleasure. “This is the best biscuit I’ve ever had, ma’am. You don’t know how good it is to eat food and not have to worry about breaking a tooth in the process.”

“Hey, my cooking wasn’t that bad!” Parker said around a tasty moist bite of chicken.

“We’re lucky to still be alive,” Lester grunted as he reached for a biscuit.

Cheyenne, who had taken a seat at the end of the table, smiled at this good-natured bantering. It pleased her more than she could say to see how these men appreciated her efforts. She loved to cook, but for the so long now it had only been her and Sage. Cooking for two was far more difficult than for a group this size, at least in her eyes.

“Gentlemen, before you get too carried away by this delicious meal, let me introduce you to our new cook, Mrs. Mendoza,” Quinn said looking at the small lady across the table.

“Please, that sounds so formal. Call me Cheyenne,” she said placing a small piece of chicken on her plate.”

“Cheyenne it is,” Quinn grinned. Then he proceeded to introduce the rest of the ranch hands, Will, Parker, Colt, Lester and Jack. Will and Parker had been on the ranch for as long as Quinn could remember. Colt and Lester had come on board about ten years ago and Jack just last year. Quinn was a fair boss who paid well for good work so he usually kept an employee for quite a while.

Cheyenne sat fascinated as the men discussed the day’s work and set up a schedule for the next day. All of her life she had read about ranch life, cowboys and cattle and sheep, but now she was going to be living her dream. Inwardly she smiled. All her life she had worked hard, first by Tomas’ side and then alone after he’d died. Her two girls were married when their father had died, and the middle daughter married soon after. But Sage had only been nine years old so Cheyenne had the responsibility of raising her alone. Sage was now a grown woman and didn’t need her mother, at least the way how Cheyenne saw the situation.

Today was the first day of the rest of Cheyenne’s life. She was going to do this for herself and for herself alone. After seventy years on this world it was about time she did something that *she* wanted to do. Oh, she knew that Sage was going to have a fit when she found out. But she couldn’t force her to return to Chicago. And after today, Cheyenne knew that this was her new home.

Quinn was brought back to the present when he rounded the crest of a hill and spotted his men. After the first couple of days he had made up his mind to hire Cheyenne permanently if she still wanted the job. His house had never run more smoothly and Cody and Kate seemed to have taken to her on sight. At least so far they hadn’t done anything to the poor woman to send her screaming into town. He knew she didn’t approve of the way he was raising them. Oh she hadn’t said a word. But he had caught her puzzled look now and then. If he knew that little woman, it wouldn’t be long before she took him to task about it. But damned if he knew what he would tell her. He’d worry about that later...that and having to deal with Sage Mendoza.

CHAPTER 3

Sage pulled her rental car off the road. The long driveway ahead would take her to the house where her mother was living and working. She was anxious to see her, but was not looking forward to meeting Quinn O'Shea. She couldn't imagine what kind of a man would hire a seventy-year-old woman to work in his house. It was easier to blame the unknown man instead of her mother whom she knew could be stubborn when she set her mind to something. Since she had arrived home and found her mother's letter, Sage had berated herself for not seeing something like this happening. But then her mother had never done anything so outrageous. Maybe that was one reason her actions now came as such a shock.

Putting the car into gear, she started down the two-lane road. It wasn't paved but it wasn't too a bad drive and for this she was grateful. It took six or seven minutes before the first building came into view. Just as Sage began to relax, aware that she was minutes away from seeing her mother, there was a loud noise from the front of the car just before it lurched to the left. Thankfully she hadn't been going very fast and quickly managed to stop.

Taking a deep breath Sage stepped out of the car to see what had happened. Her worst fears were realized as she gazed down at the left front tire, her left front *flat* tire. "Great!" she muttered aloud. Looking up she saw what must be the ranch house and it

didn't look that far away. There was nothing else to do but to walk the rest of the way. Reaching back inside the car she retrieved the car keys and her handbag. After closing the door with a resounding slam she started down the dirt road.

She hadn't gone far before she realized that she wasn't exactly dressed for a walk in the country. When she'd left Chicago her mind had been on getting to her mother, not on where she was going. Since Sage was on the small side she usually wore high heels to give herself some added height. But today those shoes were obviously not the best choice for her trip into the Utah country. She could go back to the car and retrieve a pair of sneakers from her suitcase, but that would be a hassle and she was in a hurry. Resolutely she plodded forward trying not to stumble over the uneven road. The road might have been passable for driving in a car, but it was definitely not decent for walking in the wrong shoes.

She was about halfway to the house when she heard the thundering of hooves. Turning to her left she saw a horse and rider bearing down on her. The horse seemed to grow in size as it drew nearer. She didn't know whether to stay or run. Since it would be impossible to run, she turned with her chin up to face this new turn of events. As the huge animal and rider drew nearer, Sage wondered just what her mother had gotten herself into by coming here. And then she saw the animal running beside the horse and rider. If she hadn't already been frozen to the spot, seeing a wolf heading straight for her would have done the trick. The breath caught in her throat as the large animal drew ahead of the horse.

Quinn was just coming back from rounding up strays when he'd spied a car stopped in the middle of the long drive into his spread. It was a white sedan that he didn't recognize. Then he saw the small figure walking towards the house, or trying to. The girl seemed to wobble quite a bit. Even from a distance he could make out the long black hair cascading down her back and the long purple dress and matching jacket she wore. From the way she was walking, he wondered if she was drunk. That might account for the position of the car. He spurred Thor forward to check on his visitor. He was tired and hungry and in no mood for unwanted company...male or female.

"What the hell are you doing leaving your car blocking my road?" he bellowed as he drew up beside the young woman. "Shadow, sit," he ordered the wolf who was loping around the young woman. Shadow sat.

Seeing the wolf obey the man released most of Sage's fear replacing it with anger. His road? His road? Sage straightened her five foot three inch frame up taut as she faced the horrible man. "*Your road* is responsible for my car being back there and me up here!" she spat out pointing back down the path. "I must have run over a sharp rock or something because a tire is now flat. And if you tell me it's only flat on one side I'll slap you silly!"

Quinn blinked and tried to keep the smile from forming. She was so little he doubted that she could swat a fly. And those eyes! They were green not the dark brown he would have guessed with her black hair. And right now they were the stormy deep green of a raging sea. He felt a stirring he hadn't felt in a long time but banked it down. He had no time for city women. He leaned down staring into her green eyes. "Lady, you're on *my* property and you'd better have a good reason for trespassing," he growled.

“Then you must be Mr. O’Shea,” Sage snapped holding her head high. “I’m Sage Mendoza and I’ve come for my mother. So with your permission, my Lord, I’ll just continue on to the house.” With this as a dismissal she turned to continue walking.

“What about your car?” he asked without moving.

She abruptly halted and sighed. “Since your road is responsible for the condition of the car in question, perhaps it wouldn’t be too much to ask if you could have the tire changed for me. Then my mother and I can be on our way.”

Now Quinn frowned. Cheyenne hadn’t said anything about leaving. He’d become very fond of her and would hate to see her leave. But that was not up to him. “I’ll have your car fixed, but I wouldn’t count on Cheyenne leaving,” he said dismounting. Striding forward he fell in step along side her noting that she barely came to the top of his shoulder.

“Thank you. As for my mother, that is between her and me. She...” Sage stepped on a large stone and would have fallen if not for Quinn’s quick reflexes. She felt his arm pull her up against him to keep her from falling. She immediately pulled away. “As I was saying, she has had her time on a ranch, but now it’s time for her to come home where she belongs.”

“Don’t you think that’s her decision?” The fool woman stumbled again. His hand steadied her. “Look Sagebrush, she came to me for a job and I gave her one. She’s an adult with more common sense than most of the people I’ve met. If she wants to live here, it’s up to her,” he stated emphatically.

She ground her teeth. “My name is Sage. And my mother is *my* business!” To her chagrin her heel caught in a rut in the road making her lurch forward.

“Seems to me they should have named you Tumbleweed going by the way you walk,” he snorted easily swinging her up into his arms. He breathed in her soft floral scent as he cradled her against his chest. She was soft and warm in his arms igniting feelings he’d long thought dead or buried deep where they’d never be exposed again.

Sage didn’t know whether to be embarrassed or angry over his actions. Anger won out. “Put me down,” she ordered pushing against his shoulders. “I am perfectly capable of walking on my own.” He smelled of horse and hard work, but for some reason it wasn’t a totally unpleasant odor. Up this close she could see the days dark growth on his face and sun kissed streaks of gold in his dark brown hair. He really was an attractive man, but an annoying one that she could do without.

He glanced at her small feet clad in fragile purple shoes and gave a bark of laughter. “I have serious doubts about your being able to walk across a room let alone up to the house. If you want to see your mother today, I suggest you relax and let me get you there in one piece.”

“Humph!”

Quinn bit back a grin at her disgruntled look. She crossed her arms over her chest and stared straight ahead as he effortlessly carried her the rest of the way to the house. Thor trailed behind with Shadow walking along side as he studied the person in his master’s arms.

For once in her life Sage was at a loss for words. But then what could you possibly say to an overgrown barbarian with the frontal lobes of a hamster? And her mother had said that Quinn was wonderful. Ha! He was domineering and bossy and rude and...her mental tirade was abruptly cut short when he unceremoniously put her on

her feet. Pushing the door wide he motioned for her to enter. She stomped past him with as much outrage as she could muster.

“Hey Cheyenne, you got company,” he bellowed down the hallway. “I’ll see about getting your car fixed and get your suitcase brought into the house.”

“I appreciate your getting my car fixed. But I would prefer to stay in a motel nearby.”

“Sorry, Sagebrush, but there are no motels close by. The closest one is just outside Monticello and you would be on the road going back and forth which wouldn’t leave much time to visit with your mother. Let’s face up to our dilemma. This wasn’t a trip that you had planned to make and I hadn’t planned on any visitors. The only thing we can do is to make the best of an uncomfortable situation.” Oh her green eyes were about to erupt. Suddenly he wondered what they would look like in passion. Just as quickly he dismissed the thought. It was none of his business and he wasn’t interested in finding out.

Sage groaned. Then resolve straightened her spine. “How can I refuse such a gracious invitation?”

Quinn nodded as he made to leave, but turned back at the last second. “Oh, and a word of advice. Scrap the ankle breakers and get some sensible shoes.”

Before she could mount a suitable reply he and the wolf were out the door. “Of all the nerve!” she muttered to the empty foyer.

“Sage? Is that you?” Cheyenne asked as she came down the hallway wiping her hands on a rose patterned apron. “I thought I heard Quinn?”

Sage rushed forward to gather her mother into a warm hug. “Don’t you ever go off like this again! Do you have any idea how worried we’ve been?” She held her mother at arms length to see her more clearly. She looked wonderful. Her long back hair, now heavily threaded with gray, was pulled back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Her dark eyes reflected happiness and held a twinkle that Sage could not remember ever seeing before. “And yes, your boss was here but he left to go bully someone else presumably. How you can say that man is wonderful is beyond me! He is arrogant, bossy and rude. And I have a feeling that those are his good points,” Sage snapped then immediately regretted her outburst.

Cheyenne raised a brow. “Quinn has been nothing but considerate and kind. What did you say to him to get him angry?” she asked her daughter. Of her three children, Sage was the one most likely to speak without considering her words. She had her father’s Irish temper only somewhat modified by her mother’s more sedate manner.

“What did I say? That barbarian picked me up and carried me up the drive before plopping me down on the front porch,” she replied indignantly. “And that wolf scared me half to death!”

Cheyenne frowned. “Oh, Shadow is a lamb,” she said dismissively. “But why did Quinn carry you up the drive? Where is your car?”

“I had a flat and was calmly making my way to the house when he came galloping up on the huge beast before sweeping me off my feet!” Sage didn’t bother to keep the outrage from her tone.

Glancing down at her daughter’s feet Cheyenne smiled. “I don’t believe those shoes are exactly made for a stroll around here. And that is not a beast. It’s a horse and

his name is Thor. Now come to the kitchen and I'll fix us some tea," she said taking Sage by the arm. "After you've relaxed I'll take you on a tour."

Sage let herself be led from the foyer down a hallway to a spacious kitchen. Once seated at the large table by the window overlooking the spacious back yard even she had to admit it was beautiful. She had been so angry on what she considered an undignified approach up to the house that she hadn't paid much attention to her surroundings. Now she really looked about her. "Mother, it must be a dream to cook in this kitchen," she commented honestly. The vast array of cupboards and the table and chairs were pine. The floor was done in large ceramic ivory tile with a light gold geometric design. It was simple yet elegant.

She drew her gaze away from the décor. "Why didn't you tell us what you wanted to do, mother? We all know about your fascination with ranching and the west. You didn't have to sneak off like this."

Cheyenne sat and poured the tea before answering. "Sage, I love you and your sisters. I wouldn't want give up one minute of our life together nor do I have any regrets about sharing my life with your father in Chicago. But one day I just realized that *this* is *my* time now. Your sisters are married and have their own families. You have your career and hopefully one day you'll have a family of your own. Can you honestly say that if I had told you what I planned that you wouldn't have tried to keep me from coming?"

Sage looked away not able to look her mother in the eye.

"I thought as much. That's why I made my plans and took the plunge."

"How long had you been planning this move?" Sage wanted to know sipping at her warm fragrant tea.

"Not all that long really. It was right after you told me about the business trip you had to make that I saw an article on ranches for sale in Wyoming and Utah. The pictures were so beautiful with all that open country that I knew if I were ever going to follow my dream it had to be soon. I'd been saving money towards your wedding, so I had plenty to see me through for some time," Cheyenne told Sage patting her hand. "I didn't have to spend much of it so there's still enough for a nice wedding."

Sage grinned. Her mother was not one for subtlety when it came to pushing her daughter into marriage. "I don't plan on getting married in the near future so that's no problem, mother. Besides that money is yours to do with as you want."

"So, I wanted to move west. And I did. Quinn is the most considerate boss I've ever had and the men here are just wonderful, Sage. Now stop worrying about me and concentrate on your life and your future. Are you still seeing Mark? He hasn't called in a while and you haven't mentioned his name," Cheyenne stated deftly changing the subject.

"No Mark and I are not seeing each other anymore. He expected more out of our relationship than I was willing to put into it." She wouldn't tell her mother that he was also seeing two other women besides her. By seeing she meant *sleeping with* and she had no intention of joining that little group. Mark had just joined the long list of men who had left Sage feeling as if something critical was missing from their relationship. She had no idea what it was, but she knew that she hadn't met that special someone yet.

“Well maybe while you’re visiting here you can meet someone.” She looked at Sage with a critical eye and shook her head. “We’ll have to do something about your current wardrobe. That silk dress and jacket are not meant for life on a ranch.”

Sage’s eyes widened. “I don’t plan to live on a ranch, mother. And I’ll wear what I like. Even the shoes I like,” she stated resolutely lifting her small foot moving it back and forth. Quinn’s parting remark about her footwear still rankled.

“We’ll see,” Cheyenne said smiling. “Now, let me take you on a tour of the house.

They left the kitchen to go into the family room at the back of the house. It was large with French doors leading onto a deck. The furniture consisted of a long leather sofa, two recliners, an overstuffed chair of questionable design and an entertainment center with a television and a recording system. The electronic equipment looked pretty new, but the rest of the furniture was worn and even threadbare in places. There was even a floor lamp that looked like it must have come off the ark.

Cheyenne took her into the next room off the spacious kitchen. “This is my suite,” she remarked quietly.

In spite of herself, Sage was impressed. The suite consisted of a large sitting room, bedroom and full bath. “Quinn said he’s going to replace the single bed with a double next week. And I’m to go with him to pick out some new furniture for the sitting room. I want you to ship my sewing machine when you get back to Chicago. I can put it on a table next to the window. And there’s plenty of room for a sofa and whatever I want to put in here.”

“I have to admit that I’m relieved to see that he’s given you such nice accommodations. This is larger than your room back home.

“Wait until you see the rest of the house,” Cheyenne smiled obviously proud to show off Quinn’s home.

Sage frowned as they entered the dining room. It was empty. She hadn’t paid much attention on her way to the kitchen a while ago, but now she looked around. The beige carpet continued on into the next room so she assumed that the house had wall-to-wall carpet. But there was no furniture in the dining room. The living room was a little better, but not by much. There was an old sofa and recliner and one floor lamp. There were no pictures on the walls or anything to indicate the taste of the owner. This was a new house and was very large. Quinn must be able to afford to have decent furniture. Shouldn’t he?

Cheyenne led her across the entry to another room. “This is Quinn’s den.” She pushed the door open to reveal a large oak desk; two old bookcases filled from top to bottom and two old black file cabinets.

The interior decorator part of Sage’s nature surged into gear. The desk was a beautiful piece of furniture, but the rest was old and in need of replacement. Again there were no pictures, no treasured items from childhood or collection of favorite things. Sage frowned.

Just as they retraced their steps to the front of the house to go upstairs the front door opened. An older man wearing jeans, blue-checked shirt and Stetson hat entered carrying Sage’s suitcase. “Quinn said to bring this here case into the house, Miss Cheyenne.”

“You’re a dear, Parker. Would you please take it upstairs and put it in the back bedroom. It’s the largest up there and you should be comfortable,” she directed at her daughter. “Parker, this is my daughter, Sage.”

“Please to meet you,” he offered shyly before hurrying up the winding staircase. Sage and her mother followed more slowly. The thick beige carpet covered the stairs.

“There are five bedrooms up here. The master bedroom and two smaller bedrooms are over there that belong to the twins,” she said pointing off to her right when they reached the top of the stairs. “Over here,” and she led Sage to the left, “is a bedroom and a second laundry room. Your room is over here. It has a wonderful view of the mountains.”

“Twins?” Sage asked afraid that she wasn’t going to like what she was going to hear.

“Yes, dear. Kate and Cody are eight years old and adorable. You’ll meet them a little later. They’re out in the barn now with Will.”

“You didn’t say anything about children.”

“It simply hadn’t come up until now. That is the master bedroom...Quinn’s room.”

She hadn’t been able to see into the master bedroom because the doors were closed but the one beyond was done in tan and brown. The one on her left was in green and yellow. The laundry room sparkled and she would bet that to date it had never been used. The room where she would be sleeping was much like the others as far as furniture went. There was a full bed but no head or footboard. The dresser and chest of drawers had seen many years of service, but they were still sturdy and that was all that mattered right now.

“Mother, I have to ask. How long as Quinn lived in this house? Why are there so many rooms empty?”

Cheyenne opened Sage’s suitcase and began unpacking. “Slim told me that since Quinn’s wife died he hasn’t done anything more on the inside. I assume that without a wife to see to such things, he’s not in any hurry to shop for furniture. You know what I mean? Everyone has a bed and dresser and there is a sofa in the living room. What more do they need?”

“That make some sense I guess. He’s probably busy with the running of the ranch and not too concerned about what the house looks like. But what about the children? From what I saw of their bedrooms, they could use some improvements.” Why build such a beautiful home and not do something with it? There was a mystery here that piqued Sage’s interest. But then if Quinn loved his wife, her death must have been difficult for him to handle and accept.

“Does he have pictures of his wife and children somewhere? I didn’t see any downstairs.”

“I’ve never seen any. And he doesn’t talk about his family. From what Slim told me, Quinn took her death pretty hard. I can understand that. It was difficult when your father died.” She sensed the deep hunger and grief in Quinn, but as yet didn’t have a clue how to help him...even if she could. “Now, would you like to have a bath and change your clothes? I have to start dinner and you can come and help me when you’re done.”

Sage smiled. Many an evening she had done kitchen duty with her mother as they talked over their day. “I’ll be down in twenty minutes. What’s for dinner?”

“Fresh fish, salad, potatoes and whatever else I can think up. The potatoes are your job so don’t be too long,” Cheyenne grinned as she turned to leave the room. “And I’d wear jeans instead of one of those silky outfits you like so much. We have a kitchen full of men and I don’t want then ogling my baby daughter.”

Sage rolled her eyes. “I promise not to disgrace you,” she replied snatching up a robe as she headed for her bath.

Ten minutes later she donned her robe and entered her bedroom where she stopped short in front of two dirty children. They were openly staring around and then at her.

“Who are you?” the smaller of the two demanded her head cocked to one side as she studied the pretty stranger in their home.

“I’m Sage, Mrs. Mendoza’s daughter. Who are you?”

The little girl just glared at Sage.

“We call her Cheyenne. I’m Cody and this is Kate. You’re pretty!” he stated wiping at the dirt around his left eye.

“How do you do,” Sage replied formally.

“How do we do what?” Kate questioned with a frown.

“That’s a phrase that means that I’m glad to meet you.”

“Why didn’t you say that in the first place?” Kate shot back.

Sage raised a brow. Oh, this was definitely Quinn O’Shea’s daughter. They had the same sparkling personality. At least Cody seemed friendlier. It seemed best to ignore the question. Instead she pointed to the door. “If you two will excuse me, I must finish getting dressed to I can help my mother in the kitchen. And I believe you’re both in need of a bath yourself.”

“Come on, Cody. We don’t need no city lady telling us what to do,” Kate said pulling on her brother’s sleeve. When he didn’t move she kicked him on the ankle.

“Ooow! Why did you do that? I like her. She smells a lot better than Parker,” Cody said turning to leave. He gave Sage a lopsided grin. “See ya.”

Sage crossed the room to close *and* lock the door behind the twins. What had her mother gotten into? Well she would find out soon enough. Apparently the entire ranch had dinner together. She didn’t know whether that would be good or bad.

CHAPTER 4

Sage dressed in black jeans and an emerald green blouse with a mandarin collar that emphasized her slender neck. Long black hair cascaded almost to her small waist. She reached for a pair of black canvas shoes then changed her mind. Damned if she would let that barbarian tell her what to wear. Instead she slipped into a pair of black high-heeled pumps. The added height gave her confidence a boost. Not only was Quinn a barbarian, but he was a *big* barbarian. Large men didn't usually make her uneasy, but there was something about Quinn that unsettled her.

It was twenty-five minutes later when Sage went downstairs to peel those potatoes for dinner. When she entered the large kitchen her mother smiled and then quirked a brow when she saw the shoes her daughter was wearing. But she didn't comment. "Where are the potatoes?" Sage asked cheerfully. Before she'd gotten to the kitchen the aroma of fresh baked rolls assailed her senses.

"That's all done. You can finish setting the table while I dish up the food."

The plates were on the counter so all Sage had to do was put them around the table with the silverware and napkins. "Where are the glasses and cups?"

"In the cupboard to the left of the dishwasher. We'll need a glass and cup for each place setting," Cheyenne said sliding rolls off a tray into a large napkin-lined basket.

Sage had just finished the table settings when the first of the men arrived. Each man nodded acknowledgement as Cheyenne made the introductions. If they looked a bit longer than was necessary at the young woman no one made any comment.

The twins arrived right after the men and took their seats. They had bathed, but Kate's hair was still in dirty braids. Cody's was still wet with a lopsided part down one side. They really were cute kids Sage decided. That is if you could get by the permanent scowl Kate seemed to wear.

Quinn was the last to arrive. "Something sure smells wonderful," he commented as he took his seat at the far side of the table. He had to walk past Sage to get to his seat and he wasn't sure what smelled better, her or the food. He hadn't been able to get her out of his mind all afternoon and that didn't put him in the best of moods. The feel of her in his arms as he'd carried her wasn't something he would soon forget, no matter how hard he tried.

Sage helped her mother to put the various bowls and platters on the table. More than one set of eyes followed her as she moved between the cupboard and the table. She was certainly getting her share of shy looks from the assembled group of men, from all except Quinn who had adopted a frown since sitting down at the table. *Maybe he's a natural grump*, she thought to herself. Somehow she didn't think he was and with this thought came the urge to get to know him. They'd gotten off to a bad start today and she was mature enough to own up to her part in the situation.

"Cheyenne, this is the best fish I've ever tasted," Jack said between bites. "You cook like your mom?" he asked Sage. Jack was the youngest ranch hand and was having a difficult time not watching the beautiful young woman.

Sage's warm laugh rang out. "I can cook, but I'm nowhere near my mother's standards. But I can bake a carrot cake that will knock your socks off."

"That sounds good to me," Slim cackled. "I love cakes."

“You just plain like food,” Quinn grumbled with a scowl at Jack and Slim.

Slim snorted. “I’ve never seen you pass up food, especially food as good as this.”

“After Ina moved away you wouldn’t believe some of the food we had to eat, Miss Sage,” Slim mumbled. “I don’t know who was the worse cook, Lester or Quinn. One cooked mush and the other leather. And I ain’t gonna’ name names ‘cause they know who they are.”

“Amen!” Jack and Colt echoed.

“You’re still alive,” Lester snorted.

“Just barely!” Slim laughed. “But now we got good tasting food and pretty ladies for company. Sure makes the meal more enjoyable.”

“Slim, you’re a sweetie,” Sage laughed patting his arm. “Tomorrow I’ll bake you that cake.”

Slim’s mouth split into a huge grin. “You guys better be nice to me so you can get a piece of *my* cake. Hey boss, you like carrot cake?” he asked Quinn. He hadn’t missed the tension between Sage and Quinn. It was especially apparent in Quinn. Since Sharon death Slim had watched Quinn withdraw more and more into himself. His social life was almost non-existent; work seemed to be the beginning and end to his life now. Even the twins had suffered since Sharon’s death.

There was a rapping at the back door that gave Quinn an excuse to leave the table. Shadow trailed behind him as he opened the door.

“Hey, Quinn. I was in the area and thought I’d drop in and see how Peaches was doing,” Brad announced stepping inside.

“She’s doing great. Come on in and have a bit to eat,” Quinn said slapping Brad on the back. Dr. Brad Stockton had returned to Chance about six months ago to work with his father. He was almost as good a veterinarian as old Bob and Quinn liked his way with animals. Brad truly cared about them.

“Sounds wonderful. I haven’t eaten since this morning so I’m starved.”

“Cheyenne, can we get another plate. Brad, this is Cheyenne Mendoza and her daughter, Sage. Cheyenne is my new cook.”

Slim moved his chair over a bit to make room. This put Brad next to Sage.

“Nice to meet you, Brad,” Sage said extending her hand.

“The pleasure is mine,” he said holding her hand a bit longer than was necessary.

“Are you working on the ranch too?” She was the prettiest little thing he’d seen in a long time and had the nicest smile. Her exotic beauty would stand out anywhere.

“No, I’m just visiting for a short time. I arrived this afternoon and I hope to see more of the area before I leave.”

“Where’s home?”

“Chicago. Ever been there?”

“Nope. But I’m always open to new places. Maybe I can play tourist guide and show you around while you’re here? We could start with dinner tomorrow night. The Wagon Wheel has the best steaks and ribs in the state of Utah,” Brad told her with a warm smile.

Sage grinned at his enthusiasm. It might be fun. And it might show Quinn O’Shea that other men liked her. This brought her up short. Why should she want to impress him anyway? She quickly pushed the thought aside.

As Quinn listened to Brad and Sage the scowl returned to his face. He glanced up from his food just in time to see her smile at the other man. A small dimple appeared on her right cheek. For some reason it fascinated him and he couldn't stop looking at her. When she glanced over at him the grin and the dimple faded. His scowl deepened.

"I'd love to have dinner with you, Brad. Why don't I meet you in town about six?" Sage asked sweetly. From the frown on Quinn's face it was apparent that he didn't like her talking to the local veterinarian. Well he wasn't going to dictate who she could see. He might be her mother's employer, but he was nothing to her. She was probably an idiot for even thinking they could be friends.

Quinn wasn't quite sure why he was irritated that Sage had a date with Brad. Maybe it was because she was here to see her mother but was already going out to dinner with a perfect stranger. It didn't matter that he had introduced them. To his way of thinking, Sage should be staying home with Cheyenne. He'd noted that she had smiles for everyone but him. His men...the men who worked for him were smiling like idiots over one woman. Okay, so she was nice to look at. But that was no excuse. Hell, even Cody had been drawn into her web.

"Cody, eat your dinner," Quinn snapped at the boy. As soon as the words left his mouth he regretted them or at least their harshness. Cody hunched over his plate as he put a forkful of food into his mouth. But Quinn had seen the sparkle go out of his eyes before he'd lowered them to concentrate on his plate.

Sage was enraged but didn't dare say a word especially in front of the children. In her eyes, Cody hadn't been doing anything wrong. She was just someone new in the house and probably completely different from the other women his father brought home. It hadn't taken long for the little boy to tug on her heartstrings. Now Kate was another matter. It wasn't that she didn't want to get closer to the little girl, she really did. But Kate had a big chip on her shoulder and Sage wasn't quite sure how to surmount it. She'd only been here a few hours; maybe she just needed more time so they could get to know each other.

What she had a more difficult time understanding was the way Quinn acted towards his children. He all but ignored them except for when he barked that order to Cody to eat his dinner. Didn't the man have any compassion or caring for his own offspring?

Her musings were interrupted as Brad rose from his seat to take his leave. "That was a fantastic meal, Cheyenne. If Quinn ever becomes too difficult an employer, you've got a job with me anytime."

Cheyenne smiled serenely. "I'm glad you could join us, Brad. I'll have to keep your offer in mind," she chuckled noting the anxious looks from the other men. Couldn't hurt to keep them on their toes and not take her for granted. A bouquet of flowers now and then was very nice.

Inwardly Quinn fumed. He wasn't the least amused by Brad's joke because he felt sure the man was serious. He liked the veterinarian, he truly did. He didn't know why his remark struck such a sore spot all of a sudden. But when Sage got up to walk Brad to the door, Quinn's frown deepened. It was none of his business but for some reason it didn't seem right that she should have accepted a date with a man she'd just met. *He* should be the one to show her around. As soon as those words crossed his mind

he clamped down on the thought. He had work to do, subsequently, he didn't have time to play sightseeing guide. Then why was he still upset?

Sage woke suddenly. She felt disoriented for several seconds until she realized she was in Utah, in Quinn O'Shea's house. There was a faint light coming from behind the curtains. What had disturbed her sleep? She lay still listening for a sound or that something that had woken her out of a sound sleep.

Two seconds later she felt something crawling along her leg. "Aaaah?" she shrieked throwing back the covers and leaping out of the far side of the bed close to the windows. Eying the covers she edged back to throw the spread and sheet back to reveal whatever it was that had invaded her bed.

Reaching for the spread she heard the soft sound of a giggle coming from under her bed. Sage tiptoed around the other side to be between her visitor and the door to block any escape. Taking a deep breath she threw herself flat on the floor to look under the bed. It all happened so fast that she took Kate by surprise. The little girl's eyes widened in mid-giggle as she clamped a hand over her mouth.

"Okay Calamity Jane, what did you put in my bed?" Sage had to work hard to keep the smile off her face. She had done something very similar to Helene once. She watched as Kate's expression turned from shock to defiance.

"I didn't do nothing!" she snapped, her eyes daring Sage to accuse her again. Being only eight years old it never dawned on her that her presence under the bed proclaimed her guilt. "And don't call me that! My name is Kate!"

"I didn't do anything," Sage corrected.

Kate looked confused for a second. "Yes you did. You jumped out of that bed so fast I thought you would jump out the window." The picture this conjured up made the little girl grin.

"Come on out, Kate, and let's see how innocent you are." Sage took hold of her wrist to pull her out from under the big bed. As soon as Kate stood she tried to bolt for the door. "Oh no you don't! You're not leaving without whatever you put in that bed," she ordered holding on tightly to the squirming little girl.

Before she had time to march her charge to the bed, her bedroom door was flung open to crash against the wall. "What in the hell is going on?" Quinn yelled then stopped short seeing Kate.

Sage could almost feel the anger radiating from the man. The last thing she wanted to do was to have Kate the recipient of his temper. She put an arm around Kate's narrow shoulders to pull her close against her side. "There is something in my bed and Kate came to help me find out what it is," she announced casually.

She felt Kate stiffen at her side, then look up at her.

Quinn looked from one to the other not sure what was going on. Stalking over to the bed he threw back the covers. There in the middle of the bed was a huge night crawler. Picking it up in his large hand he turned to face Sage. "Now how would this get into your bed I wonder?" he asked sliding a look at Kate.

"How should I now?" Sage said shaking her head. "I'm a city girl and don't know about these things." She hoped he wouldn't see how relieved she was that it was only a worm and not something more sinister like a snake or spider.

“Well I’m a country boy and I don’t know how one could possibly get into a bedroom on the second story of a house,” he replied still looking at Kate as if he could will a confession out of her.

Sage thought it best to get Kate out of the room. “As long as the mystery of the creepy crawly is solved, you might as well go back to your room Kate. Thank you for coming to help though.” She gave the little girl a gentle push toward the door. “Your father saved the day.” This she directed at Quinn as Kate made a dash for her own room and safety.

Quinn stood watching Sage for several seconds after Kate had left the room. He felt a stirring he hadn’t felt in a long time. But then she was only wearing a little piece of silky material that came to mid thigh and thin straps revealing a great deal of shapely leg and creamy arms and shoulders. He swallowed twice before he could speak. “Why did you lie for her?”

“Who said it was a lie?”

“Come on, Sagebrush. Night crawlers do not get into houses all by themselves. Even a city girl like you should know that. No, this has Kate written all over it.” He watched as Sage crossed her arms over her chest, an action that gave him a better view of the creamy curve of her breasts. *God it’s was getting warm in here*, he thought suddenly.

“Maybe because I didn’t want you to come down on her like a raging bull. She’s only a little girl.”

“I hope you don’t think I would use brute force with her?” he asked angry now.

“How should I know? From what I’ve seen you don’t have much to do with either Kate or Cody except to bark orders at them,” Sage hissed back.

“How I raise them is my business. Not yours, Sagebrush,” Quinn gritted out.

“You’re right, it is none of my business. But I know from first hand experience just what a bully you can be and...” was as far as she got. The next instant she was crushed against his body, his arms bands of steel around her.

Quinn’s kisses shook Sage to her toes. She was twenty-five years old and had been kissed many times, but never had her world been rocked like this. Her much softer body was pressed so closely along his long length that she felt every rock hard muscle from shoulder to thigh. The kiss had begun hard and demanding but somewhere, somehow it changed to something wondrous. His tongue snaked out to taste the fullness of her bottom lip. The feel and taste of him was too intriguing, too tempting to ignore. Her lips parted as he deepened the kiss.

Just as suddenly as the kissing began it was over as Quinn all but threw her away from him as if she had soiled him in some way. Her eyes were still unfocused from the emotional onslaught of his kiss and the feel of his obvious arousal.

“That shouldn’t have happened,” he ground out between clenched teeth.

Sage shook her head to clear the passionate aftermath of the feel of Quinn’s arms and lips. Some common sense reared back into focus and with it anger at his attitude. “I didn’t make the first move, O’Shea. If you recall, you were the one who kissed me!”

“I didn’t feel you trying to get away from me, Sagebrush. If I hadn’t stopped when I did, you know where it would have ended? Right in that bed! From the way you kissed back, you’re not inexperienced in these things.” Quinn was desperately trying to regain his composure, but it was difficult. He didn’t even know *why* he kissed her. But

he would make damned sure it never happened again. The feelings she aroused in him were more unwelcome than a hailstorm at planting time.

Sage's temper began to simmer. "Just how experienced do you think I am? And for your information," she went on not giving him time to reply. "I do not go around kissing strangers. I happen to be very picky about the men I date."

"You could have fooled me, Sagebrush. I thought all city girls knew the rules of the game by an early age." He made it a statement, not a question.

Sage marched to her door pointing to the hallway beyond. "We might be aware of the rules of the game, cowboy, but not all of us have been players," she hissed. "Please leave my room if there's enough of a gentleman in you to do such an honorable thing!"

Quinn stormed out of her room. The door slammed with a resounding crash behind him. The last thing he heard as he stomped towards the stairs was, "and don't call me Sagebrush!" As far as he was concerned, the name was a perfect fit for the prickly pint-sized pipsqueak. He'd completely forgotten about Kate until he reached the bottom of the stairs. Sighing, he placed one booted foot on the bottom stair, and then thought better of it. He was in no frame of mind to talk to her. He would see her later, after he had time to cool down a bit. No matter what Sage said, he knew Kate was responsible for the night crawler being in her bed. What puzzled him was why she would do such a thing. But then she and Cody were always getting into some kind of mischief lately.

Sage paced around her bed several times trying to work off her frustration. On the third pass by her bed she realized that nothing had been done about the night crawler. Quinn had slung it back down on the bed when he reached to pull her into his arms. Tearing the covers off the bed she found it down at the bottom. Picking it up she let it crawl about her hand. She might be a city girl but she wasn't afraid of much except spiders and snakes. Picking up her silky robe she donned it before leaving her room. When she knocked on Kate's door there was no reply. Trying the doorknob Sage found that it wasn't locked so she opened it to step into the room. Kate was sitting cross-legged in the middle of her unmade bed looking decidedly unhappy.

"What do you want?" she demanded crossly.

"Well for one thing, you could keep a civil tongue in your mouth. Second, I think you left this behind," Sage retorted holding out the night crawler. She tried not to smile at the look of astonishment on the little girl's face. It was priceless. She glanced around Kate's room dismayed at how sparsely it was decorated. The furniture was old and mismatched as in the other rooms she'd seen. Why would someone build this huge beautiful house and leave furniture in it that should have been thrown out several years ago? Maybe it was the decorator in her coming out. In any case, it wasn't any of her business. Besides, she wouldn't be here more than a few of days at the most.

Kate stared for several long seconds before scooting off the bed to retrieve the worm and returned to a coffee can full of dirt. "I thought you would be scared of worms."

"You thought wrong, kiddo. My dad used to take me fishing when I was a kid. I can bait anything on a hook."

Kate looked more downcast than upset. "My dad never takes us anywhere," she said so quietly that Sage had to strain to hear her.

She didn't know what to say. In the short time she'd been at the ranch she'd noticed that Quinn didn't interact much with the twins. Obviously it was having an affect on Kate. It might be even worse for Cody not to have his dad to do things with. The more she thought about it the madder she became. "You dad is very busy running this large ranch. It must take up a lot of his time." Even to her ears the excuse sounded pretty lame.

Kate shrugged as if it didn't really matter. She knew daddy didn't care about her or Cody, but that wasn't something she talked about out loud. Now she looked at Sage more intrigued than angry. "Why didn't you tell daddy that I put the night crawler in your bed? You were really scared 'cause you yelled when you jumped out of bed."

"That's because I was sound asleep. Why did you put it there, kiddo? I haven't done anything to you," Sage wanted to know. She really hadn't done anything to warrant animosity.

Kate just shrugged her small shoulders looking at her feet instead of at Sage. "I saw the way daddy was looking at you last night. He didn't pay any attention to me and Cody." Her bottom lip quivered as she tried to keep from crying. Crying was for babies, and Kate wasn't a baby anymore.

Sage sat on the side of the bed more confused than ever. "I don't know what you're talking about, kiddo." But maybe she did. If Kate perceived her as a threat, that would explain quite a bit. What she still didn't understand was why she should be considered a threat when all she and Quinn did was argue whenever they were in the same room.

"I think he likes you," Kate said little above a whisper. "He doesn't much like me or Cody." This time she couldn't keep a tear from escaping.

Sage's heart leaped into her throat. Without giving it any conscious thought, she pulled Kate into her arms and began rocking her as she rubbed her back. "I'm sure that's not true, Kate. He's your father and he takes good care of you and your brother. And you're wrong about him liking me. In case you haven't noticed, we don't get along too well. He tends to yell at me." Sage couldn't believe what she was hearing. She made a mental note to talk to her mother about this as soon as she could get her alone.

Kate pulled away to look up at her. "He yells at you too? He yells at Cody and me a lot," she confessed with a frown.

"What do you do to make him yell?"

The little girl shrugged. "Don't know."

"I don't think he would yell just to hear to own voice, Kate. Do you put things in his bed like you did mine?" Sage asked trying to make light of the subject but inside she was boiling.

"We would never do that to daddy. Besides, he wouldn't be scared anyway."

"Well you two must have done something," Sage persisted.

"I guess we did mess up his computer one day. We just wanted to see what would happen if we moved some of the wires around. And someone put play dough in the VCR once."

Sage tried not to smile. "I think that would be reason enough to yell at you. You do realize that you shouldn't have been touching his computer in the first place, don't you? And play dough doesn't belong in a VCR, Kate."

"I guess."

“Which one of you did the VCR?”

Kate’s blush was open admission of her guilt. “He’s always working and never spends any time with us,” she blurted.

Sage’s heart cried for the two children who had lost one parent and now were saddled with one who apparently had no interest in being a father. “Tell you what, kiddo. I’m going to be here for a few days. Why don’t you and Cody be my guides and show me around the ranch. I’d love to see the animals.”

Kate latched onto this idea as her eyes opened wide. “Can we really? We can see the barns and the chickens and everything. Cody and me have a horse and we could all go for a ride. Mine is Star and Cody’s is Thunder.”

“I’ve never been on a horse, Kate,” Sage admitted with a sigh. Seeing the glimmer of excitement in her eyes begin to dim, she made a quick decision. “Of course, if one of the men would be able to give me a few lessons, that would be great. I’m a quick learner too.”

“Oh, that would be nice. I’m sure Parker or Willy will do it. Let’s go see them right now,” Kate said leaping off the bed heading for the door.

“Whoa, kiddo. We have to get dressed and have breakfast first. I’ll go change while you dress. If you would like, I can come back and fix your hair for you,” Sage offered. She would dearly love to comb out those braids and redo Kate’s hair for her.

“Okay. Can I wear it like yours? It’s so pretty and long.”

Sage gave her a hug. “I’ll be back in a few minutes and we’ll see what we can do.” As she closed the door behind her, she heard dresser drawers opening and closing none too quietly. She smiled.

Sage had just finished slipping into a pair of pale blue jeans with matching top. She’d quickly pulled her hair into a long French braid and was reaching for a pair of black high-heeled boots when someone knocked on her door. “Come in.”

Kate bounded into the room closely followed by a curious Cody. “I’m all dressed,” she announced plopping down on the bed. “Cody doesn’t believe you’re going to fix my hair or that you’re not afraid of worms.”

Sage blinked not quite understanding how those two things could be related, but then to an eight-year old it probably made all the sense in the world.

“Kate said you touched the night crawler and you can bait a hook?” Cody stated with obvious awe. He looked so cute in jeans, a red-checkered shirt and boots. His hair had been brushed but spikes still stood out here and there. He was an inch or so taller than his sister, but they shared the same color eyes and hair. They didn’t look a whole lot alike, but anyone could tell they were brother and sister.

“Maybe we can go fishing while I’m here,” Sage suggested. She berated herself for becoming more and more involved with these two adorable kids.

“That would be great!” His eyes glowed with anticipation.

“Come here, Kate. The first thing we need to do is brush out your hair.” Sage removed the fasteners at the end of each braid then combed her finger through the long dark blond strands. Her hair needed washing but there wasn’t time for it now. She took her brush and brushed it out as best she could. Kate’s hair was much longer than it appeared in the tight braids.

Kate twisted around. “Can you fix mine like yours? I wish I had black hair. It shines.”

“Hold still and we’ll see what I can do,” Sage replied grinning. “Your hair is pretty, kiddo. Tonight we’ll give it a good washing and brushing. Then you’ll see how really pretty it is.”

Cody had been watching wide-eyed as Sage worked on his sister’s hair. He reached up to feel his spiky hair. Sage was humming softly as she worked. He liked that. Cheyenne did that too when she was making cookies. “Can you comb my hair too?” he asked quietly. Since his mother died he wasn’t used to feminine attention. Mrs. Ina didn’t count because she was so old...like Cheyenne. But Sage was younger and so pretty.

“I sure can, big guy.” She turned Kate around to look in the mirror. “How do you like it, Kiddo?” Sage’s heart swelled with tenderness at the look of pleasure on the little girl’s face. Her smile was a little lopsided because her upper two front teeth were loose. It wouldn’t be long before they came out. Suddenly she wished she were going to be here to see that. Cody had already lost one front tooth. He looked so cute with that gap in the front.

“Oh, Sage...I love it,” Kate said throwing her arms around her neck.

“I’m next,” Cody said trying to pry his way next to Sage.

“Come on, lets get Cody gussied up or we’ll miss breakfast,” Sage laughed. Suddenly the morning felt brighter than it had earlier.

When they entered the kitchen ten minutes later, everyone but Quinn was seated around the table as Cheyenne put the heaping plate of hot cakes and scrambled eggs in the middle of the large table.

Slim’s eyes narrowed as he watched the twins enter the room, one on each side of Sage. Now that was something. Those two kids normally didn’t take to strangers. They had immediately adopted Cheyenne as theirs, but then so had the entire ranch. Sage Mendoza was different. He’d seen the way his boss had looked at the young woman. Maybe, just maybe, this was the woman who could bring him back to life again. Those two kids certainly needed their daddy in a big way. Sage might just be the person to wake him up to that fact. He grinned at Kate. “Your hair sure looks mighty pretty this morning. And you’re a handsome young man, Cody.”

“Sage fixed our hair,” Kate said scooting up onto her chair. “Tonight she’s going to wash it and do it again.”

“And she likes to fish,” Cody announced. Apparently that was the more important issue in his mind.

At that moment Quinn entered the kitchen with his usual frown distorting his handsome features. The frown deepened when he glanced down and saw the boots Sage was wearing. If that darned woman didn’t get a broken ankle before she went home, it would be a miracle. As he took his seat, he watched as Sage sat beside Slim. She was looking at him as if trying to tell him something. Well, he wasn’t a mind reader. If she had something to say, she should just spit it out.

Sage could tell that Quinn hadn’t noticed how nice the twins looked this morning. Was the man blind? Pursing her lips she decided to bring it to his attention. “Quinn, don’t Kate and Cody look especially nice this morning?”

Kate jumped up from her chair to run and stand in front of her daddy, turning her back to give him a better view of her hair. “Sage did it for me. It’s a French braid just like hers. And she combed Cody’s hair like yours.”

Even Quinn, in his present mood, couldn’t resist Kate’s smiling enthusiasm. “You look very nice, Kate, you too Cody. Since you’re all cleaned up, maybe you would like to ride into town with me later?” *Now where had that come from?* He thought to himself. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken the twins to town unless it was to see Doc Smith. From the wide-eyed look from the two children, it must have been longer than he’d thought.

“Yes!” Kate yelled throwing her slender arms around his neck.

“We’ll be really, really good daddy,” Cody chimed in bouncing up and down in his chair.

“Oh, but...” Kate began looking over at Sage. “We was going to show Sage the animals. “Can she come with us? Please? We’ll take care of her and make sure she doesn’t get lost.”

Quinn almost lost himself in Kate’s pleading blue eyes. The feel of her small arms around his neck tore at his heart. He didn’t have the courage to say no. “If Sage would like to take a trip to town, that’s okay with me. I’m just going in to pick up some tractor parts and some things for Cheyenne.”

For her part, Sage wasn’t sure she wanted to be cooped up in the close confines of a vehicle with Quinn, but two pairs of anxious blue eyes were pleading with her to say yes. “That sounds like a nice trip. I didn’t get to see Chance on my way here.”

Quinn didn’t see any graceful way out so he just nodded his head. The talk during the remainder of the meal centered on the days tasks. For that he was grateful. It was a safe topic and he couldn’t get into any more trouble. He hoped.

CHAPTER 5

Sage was a bit dismayed when she saw Quinn's big blue monster truck, or at least that's what she thought it was. How in the world was she supposed to get into the thing? Why couldn't the man have a normal vehicle like other people? Oh no, he had to have this huge thing six feet off the ground. Well, that was probably an exaggeration, but not by much.

Quinn had been thinking something along the same lines, but he knew how to handle the situation. The same way he had with Cheyenne. So, without announcing his intentions he grabbed Sage by the waist to lift her into the front seat of the cab. God, but she smelled wonderful. He had no idea what it was since he wasn't up on women's perfumes, but he knew what he liked. It wasn't overpowering like some he'd been around, but soft almost elusive.

Sage gasped as she found herself lifted into the truck. "I could have gotten in by myself," she stormed at Quinn, flustered by the feel of his large hands around her waist more than anything else. Every time he touched her, every where he touched her, her skin tingled.

"Not unless I took the time to get you a ladder. Come on you two, you're next," he said beckoning to the twins. Cody didn't wait for his daddy's help. He climbed up into the backseat of the truck like a climbing pro. Kate, however, let herself be picked up and deposited next to her brother.

Sage couldn't say anything in front of the children, but she would have a few words to say to him about his high-handed behavior when the chance presented itself. A ladder indeed! The fact that he was right only made her madder. If that wasn't bad enough, Quinn walked around to the driver's side and simply slid into the seat. With those long legs of his it was no problem. *Bully for him!* She fumed.

It was a fairly quiet ride into town with the twins chatting between themselves. A couple of times, Cody broke off to point out what he considered an important landmark, but Quinn didn't say a word until they reached town. He pulled up in front of the feed store and jumped out. "I'll be about an hour if you and the kids want to look around."

"You said you were picking up some things for mother. Is there anything I can do to help?" Sage felt compelled to offer.

"Not this trip. Cody and Kate will show you around town. We'll meet back here at ten thirty. The general stores carries boots in case you're interested," Quinn informed her with a disparaging look at her feet.

"No thank you. I already have a perfectly fine pair. Come on, kids. We don't want to keep your father from his work." Sage quickly ushered the two astonished twins to the right down the sidewalk. Chance was even smaller than she had remembered when she'd passed through on her way to the ranch. Her mind had been on seeing her mother and not on her surroundings. Now she looked around and was enchanted by what she saw.

It was an old town. That was obvious by the old brick buildings that lined one side of the two-lane road. The other side of the road was lined with trees and what looked like some kind of a park further down. She stopped to look in both directions. It didn't even have a stoplight. There were some vehicles angle parked along the sidewalk...all but one of them trucks.

The store Quinn had disappeared into was *Grainger's Feed*. Sage wondered what all they sold, but since he hadn't invited her to come with him, damned if she would go in now. Since Granger's was a corner store they ambled down towards the other end of town. She was fascinated by the General Store because it seemed to sell everything...food, clothing, tools, linens, movies and even some computer supplies. The next store was the Post Office and bakery. Sage bought each of them a big chocolate chip cookie and a loaf of raisin bread that she knew her mother liked.

They passed the barber and beauty shop. She wondered if they combined stores because of lack of building space or if it just worked out that way. The next store was a café with the proud name *Utah's Finest*. Now she was going to have to try that food before she went home to see if it lived up to its name. There was a small dress shop that also carried a variety of used furniture and glassware. By the time they reached the end of the street it was getting late so they didn't linger on the way back to the truck.

When they reached the truck, Sage wondered if they should try to get in or wait on the sidewalk, but the decision was taken out of her hands. She turned when she heard someone calling to Cody and Kate. A blond little boy around Cody's age and one a couple of years younger ran up grinning from ear to ear.

"I told mom that was you and Kate," he told Cody. "Where's your dad?"

"He's around," Cody told him offhandedly.

Before anymore could be said an attractive couple caught up to their offspring. The tall man eyed Sage with a question in his brown eyes, but it was the woman who spoke. "You must be Cheyenne's daughter. I'm Kim Forest and this is my husband Lyle. These two loud mouths are Kevin and Charlie." Her expression of love engulfed the two boys as she looked down at them.

"Sage Mendoza," she said extending her hand. It literally disappeared into Lyle's huge one. "The twins have been showing me around town."

"There's not much of it, but we like it," Lyle said. His voice was deep like Quinn's only friendlier. He hadn't known what to expect when Quinn told him that Cheyenne's daughter was coming to see her mother. He certainly hadn't expected this pretty little thing. There was something about the way she stuck out her chin that made him wonder if Quinn was in for a rough time while she was here.

"How are you getting along with the deadly duo?" Kim asked hugging Cody and Kate who seemed to relish the close contact.

"Hey, we're fast friends. Cody is even going to take me fishing, aren't you, big guy," Sage said ruffling his hair.

If his grin had gotten any bigger it would have split his face. "She can bait her own hook and everything."

"My, a woman of rare talents," Lyle laughed.

"Unfortunately, walking isn't one of them," Quinn blurted as he joined the group.

"I beg your pardon?" Kim demanded. "She seems fine to me. You'll have to forgive the men. Lyle and Quinn have known each other since grade school," Kim

laughed. “Quinn’s a grump, but we adore him anyway. I hope he hasn’t been too trying? He *can be* nice at times,” she said directing a knowing look at her friend.

To Sage’s surprise, Quinn actually smiled at the other woman. She was amazed at the transformation in his face. His eyes held a glow of tenderness she hadn’t seen before except with her mother. “With such flattery, Kim, it might all go to my head,” he laughed.

“There’s plenty of empty room,” Sage mumbled, but Kim and Lyle heard. She blushed when she realized they had because she hadn’t meant to say the words aloud.

Lyle slapped Quinn on the back. “Sage might not have known you for long, but she’s already got your number.”

Quinn’s smile was replaced with his customary frown. “Thanks. I thought you were my friend?”

“Don’t be such a sourpuss, Quinn. You know we love you. It’s just nice to see another woman who can speak her mind.” At that point Kim decided she liked Sage. Quinn was a handsome man and very well off to boot. If only he could get over Sharon and her damned deceit, he had a great deal to offer the right woman. She glanced back at Quinn quickly noting the look of open admiration on his face at he looked at the young woman. Just as quickly his expression turned neutral as if he didn’t want anyone to know what he was thinking. But Kim had seen. *Interesting!* she thought to herself.

“If you’ve got a few minutes, why don’t we go over to the café for a quick cup of coffee? I’m sure the kids would love something to drink,” Lyle suggested placing a large hand on Quinn’s shoulder. “And don’t tell me you don’t have the time. You can spare twenty minutes from your work schedule.”

“Now that you have a cushy job as sheriff, you must have forgotten how much work goes into ranching, buddy?” Quinn returned. He wanted to get back to the ranch, but couldn’t see any gracious way out of Lyle’s invitation. “Come on. If I’ve got to look at your ugly face, I might as well have some apple pie to soften the experience.”

“Ugly face? I can see you haven’t looked in the mirror lately. You’re not exactly pinup material yourself and furthermore...”

“Just ignore them,” Kim said ushering Sage and the four kids across the street. “They’re like this all the time. Sometimes I don’t know who is the biggest kid around here. They may be big, but they’re harmless enough.”

“Maybe you should keep them on a leash?” Sage laughed. Oh, she did like Kim. They didn’t wait for the men but went straight into the café. “Let’s settle the kids in the booth here and we’ll take the table next to them. That way we can have some peace to talk.”

“Hey, Kim. We haven’t seen you in here in over a week,” the waitress called from behind the counter. “What will you have?”

Kim looked at Sage.

“Hot tea.”

“What would you like? And no ice cream this early in the morning,” she addressed the youngsters before they could ask.

“Coke!” four voices echoed.

“Four cokes, three coffee and one hot tea,” Kim relayed to Margie. She and her husband, Hal, had run the café ever since Kim had been a little girl. They were both in their late fifties but showed no signs of slowing down or retiring.

“Don’t forget Quinn’s apple pie,” Sage said eyeing the display of donuts and pies in the cabinet over the back counter. Why she should be concerned if he got his pie was a mystery, but the words were out of her mouth before she realized she was going to say anything.

“Got it,” Margie replied with a laugh. “That boy always has to have pie when he comes in here.”

Just then the men joined them at the table. Suddenly Sage felt the café had become much smaller. The two tall men seemed to dwarf it with their size. Both were over six feet tall with long thick legs encased in tight fitting jeans; broad shoulders tapered down to lean waist and hips. She was certain that there couldn’t be anything but muscle on those big hard bodies. *Get a grip, Sage*, she thought to herself. Until meeting Quinn, she had never really lusted after any man’s body. But there was something about him that made Sage think all kinds of foreign thought...foreign to her that is. When Quinn’s thigh brushed hers under the table as he sat down, it was as if a current of electricity had run up her leg. It was all she could do to keep from jerking away.

Margie arrived with their order and helped Kim distribute the cokes to the kids.

“You remembered my pie,” Quinn remarked picking up a fork.

“Sage ordered it for you,” Kim said happily. She vowed to do her part to keep these two together to see what would develop.

Quinn raised a brow. “Thanks.”

“No problem, cowboy. It didn’t take brain surgery or anything like that.” She saw his fork halt halfway to his mouth so she turned to Kim before he could reply. “I love your town, Kim. It is such a change from Chicago where crossing the street can be a life and death feat. Cody and Kate showed me around, but we didn’t go into many of the stores.”

“You can find just about everything you need here in Chance. A lot of people order from the Internet if they can’t find it in one of our stores. We’re having some fund raising events this summer to raise money for a swimming pool. There’s a small park across the street and Quinn has donated the adjacent land for the indoor complex,” Kim beamed a wide smile at the quiet rancher.

“Town needs something like that,” Quinn said pushing the pie plate to the side as he reached for his coffee. “We’ve got a bowling alley, a roller rink and a movie theater and that’s great. But especially in the summer, the kids need a place to swim. Lyle and I were talking about adding a basketball court for the older kids.”

“Aren’t there some lakes around here for swimming?” Sage asked remembering something on her map about a couple of them in the area.

Lyle took a sip of the rich brew. “There are two small ones, but they’re several miles out of town and not easily accessible for swimming. We make a trip now and then when it’s really hot, but it’s not worth it unless you plan to spend the day, plus the roads into them aren’t the best in the world. Takes a good sturdy vehicle to make it there and back without any problems.”

“I see what you mean,” Sage acknowledged. Any swimming she had done had been in pools. Only once had she tried to swim in a lake but she’d been young and scared of the size of it. She still wasn’t a strong swimmer, but she made up for it with enthusiasm. “You said you had a movie theater. Where is that? I don’t remember seeing it.”

“It’s down the south end of town around the corner,” Quinn offered.

“We were there last weekend with the kids,” Kim stated shaking her head. “I swear that Walt’s hearing is getting worse. The sound is so loud it hurts your ears. Can’t one of you two talk to him about seeing Doc Smith? The entire town will go deaf if they spend much time at the theater.”

“I’ll talk to Doc and have him pay Walt a visit. If anyone can get him to see reason, he’s the man to do it,” Lyle said looking at his watch. “I hate to break this up, but I go on duty in ten minutes.”

“Quinn, why don’t you bring Sage to dinner tomorrow night? Lyle is off duty and we can have a nice visit over a home cooked meal,” Kim asked smiling sweetly at him. She had him trapped and knew there was no way he could get out of it graciously.

He winced. He knew Kim well enough to know what was on her devious mind. Why did women always think they had to play matchmaker? The last thing he needed in his life was a woman, except for Cheyenne. But that was something entirely different. For the life of him he couldn’t think of one solid reason to refuse the offer. Damn! Then he remembered Brad. “I don’t know what Sage’s plans are. She’s having dinner with Brad tonight.” He took some satisfaction in seeing Kim frown slightly. But it was short lived.

“I don’t have anything planned for tomorrow night. If it’s okay with Quinn, I’d love to come,” Sage said smiling innocently at her mother’s boss. In spite of what the rational part of her brain was trying to tell her, Quinn O’Shea intrigued her. She didn’t plan to stay that long in Utah and if she couldn’t persuade her mother to return home with her, she’d feel better if she knew more about this man.

Before Quinn could reply, Lyle stood pushing his chair back under the table. “Well since that’s all settled, I have to get to work. I’ll see you two tomorrow night.” He bent to give Kim a leisurely kiss before turning to the kids giggling in the booth. “You be good and I’ll see you tonight. Kevin, don’t forget it’s your turn to give Cooper a bath. And don’t let your brother get in the tub with him.”

“Bye dad. I won’t forget. But Charlie jumps in before I can stop him,” Kevin added to protect himself just in case his younger brother decided to join the dog.

“Charlie! You take your bath in the house...not with Cooper,” Lyle said ruffling the younger boys hair. “Understood?”

“Uh-huh.”

Sage watched this exchange marveling at the warmth in Lyle’s voice and touch. She also saw something in Cody and Kate’s eyes. Longing? Her heart went out to those two love-starved twins. She would bet any amount of money they would absolutely go into meltdown if Quinn ever paid them attention like that, even if it was to give them orders to do something.

When Kim stood, Sage took this as her cue. Quinn was already on his feet.

“I’ll feed the kids first tomorrow night so we can have a quiet dinner,” Kim told Quinn. “A movie will keep them entertained while we eat. We’ll see you at seven.”

“Can I bring anything?” Sage offered.

“Nope. This is a welcoming dinner and you’re the guest of honor. See you tomorrow.” With a saucy wink at Sage, she rounded up her two boys and left the café.

It was all Sage could do not to laugh. Quinn actually looked a bit shell-shocked. “It’s only dinner, cowboy. Not an engagement party,” she laughed. “Come on you two,”

she motioned to the twins. “You father has work to do and we’re keeping him from it.” Without a backwards glance, she marched Kate and Cody out of the café across the street to the big blue truck. The twins clamored up into the back seat like monkeys. She was determined to get in by herself. It was partly because of pride and partly because the feel of Quinn’s hands on her waist made her feel funny. This feeling was not unpleasant and, under the circumstances, that made it more imperative that she refrained from any more physical contact. After watching Kate clamor up into the truck, Sage followed her movements and found it wasn’t as difficult to do as she’d assumed.

Quinn found his little group already seated in the truck a few minutes later. For some reason he felt a twinge of disappointment that Sage had managed to get in by herself. It was stupid to be having such a thought, but he couldn’t forget the feel of her small waist or the soft floral scent of her as he lifted her into the truck earlier. What he needed was to get home and engage in some good hard labor. That should wipe all thoughts of Sage Mendoza out of his mind. Something told him it wasn’t going to be as easy as that.

At quarter past five, Sage made her way downstairs to leave for her date with Brad. Cheyenne was in the kitchen working on dinner. “I’m leaving now, mother. I shouldn’t be late. Quinn won’t lock me out, will he?” she laughed, but she really did wonder.

“Don’t be silly, Sage. My, but you look lovely in that silk pants suit. You really do need to get yourself some jeans while you’re here, dear. They’re much more practical and comfortable.” Cheyenne thought all of her daughters were beautiful, but Sage was special. Helene and Dallas were taller, more sophisticated and more glamorous. Sage had an inner quality or warmth that enhanced her natural beauty. It was something that she was sure her daughter was not even aware of possessing. It was just part of her makeup. With her long silky black hair and those emerald green eyes, her choice of the royal blue outfit was stunning. Cheyenne was exceptionally proud of her youngest daughter and wanted only the best for her in the future.

“I did bring some with me, mother. Now I have to go or I’ll be late. Kate has already had her bath and we re-did her hair. Cody is dressing now,” Sage said giving her mother a kiss.

“You’re like a breath of fresh air to those two children,” Cheyenne said looking at Sage. She’d seen the small changes in the children in just the short time her daughter had been on the ranch. Now if she could only bring about some changes in Quinn...

Sage didn’t know what to say, so she just sighed before hurrying out of the house to her car. Brad was waiting for her outside *Utah’s Finest* café when she arrived. Was it only a few hours ago that she’d been here with Quinn and the kids? Shaking off that memory, she turned to Brad as he hurried to her side.

“Very punctual,” he commented with a warm smile. He’d been looking forward to this dinner since last night. “You look terrific.”

“Thank you. You look pretty good yourself.” Brad had traded jeans for a pair of black dress slacks and peacock blue western style shirt. He still wore boots, but then everyone seemed to wear them here. Maybe Quinn was right. Perhaps she should see about getting a regular pair of cowboy boots.

Brad proudly escorted her into the café, introducing her to several people on the way to their booth. Sage was surprised to see Margie still working and commented on the fact after the older woman had taken their orders and returned behind the counter.

“The café is open for breakfast and lunch, but they close down between two and four-thirty. Since they live upstairs it doesn’t present any problem for them. They get a break and then begin preparing for the dinner hour,” Brad explained.

“What time do they close?”

“They close the doors at ten. It’s a long day, but they’ve been doing it since I was a kid. I saw Lyle Forest today and he said you were in town with Quinn and the kids. What brought that about?”

Sage gave him a puzzled look. “What’s so strange about that? He asked Cody and Kate if they wanted to come and I got included in the invitation. You make it sound like some mysterious happening.”

Brad shook his head. “Nothing like that. It’s just that Quinn usually comes into town by himself. Ina was the one who usually brought double trouble to town. She was the only one who could keep them in line, I guess.”

“They’re not that bad,” Sage felt compelled to defend Quinn’s children in his absence. But then for all she knew, he might agree with Brad. He wasn’t exactly the most demonstrative father she’d ever seen. Even her brothers-in-law, who were struggling up the corporate ladder, managed to spend more time with their kids than Quinn.

“Haven’t had a run in with them then?”

Sage tried to hide a blush. “Just one small one, but we’re buddies now. They just need some attention, Brad. But we didn’t come here to talk about them over dinner. Tell me about your practice. Have you been a doctor long?”

“Shall I tell you the story of my life and all my hopes and dreams?” he laughed as Margie placed their drinks in front of them.

“Just the bare bones for now, Doc. I’ve never met a veterinarian before. Your work must be terribly interesting?” Sage commented as she studied the handsome man before her. He was almost as tall as Quinn, but where her host’s hair was dark brown, Brad’s was coal black. His dark eyebrows arched over dark brown eyes. He reminded her a little of the late actor Robert Taylor.

“Bare bones, huh? Well, I grew up in Chance, went away to school and have been back here a little over six months now working with my dad. He and my mom want to do some traveling so he’s letting me more or less take over the practice. He comes in several days a week to handle the office while I handle all the house calls.”

Sage saw the tenderness in his face as he talked about his mom and dad. “Do you have any brothers or sisters?”

“Two younger ones. Cathy is married and lives in Monticello; Peggy is going to college in Oregon. She usually comes home for the summer, but this year she has a pretty good job and wants to work. I think part of it the new boyfriend.” No one had met Luke yet so he wasn’t completely comfortable about his sister’s growing relationship with this faceless person.

“Does Cathy have a family?”

“She’s expecting her first next month. I’m looking forward to being an uncle. How about you? Any other family besides your mother?”

“I have two older sisters,” Sage said as Margie arrived with their meals. After that they concentrated on the food and talking about their families.

They were halfway through their meal when a woman approached their booth. “Hello, Bradley. When did you get back into town?”

He carefully laid his fork aside before looking up. “Lydia. Since I’ve been back over six months now, I would say you’re a bit behind the times. You should call your dad more often. Is your husband with you on this trip?”

“I’m on my own, Bradley. My marriage to Phillip was a mistake, one that I’m in the process of remedying.” Lydia turned her attention to Sage. A finely etched eyebrow arched in question. “I’ve never seen you around Chance before.”

“This is Sage Mendoza. Her mother works for Quinn and she’s visiting for a while. Sage, this is Lydia Palmer. It is still Palmer, isn’t it? Or has there been a fourth husband I haven’t heard about?” Brad hadn’t seen Lydia in over four years, which was just fine with him. She was five years older than him, but he had been aware of her while they were growing up. She’d been a snotty kid and had grown into a bitch of a woman. He wondered why she ever made these trips back to Chance, not that she’d made many trips since leaving fifteen years ago, because everyone knew she hated the place and what it represented in her eyes. It was dull with no excitement or any interesting men...save one. He wondered if Quinn knew she had returned.

Sage was surprised by Brad’s reaction. Lydia was beautiful. She was a little taller than Sage and her figure was fuller, ripe was the word that jumped into her mind. Her short blond hair had obviously been done in an expensive salon; makeup was perfect as was the two hundred dollar ivory colored dress she was wearing. Right now the look she was giving Brad was pure venom.

“I see you still haven’t grown up, Bradley. I’ll leave you to your dinner with Susie Wong here,” Lydia snapped turning back to the counter where Margie stood scowling.

“Now look here...” Brad began, but stopped as Sage laid her hand on his arm.

“Leave it, Brad. She’s not worth getting up set over. I’ve been looking forward to this dinner and I won’t let one miserable woman spoil it for me,” Sage said softly. She had no idea what Lydia had against her to illicit such dislike. After all, she’d just met her. Actually, they hadn’t even been introduced. Not that it mattered to Sage.

“She had no right to make that snide remark about you. But then again, it probably stems from jealousy,” Brad said trying to cool down.

“Jealousy? I don’t even know the woman. Why would she be jealous of me?”

“Because you’re staying with Quinn.”

“I’m visiting my mother, not Neanderthal man.”

Brad almost choked on his coffee and grinned. “I’ve never heard Quinn referred to in those terms before. Coming across a little heavy-handed, is he?”

“I’d rather not talk about Quinn O’Shea. Let’s just say that he seems to care about my mother, and for that, I’m grateful. How would she know that I’m staying at Quinn’s ranch?” Sage demanded.

“Small town news travels fast,” Brad said grinning. “A new face always stands out. And when it’s a beautiful woman that makes the news all that more interesting.”

Their attention was drawn to the counter when Lydia’s voice rose in volume. “What do you mean, you don’t carry cigarettes anymore? What kind of a place is this?”

“It’s a smoke free café, missy. We haven’t had smoking in here for over a year, so it seemed kind of silly to have a cigarette machine. Now, is there anything else I can help you with?” Margie asked her hands on her hips as if daring Lydia to say more.

Lydia’s sigh could be heard all over the café. “Can you tell me *where* I can buy some cigarettes?” she bit out.

“The general store still sells them.”

“Thank you.” With this Lydia stormed out of the café without a backward glance slamming the door behind her retreating figure.

Margie started to laugh. “Wait until she finds out that the store closed a half hour ago.”

“Did anyone ever tell you that you have a mean streak, Margie?” Brad laughed.

She threw him a devilish grin over her shoulder as she went into the kitchen to check on some orders .

When they were finished eating Brad sat back with a sigh. “It sure aids digestion to sit across from a beautiful woman.” The more he talked with Sage the more he liked her. She was funny, intelligent and down to earth; she was nothing like Lydia who liked to believe she was now better than the people she had grown up with in Chance. Sage might be from a big city, but she didn’t lord it over anyone. And she was pretty with long black hair and those marvelous green eyes.

Sage hadn’t been able to finish her meal. “This is wonderful, but there’s just too much of it,” she told Brad leaning back in the booth. She hadn’t been exaggerating either. “I’ve eaten in some of the best restaurants Chicago has to offer, but this is one of the best meals I’ve had in a long time...besides my mother’s cooking, that is,” she amended with a laugh.

“I’m glad you liked it. Look, after we finish here, how would you like to see a movie? I have to warn you that the volume will be high, but there’s a good show playing now,” Brad asked as an afterthought. He found he didn’t want the evening to end so soon.

“I’d really love it, Brad. But I know mother will not go to sleep until I get back. Even though I’m twenty-five, she still waits up for me.”

“How long are you going to be staying? If you’re planning to be here this weekend, there’s a picnic in the park. It’s our annual family outing kind of thing. The ladies bring lunches and the men supervise games for all the kids. It’s fun and relaxing.”

Sage thought it over for a few seconds. She did have several weeks of vacation coming since she hadn’t used much time for the past two years. It did sound like fun. “I have to call my boss in the morning. I had planned to only stay a couple of days, but if I can arrange it, and it’s okay with Quinn, maybe I can stay a couple of weeks. I’m really not comfortable with mother staying out here by herself so far away from my sisters and me.”

“Great! Can I call you tomorrow to find out if you’re staying or not?” Brad grinned.

“Okay. But now I really should be heading back to the ranch.” She knew her mother would still be awake. Normally she went to bed early and was an early riser, but on the nights when Sage was out, she would lay in bed reading until she heard her daughter return. Even though they were no longer in Chicago, Sage was sure the routine wouldn’t change. Her mother might even be more anxious since Sage had that long drive

back to the ranch after dark. Sage just hoped that Quinn was already in bed or at least nowhere in sight when she got to the house. She'd had a pleasant evening and could do without him ruining it for her.

CHAPTER 6

As Sage drove along the dark road leading back to Quinn's ranch, she couldn't help but think about her evening. She liked Brad. He was nice and comfortable to be with, unlike Quinn who always seemed to have something unkind to say to her. And if he called her Sagebrush one more time, she would kick him.

This thought brought a smile and the memory of his kiss. She frowned. Brad had kissed her good night after walking her to her car. It had been pleasant, but nothing memorable. Where as Quinn's kiss had left her feeling so much she wasn't sure how to describe it. Anger was the first emotion to surface, but after that it was something entirely different. The feel of his arms around her had been strong, but not hurting or threatening. His lips had been hard against hers at first. Then something happened and they softened into a caress.

If she were going to be honest with herself, she had to admit that the thought of being in Quinn's arms again wasn't unappealing. This silent admission made her gasp. *What in the hell am I thinking about?* She had never met a man who made a strong enough impression to make her fantasize about him. Sage shook her head. This was not good. She should be thinking about Brad since she had just spent the evening having dinner with him. Instead her mind insisted on centering on Quinn O'Shea.

"I'll just go up to bed and everything will be fine in the morning. I'm probably just tired after worrying so much about mother and then the flight out here," she said aloud. "Wonderful, the man has me talking to myself now!" She reached over to turn on the CD player. Maybe that would keep her from giving him any more thought.

Twenty minutes later she pulled up in the drive next to the house. There was only one light on. Her mother had told her she would leave the kitchen light on for her. Sage heaved a sigh of relief. That must mean that everyone was in bed.

Her mother's room was off the kitchen. She quietly opened the door to see her mother sitting up in bed knitting as she watched television.

"Did you have a nice evening?" Cheyenne asked laying aside her knitting and patting the side of her bed.

"Yes I did. Brad is a nice guy. And Margie at the café is great," Sage laughed sitting beside her mother. "He's asked me to the picnic this weekend." She waited for her mother to say something and it wasn't long in coming.

"But you said you were only going to stay a couple of days?"

"Don't you want me to stay longer?"

"Of course I do," Cheyenne quickly replied. "I'm just a bit concerned about you getting too involved with Brad."

"Brad? He's very nice, mother. What do you have against him?"

"Not a thing, Sage. I know I shouldn't say anything. I've always tried to stay out of your personal life and your sisters too. Let's just say I have a feeling about your future and it doesn't involve Brad. You need someone stronger who will know how to keep you in line."

Sage blinked several times, not sure she was hearing correctly. "Keep me in line? I have never been any trouble to you. Why should I need someone to..." her voice trailed off when she couldn't think of the right words.

Cheyenne chuckled. "I didn't mean it that way, Sage dear. You have a loving heart and a trusting nature that makes you vulnerable even if you're not aware of it. You can also be headstrong at times. And don't look at me that way," Cheyenne laughed because Sage's green eyes rounded with disbelief. "You have it in you to walk all over a man if he's not strong and self-assured in his own right. A lesser man would bore you to tears in a short time."

"Why haven't you ever said anything before?"

Cheyenne shrugged her delicate shoulders. "Because none of the men you've dated in the past have really meant anything to you. You enjoyed their company, but you didn't react to them with any depth of feeling. Brad is the same."

Sage sighed. She wasn't sure what her mother was trying to tell her, but she knew she was right about Brad. All she would ever feel for him was friendship. Maybe that was all she was destined to feel for the men in her life? "You're right, I guess," she admitted. "But I would still like to stay for a while. Unless you've changed your mind about staying and are ready to go home with me?"

Her mother shook her head. "Never. I love it here, Sage. And Quinn and those children need me. You and your sisters are grown now. I like feeling needed."

"I need you, mother," Sage said giving her a hug.

"But not like when you were a child. Maybe it would be a good thing for you to stay. Then you will see how happy I am and how well looked after I will be when you leave. Now, I think it's time for both of us to be asleep. Go to bed and we'll talk to Quinn in the morning."

Sage gave her mother another hug and a kiss before turning to leave the room.

Cheyenne had a thoughtful look on her face as she watched her daughter leave the room. She was smiling a minute later after turning out her light to lie down to sleep.

Shadow was waiting for Sage at the foot of the stairs. She bent to pet his thick coat as he looked up longingly at her. After a minute he licked her hand then turned to amble back toward the kitchen. Sage shook her head in wonder. She should have been afraid of such a large animal, but she wasn't. For some reason he seemed to like her, and for that she was grateful.

Sage had just made it to the top of the stairs when she collided with something solid. Strong hands reached out pulling her forward to keep her from tumbling back down the long staircase in a heap. "What?" That was as far as she got before a broad muscled chest muffled the rest of her words.

Quinn had gone to his room about ten minutes ago but hadn't undressed. His mind had been on Sage all evening, that is Sage and her date with Brad. He was surprised that Cheyenne had allowed her harebrained daughter to drive all the way into town at night. But then he really couldn't blame her. He had a feeling that Sagebrush would do what she wanted no matter what anyone said. He decided to give her a few more minutes before he started into town. If she had car trouble on the way back to the ranch, there wouldn't be anyone for miles around to help.

He heard her car in the drive and relaxed. Driving through the dark to town this late at night was not his idea of fun. Now maybe he could get undressed and get some sleep. He unbuttoned his shirt and flung it onto the chair by his dresser. As he reached for his belt he wondered if Sage had locked the kitchen door when she came in. Sighing, he slipped back into the shirt but left it unbuttoned. Not bothering to put on his boots, he strode barefoot from his room. The hallway was dark, but he knew his way around the house without any lights.

He hadn't heard any sound on the stairs so he was taken completely by surprise when he bumped into someone coming up. Her shriek of surprise told him it was his houseguest. He sensed rather than saw her begin to fall. His hands automatically reached out to pull her forward into the protection of his arms. She felt fragile as a bird under his hands; the scent and feel of her hair as it fell across his arms brought back the memories of the kiss in her room earlier in the day. When her soft hands grasped at his waist under his shirt, he felt his body harden. Because of this unwanted feeling, his tone was gruffer than he intended. "Damn woman, you're a walking disaster!"

Sage had recovered enough to be offended. "Well if you weren't so damn big and would stop creeping around the house, this wouldn't have happened," she snapped back.

"Lower your voice. I don't want to wake the kids," his ordered pulling her towards her bedroom. "And what does my size have to do with anything? I was simply going down to be sure you had locked the kitchen door."

"You shouted first!" Sage fumed but did speak more softly. "You could have made some noise so I knew you were coming. Running into you is like walking into a wall." They had reached her room where Sage turned on a small lamp. Then she wished she hadn't. The Quinn standing before her was still big, but with his shirt undone and no boots, he looked more human somehow. And that chest with the matt of dark brown hair made her gulp and look away. She experienced an unfamiliar coiling in her stomach that left her speechless. Her fingers itched to see how it felt...a most unusual happening for her.

Quinn couldn't restrain a grin at her outrage. No one had ever compared him to a wall before. There had been comparisons to other more unpleasant things, but never a wall. The dim light from the lamp danced on the curtain of black hair streaming down her back. It looked so shiny and soft that he had the urge to draw it through his fingers. But he didn't act. Instead he tried to remember whom she was and that she wouldn't be there much longer. "How's Brad?" he asked more curious than he wanted to admit.

"He's fine. We had a nice diner at the café. He's asked me to the picnic this weekend," she told him and then could have bitten her tongue. She wasn't sure why, but she didn't want him to think that she and Brad were now a couple.

Quinn's gut tightened. "You plan on staying that long?"

This was an opening to get his permission to stay, but when she looked up to tell him about her change of plans, the words wouldn't come out. He was looking at her as if...as if what? She saw his head lower but didn't try to move away.

It was the thought of her spending a lot of time with Brad that did it. Before Quinn realized what he was doing his hands were drawing her close as his mouth closed over hers. It was crazy. Even more to the point, it was dangerous. But he felt as if he'd stepped into a raging inferno as the heat from their bodies flared wherever they touched. Pulling her closer to his long hard body, his hands cupped her small firm buttocks pressing her into his hardness. When she sighed against his lips, his mouth opened deepening the kiss. No woman had ever affected him this way, this quickly. Quinn was losing control as Sage wrapped her arms around his neck pulling even closer as she hung suspended against him, her feet dangling inches off the floor.

Sage was quickly losing all desire to resist, if it had even been there in the first place, as the feel of Quinn's hard muscled body, the masculine scent that was unique to him, and the drugging power of his mouth on hers flooded Sage's senses with longings and feelings she'd never experienced before. She was adrift on a sea of new sensual feeling unable or unwilling to resurface.

As Quinn's lips moved to nip at the slender column of her neck, she sighed her pleasure, throwing her head back to give him easier access. She reached up to run her fingers through his thick brown hair, momentarily surprised at its softness. Hard body, soft hair was a contrast in textures that only added to her mounting desire. Sage had never been close to losing control before, but there was something about this man that a mere touch threatened to throw her over the edge into the abyss of desire.

"Daddy? I had a bad dream," a sleepy Kate whimpered from a few feet away, out in the dark hallway.

Sage and Quinn sprang apart as if a bomb had gone off between them. She recovered more quickly, rushing to kneel in front of the little girl. It was dark in the hallway so hopefully Kate hadn't seen her in Quinn's arms. "What is it, kiddo?"

"I want my daddy!" Kate cried close to tears.

Quinn picked her up in his arms, anything to make him forget how Sage had felt moments before. He was amazed at Kate's easy acceptance as she wrapped her arms around his neck as she trustingly laid her head on his shoulder. This brought back memories of years ago when the twins were younger and he used to rock them to sleep, especially if one of them wasn't feeling well. A sense of tenderness washed over him, something he had tried hard the past three years to deny. "I'll put her back to bed," he said huskily before turning away to leave.

Sage watched his shadowy form fade from view before turning to go to her room. What had she been thinking? She didn't even like the man, but all he had to do was touch her and everything about her dislike receded like water at low tide. Why did she apparently crave his touch, his kisses while Brad's left her feeling nothing at all? It didn't make sense, but then she'd never met anyone like Quinn O'Shea before.

It took her a while to go to sleep once she got into bed. Her mind kept reliving Quinn's kisses and the feel of his arms around her. The last thought she had before sleep finally overtook her was that she had felt safe in those strong arms. If she hadn't been so tired, she would have laughed at that thought.

Quinn was not in a good mood the next morning. He'd had a difficult time getting to sleep after putting Kate back in her own room. He's sat at her side for a few minutes until he was sure she was asleep. But it was not his daughter who had made him so restless, at least not entirely. It was the memory of Sage in his arms. He'd been aching when he'd lain down on his wide bed. Never before had he noticed how empty it felt. It was all because of one little shrimp of a woman! And she wasn't even the prettiest or most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. Oh, she was pretty all right, but he sensed it was more than mere outward appearance. Maybe that was what was so disturbing about his reaction to her. She was different from the other women he'd known, even Sharon. But he had to remember that she would only be here for a short time and he had too much respect for Cheyenne to seduce her daughter no matter how much he wanted her lying naked beneath him.

He'd gone out to do the morning chores before breakfast. As he and the other hands washed up, he hoped Sage had slept in. He didn't think he was up to facing her after last night knowing that she deserved an explanation. Trouble was, he didn't have a logical one to give.

"You look like you're mad at the world," Cheyenne commented when he entered the big kitchen. She was aware of the tension between Quinn and her daughter. You'd have to be blind not to see it. Instead of being upset by it, she was hopeful. But only time would prove her intuition right...or wrong.

"Sorry," he replied reaching for a cup of her wonderful coffee.

Just then Sage sauntered into the kitchen looking fresh and ready for a new day. Her daughter had never been one to sleep late, loving the quiet of the early morning to read on her day off. Cheyenne glanced at Quinn. She noticed his frown deepen as he studied Sage. Cheyenne Mendoza might be seventy years old, but she could still recognize desire when she saw it. Quinn was a man in denial and wasn't ready to admit it even to himself.

"Morning, grumpy," Sage muttered as she passed him on her way to get a cup of coffee. It was all she could do not to stare. No man should look that good so early in the morning. Now that she thought about it, he looked pretty good late at night too. That was just one more thing that had kept her awake until late into the morning.

"Sagebrush! You always this prickly early in the morning?" Quinn growled. She was wearing black jeans that looked as if they had created just for her as they hugged her pert little bottom, and she still wore those damn spindly shoes. The deep purple tee shirt lovingly caressed her breasts making him ache with the urge to haul her into his arms. Instead he retreated behind his mask of indifference. If only his body would do the same!

“I am when I don’t get much sleep. You scared me half to death last night sneaking around in the dark at the top of the stairs.” Actually it wasn’t the scare that had kept her staring at the ceiling. It was the memories of his kiss and the longing to be back in his arms. What had tormented her most was wondering where that kissing would have led to if Kate hadn’t interrupted them. It upset her to think she would have eagerly crawled into bed with him when she didn’t even particularly like him. And she really didn’t. Did she?

“I was not sneaking around and you didn’t do my heart all that much good either. If you wore sensible shoes maybe you wouldn’t fall down stairs,” he grouched. One part of him was glad she hadn’t referred to his lapse in judgment when he’d kissed her, while the other part despaired that it hadn’t meant anything to her. Now he understood how women could drive men to drink.

Sage plopped down in a chair carefully placing her coffee on the table before she gave into the desire to throw it at him. “When people don’t make any noise when they walk around, they’re sneaking. For your information my shoes had nothing to do with what happened. It was running into you that made me stumble,” she announced haughtily.

“Sage Fleur Mendoza, I raised you to mind your manners,” Cheyenne reprimanded her daughter. “But what’s this about the stairs?” Cheyenne asked concerned now. “Did you fall?”

“I’m fine, mother. Nothing really happened. I just bumped into Quinn in the dark when I came home last night,” Sage quickly assured her mother blushing at her mother’s remark and the use of her middle name. She could only hope that Quinn wasn’t paying that much attention and had not heard. She was eager to channel the conversation in another direction and remembered the dinner invitation. “Are we still on for dinner with Kim and Lyle tonight?” she asked returning her attention to the brooding man hovering on the other side of the table. She hoped it was because she had really liked Kim. Lyle seemed really nice too, unlike his friend here who could be a real sourpuss.

If anything, Quinn’s frown deepened. He normally enjoyed dinner with his best friend and his family, but he’d never taken a woman over to their house since Sharon died. “I guess that’s the plan,” he agreed with little enthusiasm. It was going to be hell spending an entire evening with Sage Mendoza because he had the feeling that he wanted more from her than he was willing to give back. How could one little shrimp of woman invade his space and his mind so quickly? Then he considered her mother and how she had come to work for him and determined that audacity must run in the family.

“Control your enthusiasm, grumpy. It’s not like we’re announcing our engagement or anything like that. It’s only dinner,” Sage bit out sarcastically. She’d gotten more enthusiasm from the phone company when she paid her bill. It wasn’t her fault that Kim had paired them up. But then Sage supposed she couldn’t have just invited her to dinner and not Quinn.

“Heaven forbid!” he bit out. “Once down the aisle was enough for me. Never again.” And he meant it too. He would never put himself in the position to be hurt the way Sharon had hurt him. There wasn’t a thing he could do about the past, but he could make damn sure that it didn’t happen to him again.

“Speaking for the females of the world, we thank you. You’ll save some poor woman from being bored to death with you dour attitude,” Sage snapped and wasn’t quite

sure why. She wasn't interested in him so why should it matter that he never planned to marry again?

"You could do the males of the world the same favor, Sagebrush. You're enough to drive a man over a cliff," Quinn replied stepping aside so that the men could get to the table. This wasn't like him to be so rude, but he couldn't seem to control his mouth around her. He had to give her credit though. She gave as good as she got. Sage might look fragile, as if she would blow away in a strong wind, but he was beginning to believe there was one tough lady in that gorgeous body.

"If you two don't stop snipping at each other, I'll eject you both from my kitchen and you'll go without breakfast," Cheyenne huffed. It took an enormous amount of effort to keep from grinning. There were some strong emotions raging between Quinn and Sage. It would be interesting to see how this relationship developed. She would love to have him for a son-in-law. Only time would see if it was to be.

Quinn's look of astonishment and the snickers of the other men at the table made Sage want to laugh. She was used to her mother and had heard this before. But apparently Quinn was not used to being told to mind his manners. She caught him glaring at her and couldn't keep the devilish grin from her face. She sat next to Parker and gave him a broad smile. The man all but sighed before turning his attention to the meal at hand. But if Quinn thought he was going to have a quiet meal, he was mistaken.

Sage knew she couldn't put off asking about extending her trip any longer. She had to call Brad this morning to let him know if she would be available to go to the picnic with him. Trying to swallow her agitation, she took a deep breath before looking at Quinn. "I meant to ask you last night but forgot. I was wondering if it would be all right if I extended my stay here? I have some vacation time coming, and I would really like to assure myself that mother is going to be okay. But I can find other accommodations if it will be an imposition," she asked.

Quinn was of two minds all at once...perplexed that she would be around for more than a couple of days, but at the same time, relieved that she wouldn't be leaving right away. Damn woman was driving him mad, but he couldn't let that show in front of Cheyenne. So he retreated into indifference. "It's fine with me as long as your mother doesn't mind you being under foot."

"Sage would never be underfoot, Quinn," Cheyenne assured him before Sage could gear up into a sarcastic reply. "It will be wonderful to have you here for a while, dear. I hope this means that you've given up on trying to persuade me to return to Chicago with you?"

Quinn waited for this answer because he certainly didn't want to lose Cheyenne.

Sage relented. "I can see how happy you are here, mother. As long as Quinn gives me his word that he'll call me if you need anything, I won't press the issue. But I will miss you terribly."

"I'll miss you too, dear. But we can talk on the phone. And who knows? You just might find that you like it here too." Humming softly to herself, Cheyenne returned to the stove to finish cooking but not before seeing the startled looks on Quinn and Sage's faces.

Sage wasn't sure what to wear to dinner. Everything was so much more casual here than back in Chicago. She didn't want to be overdressed so she'd asked her mother

who told her that a simple skirt and blouse would be fine. Since she hadn't brought that many clothes with her, her choices were limited to one long skirt with a slit up the side or a full silk skirt with matching blouse in a deep rose color. The rose outfit won out after trying on both. The shirt was sleeveless with a scoop neckline while the hem of the skirt came to her knees.

After washing and drying her long hair, she left it loose to hang down her back. Long dangling earrings that had been a present from Dallas on her last birthday and a pair of fragile gold high-heeled sandals completed her outfit. She was adding a dash of lip color when her bedroom door burst open as Kate and Cody flew into the room.

"Miss Cheyenne says you're going to see Uncle Lyle and Aunt Kim," Kate announced breathlessly.

"Would you take this to Kevin for us?" Cody asked thrusting a crudely wrapped box at her. "It's something special we have for him."

"And he needs it now," Kate added her eyes wide and pleading.

"Why don't you ask your father to take it for you?" Sage asked not quite sure she wanted to get involved. Not that she thought Kate would do her any more harm, but you never could tell.

"He won't have time," Cody muttered shuffling a foot back and forth across the carpet.

Sage frowned. Won't have time for his children? No matter what she personally thought about the grump, she couldn't quite imagine him that totally unfeeling where the twins were concerned.

"Please?" Kate asked wrapping her arms around Sage's waist. "We won't see them until Saturday and that will be too late."

She looked from Cody to Kate, not sure if she should trust them. "Do I want to know what's in this box?"

"It's for Kevin," Cody stated firmly.

"Right! Okay, but if I get in trouble for this, you two take the fall with me. Understand?" Sage relented unable to resist those two beautiful pleading faces.

"I told you she was nice," Kate told her brother smugly.

"I just hope I don't regret this," Sage muttered taking the box before picking up her small handbag. After giving it a second thought she laid it back down. She wasn't driving so she didn't really need it tonight. Then she heard that wonderful voice that stirred her senses...or her anger.

"Hey Sagebrush? I'm leaving in two minutes," Quinn yelled up the stairs. He wanted to get this evening over with. Normally he enjoyed a night with Kim and Lyle; most times he would bring Kate and Cody along so play with Kevin and Charlie. All day he had been trying to convince himself that he should call and see about including them in the invitation, but he knew Kim. She was in her matchmaking mode and would have some excuse to deny him.

"Got to go," Sage said giving each of the children a kiss on the top of their head before dashing out the door. As she started down the stairs she saw Quinn waiting for her. Her mouth suddenly went dry. Tonight he was wearing a pair of black dress slacks with a gray and black pullover sweater that seemed to emphasize every muscle in his body. The black material clung lovingly to his long thick legs. And that sweater! It made his shoulders and chest look impossibly wide. The thought of his chest brought

back the memory of last night on the stairs. His shirt had been open revealing the fine contoured muscles along with the mat of dark hair. *Give me strength!* Sage thought to herself before continuing down the long staircase.

For his part, Quinn had to remind himself to breathe. He had never seen a woman look so ravishing...and that's the word that leaped into his mind. Sage was a short little thing, but she had terrific legs that were shown off to perfection in a full short skirt and gold shoes. Her glorious black hair swung seductively as she slowly descended the stairs; her slender golden arms made him hungry to feel them around his neck. *Get a grip! She's trouble in high heels and you'd best remember that.*

When she reached the bottom of the stairs he turned to leave. "My car is out front," he said gruffly.

Sage turned to wave to the twins who were standing at the top of the stairs. "See you tomorrow." Then, holding on to the box in her hands, she followed Quinn out the front door. She was relieved to see that she wasn't going to have to climb into his huge truck and was surprised when he stopped to open the car door for her. She gave him a warm smile as she slid into the passenger seat.

Quinn swallowed hard when her skirt rode up her thighs. This was going to be a long night and he didn't just mean dinner at Kim and Lyle's. He had a terrible feeling that sleep would be an elusive thing again tonight.

CHAPTER 7

They rode in silence for the first half of the ride into town. Lyle was the local sheriff and had a big house a short distance from his office. Quinn was curious about the box Sage held on her lap. Finally he had to ask. “What’s in the box? You bake some cookies for Kim?”

“No. Actually, it’s for Kevin from Cody. He said it was important.”

Quinn’s bark of laughter filled the car. “Boy, I bet he pulled a good one on you, Sagebrush. He and Kevin are really into bugs and things like that. Who knows what you have in there.”

“What?” Sage squealed holding the box out in front of her as if it had grown fangs.

“I wouldn’t worry about it. The box is wrapped with brown paper and tied with string. Nothing should be able to get out.” He shook his head trying to stop laughing.

“I do not see anything funny about this!” Cautiously Sage raised the box to listen to see if she could hear anything moving around. She certainly hadn’t felt any movement. That was a good sign, wasn’t it?

“Boo!” Quinn barked.

“Stop that!” She jumped bumping her head on the side window.

“Will you relax? Whatever it is can’t hurt you and you’ll find out what it is as soon as we get to Lyle’s.”

“I’m not so sure I want to know,” Sage acknowledged settling the now offensive box back down on her lap.

“You’ll have to ask Kevin to show you his mounted bug collection. He’s very proud of it.”

“How does Kim stand having it in the house? I mean, bugs are bugs whether they’re dead or not,” Sage grimaced.

Quinn shrugged his broad shoulders. “She’s a special lady. I saw her take out a rattlesnake with a hoe once. After that what’s a bug or two?”

Sage shuddered. “I’ve never seen a real snake and I hope I never do,” she told him glancing down at the box. “If there is anything creepy or crawly in here, your son is going to hear about it. And don’t tell me to keep quiet because I won’t!”

“I wasn’t going to say a word. This is between you and Cody.” He couldn’t seem to keep the smile off his face and wasn’t quite sure why. Perhaps it was the anticipation of seeing her face when the box was opened. He could tell by the way she sat that she was nervous, but since he didn’t have any idea what Cody had put in it, he couldn’t reassure her about the contents.

When Quinn stopped the car in Lyle's driveway, he walked around the car to open Sage's car door. The sight of her terrific legs as she swung them around to get out did a number on his breathing. As soon as she stood, she thrust the box at him.

"Here, you take it," she grimaced.

He held up his hands. "No way, Sagebrush. You're the messenger, not me." Her glare didn't hold any real malice making him smile more. Placing his hand in the small of her back, he led her up the sidewalk to the wide front porch to the double doors. He could hear her muttering, but thought it best not to ask her to repeat it.

She and Quinn were ushered into a lovely family room done in green and brown where an old upright piano took up a prominent place on the end wall. There was a large fireplace flanked by floor to ceiling books shelves; the topmost shelves held beautiful teapots in myriad colors and shapes while the remainder was filled with books. "This is beautiful," she commented turning to Lyle. "I take it Kim collects teapots?"

"Many of those," he said pointing to the top shelves, "belonged to my mother. Kim has added to them over the past few years."

"He's added a few too," Kim said coming to stand by her husband. "Whenever we go somewhere on vacation, he has to check out the china." The look she gave him was filled with love and laughter.

Sage looked up at Quinn encountering his smile. He was an exceptionally good-looking man, but when he smiled, he took her breath away. Unfortunately he didn't do it that often. When he winked at her, she felt her heart begin to race. The grump wasn't aware of it, but he was too potent by far for her peace of mind.

"I still find it hard to believe that the big bad sheriff of Chance is into picking out china patterns," Quinn laughed

"It's my feminine side coming out," Lyle snorted. "And I could tell a few stories about you and how well you sew."

"My lips are sealed!" Quinn said putting his hands up in the air in surrender.

"Sewing? Oh, you can't throw out a bit of information like that without elaborating," Sage grinned. "I can see those big hands branding but not with needle and thread." She was more than intrigued. But as soon as those words left her mouth, she wondered what it would be like to have those hands brand her with his touch. This brought back memories of his kisses and the feel of his hard body so close to hers.

"Thanks pal," Quinn sighed.

"Don't pay any attention to them," Kim chuckled. "This goes on all the time. Quinn is actually very good with needle and thread, especially mending. When he broke his leg five years ago, he took up embroidery for something to do besides watching television and reading."

Sage laughed. "If I tear my jeans, I won't bother mother, I'll just let you mend them for me," she told Quinn with an impish grin as she stared into his dark eyes.

Before he could come up with a reply, Charlie and Kevin burst into the room. "Uncle Quinn!" they yelled launching themselves into his arms pushing him down on the sofa. "Cody and Kate are coming to the picnic on Saturday, aren't they? Please, they have to come. It's important," Kevin pleaded.

Quinn laughed as he hugged the two boys. "If it's that important, I guess they will have to be there. Care to tell me about it?"

Sage was taken aback by his easy affection with Lyle and Kim's boys. He was free with a smile and warmth that she hadn't see him display towards his own children. She wondered if he was this way when Kate and Cody were around. She hoped not because it would be like rubbing salt into a wound to see their father affectionate with other children but never with them.

Five-year-old Charlie started to speak but Kevin jumped in to shut him up. "It's a secret. You'll find out Saturday."

"I believe this is for you," Sage said stepping forward to hand the mysterious box to Kevin. Cody said I was to give it to you."

"Great!" Kevin said taking it and began tearing off the string and paper.

"What do you say?" Lyle asked sternly.

"Thank you, Miss Sage."

"You're very welcome, Kevin. But I am a bit curious about why this was so important. Nothing is going to jump out of that box is it?" Sage asked edging back just a bit.

Kevin grinned as he held up a dark green tee shirt with his name embroidered on the back. Then he pulled out one for Charlie. "We get to wear matching shirts on Saturday. Aren't they neat?"

Sage turned to glower at Quinn. "You knew all the time, but let me believe there could be something alive in that box."

Quinn shrugged. "It could just as easily have been a bug or a snake. The look on your face was priceless, Sagebrush. You're so easy to rile and so adorable when you get on your high horse." The look of outrage on her face made him grin. He seemed to be doing it more and more lately since she'd arrived on the scene.

Kim and Lyle shared a knowing look. This was not like Quinn, at least not Quinn of the past three years. They were both delighted to see him so relaxed and smiling.

"I do not get on my high horse. I simply state my mind since I see no reason to beat around the bush about things. You," she said poking him in the chest, "have a devious nature and I'll be sure to be wary of you from now on."

Lyle roared with laughter. "Boy, does she have your number!"

Quinn looked down at Sage surprised by the candid look in her big green eyes. He wasn't used to women arguing with him or talking back, except for Kim whom he had never known to be shy about saying exactly what she thought. Begrudgingly he had to admit that the more he was around Sage, the more intrigued he became. No matter how hard he worked to keep his mind busy during the day, he found his mind wandering back to her. It would probably be a good thing when she returned to Chicago. Somehow that thought wasn't as comforting as it would have been two days ago.

"If you are through throwing insults around, dinner will be ready in five minutes," Kim told them putting her arm through Sage's. "Come out into the kitchen with me and leave the men to follow when everything is ready. And Kevin, take your brother into our bedroom and put in that movie you want to watch."

"Yes, ma'am. Come on, Charlie," the older boy said heading for the stairs.

"Aren't they going to eat with us?" Sage asked.

"Not tonight. I fed them early so we can have an adult meal with adult conversation," Kim told her as they turned to leave the room.

Sage couldn't help the little imp that bubbled up inside her. She glanced over her shoulder to give Quinn a sweet smile. "You think you're going to get adult conversation out of those two?"

"Probably not, but you and I can carry most of the talking," Kim chuckled as they disappeared down the hall.

They finished dinner and retired to the living room. Kim was a fabulous cook and both Sage and Quinn had been lavish with their praise. Lyle and Quinn had just settled back to have coffee when the doorbell rang.

"I'll get it," Kim said since she was still standing.

They heard voices coming from the foyer and Sage thought that Kim didn't sound too happy. Seconds later Lydia flounced into the living room quickly followed by a frowning Kim. "Company!" she announced with a sour look at Lydia's back.

Both men stood but neither seemed any too happy to see the blond. "Hello, Lydia," Lyle said directing a look at his wife who just shrugged her shoulders as if to say *I didn't invite her*.

"Quinn darling. I saw your car and just had to come in and let you know that I'm back in town," Lydia gushed reaching up to give him a kiss. Much to her chagrin, he turned his face at the last minute so that her lips merely brushed his cheek.

"Lydia," Quinn acknowledged with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. He wondered what in the hell she was doing in Chance, but didn't care to ask which would doubtless encourage her to stay. "I don't think you've met Sage?" he said turning to make the introduction.

Lydia's eyes narrowed when she realized that Quinn had not been sitting alone on the sofa. If she was visiting her mother, what was she doing here with Quinn? "We've met. I believe she was with Brad having dinner. You do get around, don't you?" she said a little too sweetly.

"I only go where and when I'm asked," Sage replied with a smile. Lydia was obviously a woman who liked men, not women. From the look on Kim's face, she had the feeling that her new friend wasn't very keen on Lydia either.

"No doubt you don't get out much then," Lydia said laying her hand on Quinn's arm as she turned all her attention and charm to the tall rancher. "I was hoping we could go somewhere and get something to drink and go over old times."

Quinn clenched his teeth trying not to make a scene. He had actually enjoyed the evening so far. Sage was a delightful companion, funny and open. For some reason he was pleased that she and Kim had hit it off from the first time they'd met. They seemed to share the same openness and frankness. He was sure that, like with Kim, you would always know where you stood with Sage. She might irritate the hell out of him at times, but she was real and honest with her views and emotions. Unlike Lydia, who only had her own interests at heart. He'd found out that the hard way years ago.

Kim was just about to ask Lydia if she would like some coffee, not that she wanted this woman in her home. But she had been brought up to be a gracious hostess and it grated on her now to have to make the offer. Quinn surprised her by taking control of the situation.

"Lydia, why don't we just meet tomorrow to talk? I have to be in town for a meeting at ten. We could meet for lunch at the café," he offered. The last thing in the

world he wanted was to spend time with her, but this seemed the best way to get rid of her now.

Lydia gave Sage a smug look as she rested her hand on Quinn's arm. "I look forward to seeing you tomorrow, but not at the café. That Margie is such a nasty person. Let's meet at the Cactus House. We can talk about the sale of my land...and other things."

"Fine," Quinn said taking her elbow. "I'll see you to your car." Without another word he ushered her out of the house as the others stared after their retreating figures.

"Well, that was fun. Come again, Lydia...anytime," Kim snorted as she sat down. "That woman makes me so mad! She just marches into a private home and thinks she can whisk away our company! She wasn't good for Quinn before and she sure as hell isn't now!"

"Calm down, sweetheart. He's well aware of Lydia and her tactics. I think he should get a medal for bravery for escorting her out of here like he did. Poor man even has to eat lunch with her tomorrow. That would be enough to put me off food," Lyle grinned. Then he turned his attention to Sage. "I'm sorry she was so rude to you. I could have applauded when you gave it back to her."

"I'm beginning to think she's not the most popular person in Chance," Sage ventured. "Maggie at the café didn't seem to care much for her. And in my opinion, Maggie is delightful."

Kim laughed. "So does everyone else. Don't let what Lydia says get to you. In case you're not aware, women are not on her friends list!"

"I picked up on that last night."

"Picked up on what?" Quinn asked returned to his seat on the sofa.

"I take it the vampire lady has moved on to other victims for the evening? Maybe you should carry a silver stake in your truck?" Kim asked quirkling a brow ignoring his question. Quinn was Lyle's best friend and had become hers too. And she was very protective of those she considered hers.

Sage burst out laughing, then clamped a hand over her mouth.

Lyle ran a hand over his face. "Don't beat around the bush, sweetheart. Why don't do say what you think?" He was grinning when he said it though. He adored his wife, her outspoken ways and caustic sense of humor.

Quinn looked over at Sage reading the laughter in her beautiful green eyes. Now that Lydia was gone, he could smile too. "If I thought it would work, I'd try it. I don't think she'll be in town long. There's nothing for her here anymore, especially since she's a member of the high-flying party set in California."

Kim and Lyle exchanged a knowing look that puzzled Sage, but no one commented further.

She and Quinn left shortly after because both men had to be up early in the morning. It wasn't until they were in the car heading back to the ranch that he broached the subject of their conversation when he'd returned from showing Lydia the door.

"What was it you picked up on last night? Kim never did answer my question."

"It was just a comment about your lady friend."

"She's not my friend," Quinn bit out. "You haven't answered my question."

Sage sighed as she settled more comfortably in the seat. “Kim just commented that Lydia isn’t a woman who has a lot of women friends. And I agreed. Does that make you angry?”

“No, why should it? You’re both right. Now if you don’t mind, I’d rather not talk any more about her.” During the course of their meal, Sage had told Kim about taking her vacation here. And about telling Brad that she would be here to go to the picnic with him. Apparently she was looking forward to being with the veterinarian again. He wondered if Brad enjoyed her kisses as much as he did. As soon as that thought entered his mind, he banked it down. He would not go there. Sage was only here for a short stay and he would not let himself get involved.

“That’s fine with me.” Sage looked thoughtful for a few seconds. “Can I ask you something and not have you bite my head off?”

Quinn frowned. “I’ve never bitten your head off, Sagebrush.”

She gave him a direct look that said, *yeah right*.

“Do you like children? I mean in general, not any specific ones.”

“Sure, why do you ask?” He had a feeling he knew where she was heading and he didn’t want to talk about it.

She hesitated looking at his profile as he drove through the dark night. “It’s just that tonight...you were...you were different with Charlie and Kevin. Kate and Cody would love for you...”

“The twins are my responsibility. They don’t go without anything,” he replied all warmth gone from his voice.

Sage ignored the change in his manner. “But they do go without. They want to be close to you, but you keep pushing them away. Cody thinks you’re...”

“Drop it, Sagebrush! How I raise them is none of your business. You’re only a visitor here.” His words were clipped, his tone harsher than he had intended. She had hit a sore spot with him and he wasn’t about to discuss the matter with her now or at any time.

“I may only be a visitor, but I know what I see. And you, cowboy, sure wouldn’t win any prizes for parenthood! Your wife must have been a terrific mother for those two to turn out as well as they have.” She didn’t care if he threw her off the ranch. If he could be so warm and loving with his friend’s children, what was keeping him from showing his own children the same affection?

“You don’t know what you’re talking about!” His hands held a death grip on the steering wheel. Deep down he knew what she was saying was true, but to admit it openly would open doors that he had purposely left closed.

“Wake up, Quinn. A blind man could see the difference.”

“Sharon was a great mother. Is that what you wanted to hear? But she’s gone and I’m doing what I can.”

Sage studied his stony profile, his clenched jaw. She’d hit a raw nerve and wondered how far she should push. Then she remembered something else she’d noticed in the house. “You don’t have any pictures of Sharon or the kids around the house. Don’t Kate and Cody ask about her?”

“They were taken down when we moved into this house. They’re packed away in boxes. In case you haven’t noticed, Sage, I run a working ranch with emphasis on working. I don’t exactly have time for decorating.” But the truth was, the pictures hadn’t

gone back up because he couldn't bear to look at Sharon's smiling face or relieve the baby pictures all over again. He couldn't do it, not when her smile hid a lie so monstrous he hadn't been able to come to terms with it since she'd died.

"I work in a decorating firm. I'd be more than happy to help get things in order," Sage offered. "If there's anything I can do..."

"Just butt out, okay?" Quinn pulled the car onto the road leading to the ranch, drove a few feet, then cut the engine before turning to face her. "If I want any help from you, I'll ask, Sagebrush. Why don't you keep your warm concerns and interest for Brad? I'm sure he'll be much more responsive than I have been." His anger dissipated as quickly as it appeared as he watched her green eyes flare with hurt or anger, he wasn't sure which at that point. Probably both.

"That's fine with me, grumpy. At least Brad is fun and interesting to be with and doesn't carry a load of crap around on his shoulders! You wouldn't know an honest emotion if it reared up and bit you on the butt," she shouted.

Quinn wasn't sure why he brought Brad into the conversation, but he regretted it almost as soon as the words left his mouth. The picture of Sage in the veterinarian's arms made his pulse race. Undoing her seatbelt in one quick movement, he pulled her onto his lap as his mouth covered hers. It was a kiss of possession. He wanted her to remember what it felt like to be in his arms when she was with Brad. If she wanted to compare the two men, he'd give her something to work with. Unfortunately, the feel of her silky bottom pressing on his lap, the softness of her body and the amount of leg displayed made his body come alive to the fact that he was a man alone with a beautiful woman. He gentled the kiss as his tongue sought hers.

Sage sighed as Quinn's mouth closed over hers. It wasn't logical under the circumstances, but she didn't seem to have much control where this man was concerned. Something deep down told her that he was hurting and he needed to talk, but now she could only respond as her body took control. She willingly wrapped her arms around his wide shoulders, pressing closer to his chest helping to deepen the kiss. No man had ever affected her as quickly or as deeply as Quinn. Just a glimpse of his marvelous smile was enough to send her heart racing. Now it was the feel of his big body robbing her of her sanity. Seconds later when he undid the first two buttons on her blouse, she felt a fabulous tingling pleasure as his knuckles brushed against the rounded curve of her breasts. She should stop him. Instead she raked her fingers through his hair as her lips opened under his.

She wasn't sure where the moans of pleasure came from and it didn't matter. All that mattered at this moment was her feeling of having come home. This was where she belonged...this man was meant to be in her life. Her heart swelled with so much emotion she couldn't keep it contained. As his lips moved down over her chin to the tender column of her slender throat her head fell back giving him easier access. Everywhere his lips touched burned, branded her as his. She wasn't aware he had undone the last button until she felt him release the front clasp on her bra. His large hands cupped her tender breasts. She had never been touched like this before; she had no idea that the mere feel of a man's hands on bare skin could send tendrils of pleasure cascading throughout her body. Or was it just Quinn?

When his fingers rubbed gently over her tender nipples they pebbled in response to his touch. She watched mesmerized as he lowered his head. Then she gasped. “Quinn!”

Sage’s startled gasp, calling his name was like a dash of ice water. Suddenly he recalled where they were and what he was doing. He hadn’t lost control like this since he was a young man in the throes of his first romance. He ached; his body was hard, ready to make love to this beautiful woman. But he could not, would not let that happen because of the consequences. No woman was going to trap him like Sharon had done.

He made every effort to control his trembling hands as he lifted Sage back into her seat. His face was grim when he faced ahead once again.

Sage was momentarily stunned by the abrupt change in Quinn. She set to redoing her clothing and turned to speak to him. When she saw the set of his jaw and his hands clenching the steering wheel she knew what he had to be thinking. Her hands shook as she redid the last of the buttons on her blouse. “Quinn, don’t you dare tell me that this shouldn’t have happened! If I can be honest about wanting you, the least you can do is accord to me the same sincerity! We’re both adults and aware of what we were doing.” That wasn’t quite true, but she wouldn’t go into it now. If she was going to be completely honest with herself, she had to admit that even though he might aggravate her at times, there had always been this attraction that had been present since their first meeting when he’d rushed to her aid on his trusty steed. Maybe she hadn’t viewed it quite that way at the time, but she was quickly having a change of heart. Heart being the key word.

“I won’t lie about wanting you, Sagebrush. But getting involved with…”

“I said don’t you dare tell me that! I might not be very experienced in these things, but I know enough to realize that you want me as much as I want you. And for your information, that has never happened to me before. I mean me wanting a man, not a man wanting me...you know what I mean,” she said her voice trailing off. She stared at him as he studied her upturned face and saw the hint of a smile playing at the corners of his mouth. “And don’t laugh at me. It’s not good for my ego!” Her small hands fanned the air as she spoke.

“I wasn’t laughing,” he replied taking her two hands in one of his larger ones. “But I did wonder if you could talk without using your hands.”

“Then you don’t regret what happened just now?”

“I didn’t say that. I shouldn’t have let things get out of hand the way they did. It wasn’t fair to you, Sagebrush. It was just a momentary lapse in judgment.” That part was true, but he couldn’t admit to the real reason.

“Well, thank you very much. I’ve never been called a momentary lapse before. You can pretend all you want, but there is something between us. It comes as a shock to me because you’re not exactly my idea of the perfect man. What it all boils down to is that there’s no accounting for whom we’ll be attracted to,” Sage told him with a stubborn tilt to her chin.

“It’s pure lust, Sagebrush, so don’t go wrapping it up with pretty paper and ribbon. You’re a beautiful woman and, for some reason, you manage to get under my skin. It’s nothing more than that. I’ll see that it doesn’t happen again.”

“Is that so? You mean to tell me that if I crawled onto your lap right now, nothing would happen? For some reason you want people to believe you’re cold and

hard, but you're not, cowboy. I've seen you with my mother and with your friends. You couldn't kiss me the way you did if you didn't feel something for me." Sage was taken aback by the feelings he had aroused in her; anger he could easily make her feel, but this new feeling filled her with thoughts of making him laugh, making him feel loved and needed.

"Don't start psychoanalyzing me, Sagebrush. I'm a man who gets turned on by a pretty face and fantastic body just like other men. End of story. Unless you want to end up a one night stand, I suggest you stay on your side of the car because I might be tempted to sample what you seem so willing to give." With a quick snap of his wrist he started the car.

She recognized his words as a defense and accepted them as such. There was much more to Quinn O'Shea than she had first thought. He was a man worth getting to know and that was exactly what she was going to do, whether he liked it or not. She gave him an innocent little smile making him frown. "When we first met I would have taken your nasty remarks at face value, but not now. You're not going to get rid of me that easily, cowboy. If you think my mother is tenacious when she goes after something, you haven't seen anything yet."

CHAPTER 8

The next morning Quinn had already left the house before Sage made it down to the kitchen. She'd spent a restless night because of him. Her last thought before she had finally fallen asleep was the admission that she was in love with the wretched man. Why did it have to be him? Why not someone pleasant and easygoing like Brad? *Because he would bore you to tears in a short time*, she reasoned. Her mother was right on that score. As she dressed she admitted to herself that this was going to be an unusual courtship and the first thing she had to do was to learn about the ranch. If she was serious about Quinn, one of the first things she would have to do was learn how to ride.

Her mother was alone in the kitchen when she made her way downstairs. "Sorry I slept late," Sage said automatically going to the microwave oven. If she was late, there was always a plate warming for her and today was no different.

"You weren't out late last night. Did you have trouble sleeping?" Cheyenne asked watching her daughter closely.

"A little," she replied sitting at the table. "Quinn's a complicated man, isn't he mother? I mean there's a lot more to him than you first think when you meet him."

Instead of answering Sage's question, Cheyenne asked one of her own. "I take it you're no longer of the opinion that he's a monster?"

Sage grinned. "I wouldn't go that far, but he's...he's...interesting."

Cheyenne took a seat across the table cradling a cup of tea with her hands. "Do you know what I thought of your father the first time we met?"

Sage shook her head.

"I thought he was the most brazen, the most obnoxious man I'd even encountered. Five minutes after we had been introduced he told me that we were going to get married. Well I told him a few things and it included that I had no intention of seeing him ever again." Cheyenne's dark eyes were warm with fond memories.

"Obviously he didn't take no for an answer," Sage chuckled.

"Oh my, no. The next morning I received a dozen yellow roses at my job. All the other girls were agog with envy. That evening when I was ready to leave work, Tomas was waiting for me on the curb with a cab to take me home. My apartment was only two blocks away from my job, but he insisted that we ride. Mother just happened to be returning from next door when we pulled up. She insisted that my young man come in to dinner. I couldn't very well make a scene out in the street, so...that was the first of many dinners that your father shared with my family."

"I wish I'd known him longer," Sage said with a sigh. "He was so much fun and always laughing. I remember that."

"Tomas was a wonderful man. I just had to have time to discover it for myself," Cheyenne said patting Sage's hand.

"I wish Quinn would smile more. He has such a beautiful smile." Sage became lost in her own thought for several seconds.

Cheyenne smiled as she stood taking her cup to the sink to wash it out before putting it into the dishwasher.

When Sage remembered where she was, she recalled something she had wanted to discuss but hadn't had an opportunity because someone else was always present.

“Mother, he was so different with Kevin and Charlie last night. Do you have any idea why he distances himself from Kate and Cody?”

“I don’t know, Sage. Slim told me that he wasn’t always this way. It’s only been since his wife died.”

“But you would think that something like that would draw him closer to them.”

“Whatever it is, he won’t talk about it to anyone. I don’t know if he’s even talked with Lyle and from what I understand, they have known each other since childhood. Go slowly, Sage. You’ve made a difference with the twins already. But don’t push too hard,” Cheyenne cautioned.

“Well, the first thing I need to do after breakfast is see if I can have a riding lesson. The twins want me to go with them to a special picnic spot and for that you have to ride. Is there anything you want me to help you with here first?” she offered. Quinn had also hired a younger woman to come in once a week to do the heavy cleaning so most of Cheyenne’s duties were supervisory for the rest of the house. The kitchen was her domain and where she was the happiest.

“You go and learn to ride. Alice will be here shortly,” Cheyenne said ushering her daughter out the back door. She shook her head when she saw the boots Sage was wearing. “The next time you go into town, you are going to have to get yourself a decent pair of boots.”

“What’s wrong with these? They’re expensive and very comfortable.”

“I won’t say another word,” Cheyenne replied turning to the sink. “Quinn is certainly right on that issue.”

Sage heard her mother mumble something, but thought it better not to ask her to repeat it. Instead she made her way over to the corral where Parker was talking to the twins.

For the rest of the morning, Parker gave Sage her first lesson in riding. He began with instructing her on how to saddle the horse. She had never been around horses very much, but found she had a way with them. Well, at least with Peaches. She was a beautiful pinto and Sage was in love the first time she gazed into her big brown eyes.

The twins stayed through most of the lesson giving her encouragement and laughing if she forgot something. Parker was lavish with his praise telling her that she had a natural seat and looked really good. When the lesson was over, she unsaddled Peaches and insisted on hanging up the gear so she could learn where it belonged when not in use. She gave Peaches a good rub down with help from Kate and Cody. They seemed unusually helpful, but it was this special look they shared from time to time that gave Sage an uneasy feeling. She was sure those two were up to something but couldn’t figure out what it could be. She had been on her guard since the night crawler incident even though she thought they wouldn’t pull anything like that again.

That night over dinner Cody broached the subject of a picnic. “Daddy, can we take Sage down by the pond for a picnic tomorrow?”

“Please?” Kate chimed in. “We’ll take care of her.”

“She rides real good!” Cody was quick to assure him.

Quinn quirked a brow looking from Sage to Parker who had already informed him about the riding lesson and what a quick learner she had been. “I don’t have time tomorrow, Cody.”

“But we can take her, daddy! It’s not that far,” Kate pleaded.

He looked at Sage. "You feel up to a ride with them? It really isn't that far and you can't get lost if you follow the trail." He would rather be going with them especially since it was her first ride, but he had work to do that couldn't be put off. The town picnic was the day after tomorrow and he had to get some things done in advance so he could take the kids and Cheyenne.

"It sounds like fun. If it's not too far I shouldn't have any problem. Can we fish at the pond or swim?"

"It's getting a little late in the season for swimming there. The water is from a fresh spring and is naturally cold. To do any good fishing you need to go further north to the river. Wait to see how your ride to the pond goes before you plan any longer trips. There's a back road to the river. It's pretty rough but you can make it in the jeep." As soon as the words left his mouth, he wished he'd kept quiet. The last thing he needed was to be alone again with her. He was really busy now so he wouldn't be stretching the truth if he told her didn't have the time to take her himself. But he didn't want her going that far on her own either. Damn woman was going to drive him crazy!

The next morning Kate and Cody were dancing around in their excitement about the coming picnic at the pond. Cheyenne packed them sandwiches, fresh fruit and some cookies that Quinn packed in the saddlebag on Cody's horse. When they were all saddled and ready to leave he was overcome with a feeling of dread. It was ridiculous, but the feeling was there just the same. The twins had been to the pond numerous times, always with an adult, but they still knew the way there and back without any problem. Sage was the problem. She was a city girl, one who wasn't familiar with the country or wide-open spaces.

"You go straight to the pond and be back here no later than three o'clock," he told the small party of riders.

"Yes, sir!" Sage said giving him a saucy salute. She was wearing jeans, a long sleeved shirt and a hat that Quinn had given her. The kids were dressed the same. Both she and Kate wore their hair in one long braid down their backs. "Relax, Quinn. We'll be fine."

"Why doesn't that make me feel better?" he grumbled standing back.

"See you later, Daddy," the twins chorused.

"See you later, grumpy," Sage said falling in behind the twins as they led the way out of the corral. She didn't feel all that confident a short time later when they were out of sight of the ranch buildings. The country looked the same to her as they rode. Still she made a special effort to study her surroundings. The twins seemed to know exactly where they were going so Sage tried to relax. It was warm but not overly so. She was grateful for the hat because the sun was brighter than she had realized.

They had been riding for about fifteen minutes when Cody turned off to the right.

"Cody!" Sage called. Are you sure this is the way we're supposed to go?" Sage had a good sense of direction and normally didn't get lost. This didn't seem right to her.

"We know the way," Kate said when Sage brought her horse up next to the little girl. "Daddy goes this way." Cody's sister hoped Sage didn't see her fingers crossed when she said that. This was going to be a surprise and they didn't want it spoiled.

Sage really didn't have any choice but to follow. At this point she didn't know if she could find her way back to the ranch. Trees and rocks all looked the same to her.

She started to pay even closer attention to the scenery as they road on. For some reason it seemed important that she remember the way home. *Way to go, city girl*, she mumbled to herself.

Fifteen minutes later she glanced at her watch and knew that they should have reached the pond by now. Quinn had said it was a short ride and they had been riding for over half an hour already. The twins had not shown any signs of being lost, just the opposite in fact. Cody seemed to know exactly where he was going. Still, Sage felt compelled to call a short halt. “Cody, stop!”

“We’re almost there, Sage,” he called back spurring his horse forward and around a stand of trees.

“Come on, Sage,” Kate called as she too hurried forward. “You’re going to love this.”

“Come back here both of you!” Sage yelled, urging Peaches forward. The twins were out of sight about the trees and this brought on a feeling of panic. She was the adult and felt responsible for the children even if they supposedly knew the country around here. She heaved a sigh of relief when she spotted them a short distance up ahead. They had dismounted and were standing by a ravine that cut the land in two for quite a distance in either direction. There was no pond in sight for as far as Sage could see in any direction.

“Come and see,” Cody said waving. “This is better than any pond.”

“If there is no pond here, you two are in big trouble,” Sage said dismounting.

“But we wanted to show you our special place,” Kate said in earnest. “We can leave the horses over here under the trees.” She put action to words as she and Cody led their horses to the nearby tall trees.

Sage followed, but she wasn’t happy. “What is the special place? And why didn’t you tell you father that’s where you wanted to go in the first place?” she asked with hands on her hips.

“Because it’s *our* special place and no one knows about it. Except you, now,” Kate told her. “Please don’t be mad.”

“Daddy wouldn’t let us come if he knew,” Cody added truthfully.

Sage looked at them with narrowed eyes. “Would you mind telling me how you found this place to begin with if your dad didn’t bring you?” These two were sneakier than she had originally thought and they most certainly needed watching.

Cody shrugged his shoulders. “We just found it one day.”

“Right! You just rode all the way out here all by yourselves? Didn’t anyone miss you at the ranch?”

“Everyone is always so busy that we can sneak away for a few hours. Please come and see our cave. It’s really neat and cooler on hot days. We can take our lunch in there to eat. From the ledge you can see for miles,” Kate said hurrying back to get the saddlebag with their food.

Sage covered her face with her hands. On the one hand she felt privileged that the twins trusted her with this secret. But on the other hand, it was dangerous for them to be sneaking off alone. “Since we’re here, we’ll go to your cave. But I want you to promise me that you won’t come way out here alone again. If something happened to you, no one would know where to look. Your father would be worried sick about you two.”

“No he wouldn’t,” Cody said, his face downcast as he kicked at the ground with his boot. “He doesn’t care where we are as long as we don’t bother him.”

Sage didn’t know what to say. Quinn wasn’t a demonstrative father. She put her arm around Cody’s slender shoulders. “He’s very busy. Running a large ranch like his takes a lot of his time.” Even to her ears the explanation didn’t sound sincere. “If we’re going to get back by the allotted time we had better get this picnic underway. Show me this special place of yours.”

The twins led her down the side of the gently sloping ravine to an outcropping of rock. Sure enough, there was a small cave about five feet from the floor of the ravine. The opening was large enough that Sage didn’t even have to bend down to enter. It wasn’t very deep, about eight feet deep and seven feet wide. And it was cooler inside than out in the hot sun.

Sage noticed something stacked in the back of the cave. “What is this?” she asked picking up a blue plastic bag. Inside were four candles and some matches. Also neatly folded on the floor were two old blankets. Holding them up, she faced the twins. “I don’t suppose you know how these got here?”

They looked at each other and shrugged. “Someone must have left them here. But now we can sit on the blanket to eat,” Cody suggested with a big grin.

“Someone, huh? Maybe two little mischief makers who should be in big trouble.”

Kate took Sage’s arm to pull her forward. “Please don’t tell. We’ll be good. Only don’t tell anyone about our special place. Please!”

“Let’s eat and you can tell me how you really found this place. And no more stories about a mysterious someone leaving these things here either. Then I’ll decide what to do about you two.” She knew the right thing would be to tell Quinn, but she was reluctant to betray their trust in her. They didn’t have much in their lives at the moment and she didn’t want to add to their misery.

As they sat on the blanket eating, Sage did enjoy the view from the mouth of the cave. The rocks on the other side of the ravine were in all shapes and sizes with two archways sculptured by time leading off to the far left. It was starkly beautiful in its own right and like nothing she’d ever seen before.

When it was time to leave, they folded the blankets before putting them in the back of the cave with the plastic bag. Sage wasn’t sure why she let them leave those things behind, but it seemed right somehow. When they had mounted and were ready to head back, she had made a decision.

“Cody...Kate. If you will promise me, and I mean an honest promise that you won’t come back here alone again, I won’t say anything to your father. I don’t know if you realize just how dangerous this can be for you alone? If you want to come back, you’ll have to have one of the men bring you...or your father.” She waited as they looked at each other.

“I guess so,” Cody said softly.

“You guess what, Cody. I want to hear you promise me,” Sage persisted.

He sighed loudly. “I promise not to come back here alone.”

“Kate?”

“I promise too. But it was so nice.”

“I’ll be holding you to your promise. And it will be nice again, Kate. You enjoyed sharing your cave with me today. You can do the same with someone else.”

Sage heart was torn at that point. Part of her wished she could stay here with them and be the one to bring them back from time to time. But she didn't know if that would be possible. Quinn was a hard man, but he was the one she was falling in love with whether she liked it or not. Apparently you don't choose whom to love, it just happens. She had no doubt that he was a good man who had suffered a great loss when his wife died. He must have loved her very much to still be grieving after three years. The question she had to face was whether he could ever love like that again. Or more to the point, could he ever love her, Sage Mendoza, like that? This question stuck in her mind as they began the ride back to the ranch.

On the trip back, Sage insisted they ride by their pond so she could see it and be able to honestly comment on it. It turned out to be a rather small pond of beautiful clear water surrounded by trees, sparse grasses and some large rocks and boulders. Sage immediately thought it would be an enchanted place to visit. She wondered if the water was very deep because if the twins sneaked off here by themselves, and she now had every reason to think it was a distinct possibility, it could be as dangerous as the cave.

She wasn't sure she completely trusted Kate and Cody to keep their promise to her. Maybe for now, she could watch out for them, but what about after she left? The thought of not seeing them again, or Quinn, was not something she wanted to think about. Maybe she should tell her mother about the twins and their special place before she returned to Chicago? If Quinn heard about it from her, he might not get mad. Who was she kidding? He would be mad as hell if he found out about the cave. Well, she still had time to decide what to do.

Surprisingly, Quinn was in the main barn when she and the twins rode into the corral. If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn the expression on his face was one of relief. She watched as he glanced at his watch. It was only a quarter past three so they weren't all that late. He stood with his long legs spread, hands on his hips as they dismounted.

"It's after three," he said quietly.

"But not by much," Sage replied sweetly. "Don't forget that I'm a novice rider so it probably took longer than usual. We had a good time, didn't we?" she asked looking over at Kate and Cody.

They looked at her in genuine surprise. She had told them she wouldn't tell and she hadn't. "It was great!" Cody agreed quickly.

"Yeah and Sage is a really good rider even if she does wear funny looking boots," Kate added in the hopes that her daddy wouldn't ask any more questions.

Sage gave her a mock smile. "Thanks a lot kiddo!"

Quinn couldn't keep from glancing down to see what boots she was wearing and grinned. "They are kind of funny aren't they, Kate? We don't see many like that around here." Before he realized what he was doing, he gave Kate a wink.

Sage saw it and the absolute glow of happiness that lit Kate's face. Quinn couldn't have done more to please his daughter if he'd just handed her a handful of money. The little girl's smile beamed up at them.

"But she didn't trip once, daddy," Kate said in defense of the boots.

Quinn raised a brow in disbelief. "That must be a miracle. Now lets get these horses cooled down and fed," he said reaching for the reins Sage was holding.

“I’ll do it,” she told him quickly. “Parker said if you ride, you take care of your horse. So it’s my responsibility.”

“That’s all well and good, Sagebrush. But do you know what to do?”

“Well, not exactly. But Cody and Kate are teaching me. Aren’t you?”

“Yeah!” they chorused eager to help in any way they could.

Quinn raised his hands as he backed away. “Have at it. Then you two get bathed and ready for dinner. You should have time to put in a half hour reading.”

“Doesn’t Sage have to take a bath too?” Cody asked innocently.

The picture of a naked Sage lounging in the bathtub sprang into his mind; all that lovely creamy skin covered only by a few soap bubbles; her body sleek and wet. He swallowed hard to dislodge the picture. “That’s entirely up to her,” he replied gruffly before turning to leave. Suddenly the front of his jeans had gotten uncomfortably tight. What in the hell was the matter with him? There was something about this woman that was driving him up a wall. He’d tried to hide behind a wall of anger, but that wasn’t working. If anything, he wanted her more.

Of course, kissing her had been a big mistake. If that had never happened, he wouldn’t long to repeat it; to feel the softness of her lips and skin; to taste the sweetness that was uniquely Sage. He needed some hard labor and he needed it now, anything to keep thoughts of the blasted woman out of his mind.

The next morning everyone was up early to get the chores done before they left for town. Sage was helping her mother put the finishing touches on the huge lunch she’d packed for the picnic. She had never seen her mother so happy, but she had always loved cooking and there certainly were enough men on the ranch to feed; and enough praise about her culinary skills to keep her beaming. When the phone rang, Quinn had just entered the kitchen and picked it up on the second ring.

“She’s right here, just a minute. It’s lover boy,” he said with a scowl thrusting the phone in Sage’s direction.

“Grump!” she replied taking the receiver from him. “Hello, Brad.”

“I’ve got bad news, Sage. I just got a call from one of the ranchers about a sick horse so I don’t know if I will be able to make it to the picnic or not. It’s about an hour and a half drive from here and I don’t know how long I’ll be,” Brad told her genuinely upset that he might not see her today.

“Your patients come first, Brad. I understand that. You’re going to miss my mother’s cooking though,” she laughed.

“Don’t add that to not seeing you. It’s too much for a man to take all in one day. I’ll call you later if that’s okay?”

“Okay. Talk to you later then.” Sage hung up the phone turning to her mother. “Brad doesn’t think he’ll be back in time for the picnic.”

“You might as well ride with us then,” Quinn told her gruffly. “There’s no sense in taking two cars when one will do. Parker is driving my truck with the picnic stuff. There’s plenty of room in the car.” For some unaccountable reason the day just got a little brighter. He’d had a hard time getting to sleep last night imagining Sage walking around town and the park with Brad by her side. It wasn’t jealousy or anything like that. She was a guest in his house and he felt a certain obligation to take care of her. Right! *And I’ll win the lotto next week!* he thought sourly.

“You sure know how to sweep a woman off her feet, Grumpy. But I will ride with you anyway. I’m looking forward to seeing Lyle and Kim again.”

“We’ll let’s get this show on the road,” Quinn said staring hard at Sage. He’d managed to keep other women at bay with his dark mood and caustic remarks, but she gave back as good as she got. There was no denying that life would never be dull with Sagebrush. That thought did not make him feel any better.

Quinn had brought two long folding tables and an array of folding chairs for the picnic. Cheyenne supervised as he and Parker set them up under a canopy of trees in the park across from the main shopping area in town.

“We’re not going to sit on the grass to eat?” Sage asked Quinn as she helped him carry some of the food.

“I thought this might be easier on Cheyenne. She’s a little thing, but at her age getting up and down from a blanket might be uncomfortable for her,” he admitted.

Sage beamed a radiant smile up at him.

“Don’t read more into it than there is, Sagebrush. I just don’t want her getting sick. You’d never let us hear the end of it,” he grouched.

“Uh-huh. You’re not as mean and grumpy as you’d like people to believe. I might even go so far as to say that you’re a nice man.” Without giving it a seconds thought, she reached up to give him a kiss on his newly shaven cheek. The soft scent of his cologne intrigued her, as did the shafts of fire ignited in the depths of his dark eyes.

Quinn was momentarily taken aback. No one had called him nice in a very long time. It left him feeling vulnerable and open in a way he hadn’t experienced since he was a child. Along with this feeling came the admission that he wanted Sage with a hunger, with a physical yearning he’d never felt before, not even with Sharon. The physical side of their marriage had been pleasant, nothing outstanding. But Sage aroused something in him that he knew he had to keep banked down. Once aroused, he was sure he wouldn’t be able to control it, or himself.

His dark eyes bored into her lovely green ones; green pools where he could lose himself for an eternity and thank heaven for the opportunity. Sage wasn’t right for him. She was from Chicago where she had a budding career and a life of her own. Life on the ranch could be hard and unforgiving at times. Hell, if she stayed too long she was sure to break her bloody ankle or leg with those ridiculous shoes she insisted on wearing.

He quickly decided that his best defense against his growing desire for the petite lady was honesty. “Watch your step, Sagebrush. I might not be an ogre, but I’m sure as hell a man with appreciation for a pretty lady. Don’t forget what happened in the car. If anything like that happens again, I don’t know if I will be able to stop. And I don’t think you’re in the market for a few one night stands?”

Sage shrugged. “Never had one so I can’t say if I want one or not. But who knows where it might lead, Grumpy.” He was trying to warn her off but she wasn’t about to be sent crying back to her mother’s arms. No man could kiss her and hold her the way Quinn had done and not feel something for her. She knew he found her attractive; knew it by the way he looked at her; the way his eyes grew hot when he’d kissed her breasts.

“Don’t play games, Sage. I’m a grown man not one of your city boyfriends.” *Damned woman was going to drive him up a wall...or out of his mind,* he thought angrily. After Sharon died and her secret was revealed, he vowed that no woman would ever make a place in his life again. And that meant any woman.

Sage cocked her head to one side, as she looked him over from the top of his head to the tip of his boots. “No, I can’t quite see you as anyone’s *boyfriend*. You left boyhood quite a while ago, cowboy. You’re all man from head to toe. And I no longer consider myself a girl, but a woman. I think we’re both past the age of going steady. We’re in the man-woman relationship time. But it has to be a two way street. You’re stubborn, but I think you’ll be worth the effort.”

“What...?” was as far as Quinn got before Cheyenne joined them to finish setting out the food. What in the hell did she mean by that? He’d be damned if he would seduce his housekeepers daughter, even if she was willing! He gave Sage a look that told her she hadn’t heard the last of this conversation. All he got for his effort was a grin and a wink before she turned away to help her mother. Running a hand through his hair he turned to find some place safe to retire to for a while.

“Quinn! Quinn, darling!”

He turned to his left to see Lydia hurrying across the grass. She was wearing a white dress that left her shoulders bare. Her high heels made walking in the soft grass a precarious test of her agility. Funny, but when it was Sage it was endearing. With Lydia it just looked silly. He didn’t know what she wanted, but it would give him an excuse to leave the area for a while and get himself back in check. He waited until she was closer before he acknowledged her. “Lydia.”

She threw her arms around his neck to press her lips to his. She’d seen him arrive with those two brats and that woman. If she had her way, he would be hers for the afternoon at least.

Quinn had no choice but to put his arms around her or they would have fallen to the ground. She’d actually thrown herself into his arms. Her lips were soft under his but it was her perfume that watered his eyes. *She must have bathed in the stuff*, he thought numbly. Lydia hadn’t changed since she’d gone away to New York all those years ago. He knew her clothes and perfume would be the most expensive she could buy, but he was glad they were outside. In a closed up room he would have suffocated. The taste of tobacco from her lips was not pleasant.

“Come walk with me, darling,” she said linking her arm through his. “I have so much to tell you. And I’ve missed you so much. Now that I’m a little bit older, I realize that sometimes what we really want is right in our lives all the time.”

Quinn glanced over to see Sage frown. Good! This might show her that he wasn’t in the running for whatever she had in mind. Maybe if she thought he and Lydia were going to be a couple again, she would back off and give him some peace of mind? He patted Lydia’s hand. “Let’s walk down to the corner and get a cup of coffee. See you later,” he said waving at Cheyenne.

CHAPTER 9

Sage watched them walk away, the tall handsome rancher and the over-dressed blond. “I bet she gets her hair color out of a bottle,” she snapped before pursing her lips. Men could be so blind when it came to women. “I wonder if she’ll get a lecture about her shoes?” Lydia caught her heel in the grass forcing her to hold on tighter to Quinn’s arm. Since he had his back to Sage, she couldn’t tell if he was irritated or pleased, as Lydia pressed closer against his side.

“Sage, since when do you care what Quinn does?” Cheyenne asked innocently.

“Since...oh, never mind. Come and sit down for a while and rest. You’ve been working since early this morning.” Sage handed her mother the bright yellow flowered bag with her crocheting. “I’m going to check on the twins since their father is too busy to keep track of them.”

“Don’t worry about me. Everything is set up and all I have to do is sit,” her mother assured her. “Have fun!”

That’s a laugh, Sage mumbled making her way towards the playground. When Brad had called to say that he didn’t think he would make the picnic, she hadn’t been overly disappointed. Brad was nice and she did like him. But it was Quinn who intrigued her; whose kisses inflamed her senses; whose touch created an avalanche of feeling and desire she’d never experienced in her entire life. Her thoughts were so filled with Quinn and Lydia that she almost walked right past Kim who called her name twice before she stopped.

“Oh, hi Kim.”

“If I didn’t know better I would swear you were out to murder someone,” Kim laughed.

“Don’t tempt me! Men can be so, so...” words failed her at this point.

“Unreasonable? Stupid? Pig-headed?” Kim offered sweetly.

“Yes! How did you know? Lyle seems a sweetie to me.”

“He’s a man isn’t he? But he’s mine and I adore him. So what has Quinn done now?” Kim was only guessing but she and Lyle had been aware of the tension between their two guests the other night.

“It’s not so much him as Lydia. She comes over all sweetness and off he goes to be alone with her. And he didn’t say a word about *her* shoes!”

Kim looked confused. “What do her shoes got to do with anything?”

Sage shook her head. “Never mind me. The man is driving me around the bend and he’s not even aware of it.”

“Look, you can’t make a statement like that and leave me hanging. Has he been critical about your footwear? If he has, it’s a miracle because for the past few years he wouldn’t have noticed if a woman walked by wearing a shower curtain. The fact that he is aware of what you’re wearing is significant...and surprising.”

“No it’s not. The day we met my car got a flat on the road leading to the ranch house. The shoes I happened to be wearing were not quite up to the long walk. He found me and ended up picking me up and carrying me the rest of the way. But bleached blond Lydia can apparently wear anything she likes and that’s okay,” Sage snorted. “Maybe when you’re pretty and blond you can get away with anything with men?”

Kim smiled to herself. Sage was obviously jealous of Lydia and that pleased her greatly. She couldn’t wait to tell Lyle of this latest development. He might have told her to not interfere, but this was different. “I don’t think you have anything to worry about where Lydia is concerned. Quinn is too smart to get involved with her again,” she said hoping it was true.

Sage didn’t look convinced or relieved in any way. “He’s a man and they can be blinded by a beautiful woman. Even more so when she’s stylish and sophisticated.”

Kim waved a dismissing hand. “Lydia is not that attractive anymore. She’s only a year younger than Quinn but already she has to pack the frown lines with enough makeup to patch an adobe house.”

Sage grinned. “Meow! Do I sense that you’re not very fond of the lady?”

“Did I say that?” Kim asked innocently placing a hand over her heart.

“Well I wouldn’t exactly believe you were a member of her fan club.”

“She only has one member of that club...and it’s herself. Now enough talk about the aging glamour queen. Let’s go check on the kids. They should be ready to begin the kid games in a little while. Kevin and Charlie have been looking forward to this all week.”

They found all four children on the playground. Soon after they moved to the center of the park where Lyle was supervising the games. There were several games for the various age groups, which began with the children five and under. Sage was fascinated by the event because she had never experienced anything like this neighborly get-together before.

They spent the next hour watching and Kim introduced Sage to some of the other parents in the growing crowd. All were friendly and welcomed her into their midst. When it came time for Kate and Cody to participate, she scanned the sea of faces looking for Quinn. It would be a shame if he missed seeing his children. The twins must have felt the same way because after they waved at her, she saw them looking around. She watched as Cody waved to someone off to the far side of the park, and then saw his expression change to disappointment.

She saw Quinn standing with Lydia. He had started to raise his hand to wave to the twins when Lydia grabbed his arm as she reached up to kiss his cheek. Right at that moment, Sage could have torn the woman's hair out by the clumps. How dare she spoil this time for Cody and Kate? Not being able to stand the look of dejection on Cody's face, she began to yell. "Come on Cody! You can do it!" It was a relay race and he was the last one in line. When he heard his name, he looked over at her and managed a grin. Sage gave him a thumbs-up and was rewarded with a wide smile.

After that there was no more time because the race began. There were four teams of five and Cody's and one other were in the lead from the beginning. Then it came down to Cody and one other boy. Cody took the stick and ran for all he was worth, his legs pumping as he ran down to the other end of the field. It was close, but Cody won for his team. He began jumping up and down as his teammates ran up to hug him as they all laughed.

Quinn had been watching the race, but he had also been unable to keep his eyes from wandering over to where Sage stood with Kim and some of the other parents. He'd seen the look she had directed at him earlier and knew exactly what it was for. He wasn't any too pleased with Lydia hanging on to him like a leech. He hadn't asked her to join him today so he felt no responsibility to remain with her the entire time, especially after that little show of possessiveness. He might not be the best father in the world, but he would never deliberately snub Kate or Cody.

As soon as the race ended, he quickly made his way over to where Cody and the others were being presented with their prizes. They each got a tee shirt with *CHANCE, UTAH* printed across the back and the picture of a horse on the front. He stepped up to Cody placing a hand on his narrow shoulder and smiled down at the little boy. "You did a good job, Cody. I didn't know you could run that fast." Quinn's heart hammered in his chest at the look of joy filling his son's eyes.

"I can run like the wind, daddy. See my shirt?" he said holding it up like a trophy.

"Now that's what I call a mighty fine shirt," Quinn pronounced after examining it carefully. "Would you like to put it on now?"

"Yeah!"

Quinn helped him change into the new shirt, watching as Cody smoothed it down lovingly. "I'll take your other one over to the table so you can get ready for the next event."

"Will you be there?" Cody asked hopefully.

"I'll be right there," he assured him. *And no one will keep me away*, he vowed. Just then Kate rushed forward.

"Daddy, they're starting my race now," she announced pulling on his hand.

Sage watched as Kate pulled Quinn toward the other end of the park where kids were lining up for another relay race, only this time it was carrying spoons of water to a glass about ten feet away. Kate waved as they passed and Sage waved her on. Quinn gave her a questioning look that she ignored. She had been all geared up to let him have it about Cody when he'd abruptly left Lydia to go to his son. Maybe he wasn't as heartless as she had begun to believe he might be where the twins were concerned.

The games passed quickly with all of the children winning something. Kate also ended up with a tee shirt and both won a storybook and a coloring book. When it was

time to eat, Sage was dismayed to see Lydia heading for their table where Quinn and Parker had just sat down to enjoy some iced tea.

Kim saw the change in Sage and turned to see what had made her frown. "I think you had better get over there. That barracuda should learn not to tread on private property."

"What private property?" Sage asked confused by the statement.

"Why Quinn, of course. You two make a much nicer couple, so get over there and let her know you're not easily intimidated," Kim chuckled as if the thought amused her.

"I don't know how Quinn would take any interference on my part. It's his life and if he's interested in Lydia, it's none of my business. Maybe he's glad she's back?" Inside Sage was quivering. What if he was really interested in the woman? After all they had known each other for a long time and Lydia was a free woman now. Quinn might jump at the chance to have her back in his life, no matter what he said to the contrary. This thought did not sit well with Sage.

"Credit him with some sense, Sage. And me! He might have thought he was in love with her a long time ago, but now I have no doubt that he appreciates what a close call he had. If she hadn't gone to visit family in New York all those years ago, she might have ended up marrying him. Talk about a mismatched couple! A marriage like that would have been hell on both of them," Kim snorted.

"But you can't know for sure what's going through his mind," Sage persisted. "People change over time and so do opinions."

"You're right they do. But not in this case. Oh, I have no doubt that Lydia may have had a change of heart now that she's unencumbered by a husband. The fact that Quinn has done very well over the years and now has quite a bit of wealth behind him doesn't hurt the picture either. But I don't believe for a minute that love has anything to do with her being here now. It's greed pure and simple," Kim stated firmly. She'd known Lydia too long to believe any differently.

"You can't know that for sure, Kim. Quinn is a fantastic looking man, intelligent, brilliant with horses and..."

"Boy, you've got it worse than I thought," Kim chuckled. "Get over there now and don't let her run you off." She gave Sage a gentle nudge in the right direction.

"I'm going, I'm going. But if you see me getting into trouble, I expect you to come to my rescue," she laughed turning to head for their table. As Sage approached the area Quinn had set up under the trees, she could tell by his expression that he wasn't too happy. Maybe Kim had been right. Maybe she didn't have anything to worry about at least where Lydia was concerned. When he looked up to see her, she was sure she saw a look of gratitude shining in the depths of his dark eyes. He gave her a bright smile as she stopped by his side.

"I was going to come hunting for you, Sagebrush. We're about ready to eat," he said placing an arm around her waist. Lydia was being a bore, which was nothing unusual as far as he was concerned. Sage might be a pain in the ass at times, but she was never boring. As much as he didn't want to, he had to admit that he was getting used to her being around. It was obvious that the twins had already taken to her in a big way.

Sage tried not to show her surprise when Quinn wrapped his arm around her to pull her close against his side. The feel of his long hard body was heavenly and

everywhere their bodies touched she felt shafts of awareness tingling along her skin. She looked up to give him a warm smile. "I got waylaid by Kim," she said by way of explanation. "Where are the twins?"

"Cheyenne is getting them washed up. They should be back any minute."

Lydia was fuming. Once she had made up her mind about something, she wouldn't tolerate any interference and this little girl was becoming a nuisance. "I was hoping you were going to ask me to join you, Quinn," she said softly looking at him with a wistful expression on her face.

Quinn wasn't fooled for a minute, but he couldn't think of a graceful way out of the situation. To his surprise it was Sage who replied.

"We have more than enough food, Lydia. I think you'll find that my mother is a fabulous cook." She felt Quinn's body tense and took pity on the man. She had no desire to be friends with this woman, but she had been raised not to be deliberately rude. She felt Quinn give her a slight squeeze, whether it was approval or not she wasn't sure. But there was no mistaking Lydia's expression. If looks could kill, Sage would have fallen on the spot.

Lydia tried not to show her anger at Sage for acting the gracious hostess for Quinn. She had come back to this backwater town for one reason only...Quinn. And she had endured the sun and this ridiculous picnic for the same reason. She meant to stay by his side at all costs. He wasn't as easy to sway as her past husbands had been. But she was confident she could bring him around if she could be with him. "Why thank you, dear," she replied sweetly. She moved to stand next to Quinn putting her arm through his. Two could play at this game. "Your little friend has such nice manners, Quinn."

He was momentarily dumb struck, not sure what to do standing there with Sage on one arm and Lydia clinging to the other. Why had Sage invited her to eat with them? His expression must have reflected his consternation because Sage broke the silence.

"Well, we might as well fix our plates and sit down then. This little girl is hungry." With these words she stepped away from the warmth of Quinn's side. Just as she picked up a plate, the twins ran up their faces lit with anticipation.

"Can we go play on the swings after we eat?" Kate asked all in one breath.

"That's up to your daddy, kiddo," Sage said reaching for another plate to get the children settled with their lunch. She knew the moment the twins saw Lydia and Quinn. Both little faces scrunched up into frowns. *Interesting*, Sage thought. *Looks like they don't care for their father's friend.*

"What's she doing here?" Cody pouted.

"She's our luncheon guest and I expect you to be nice to her," Sage said quietly because Quinn and Lydia were approaching the table.

"I don't like her," Kate said pulling Sage by the arm to make her bend down so she could whisper to her.

"Do you know her?"

Kate slowly shook her head. "She looks mean. And I don't think daddy likes her much either." She liked Sage and Cheyenne. They were nice and fun to be with.

"Well, you be nice anyway and if it's okay with your daddy, we'll go to the playground. But you have to be good," Sage warned as she settled Kate and Cody at the table with their plates. She would rather stay closer to Quinn, but in this case, it might be

better to get the twins away from temptation. She knew from first hand experience what those two could get into or up to when provoked.

Once they were all seated, Lydia next to Quinn with Cody and Kate on her other side, they began to eat. Cheyenne had fixed potato salad, coleslaw, fried chicken and fresh baked bread. Everyone ate with appreciation except Lydia who picked at the small portions she'd taken. If she made one derogatory remark about her mother's cooking, Sage wasn't sure what she would do. Quinn ate with relish apparently enjoying his meal so that made her relax a little. But this was short-lived.

"Tell me, Sage, are you a cook like your mother?" Lydia asked just a little too sweetly.

"I do cook, Lydia, but only for myself. I work in an interior decorating firm."

"Oh, how quaint. Decorating other people's homes...quite like being a bridesmaid but never a bride I would imagine." Lydia had only worked for a short time in her life and that had been in an office. She'd ended up marrying one of the company's biggest clients and hadn't had to suffer that state of affair since.

Sage barely stopped herself from grinding her teeth, but she managed. "It's really quite an interesting job, Lydia. It takes intelligence and a great deal of creativity to formulate a decorating scheme and then see it through to the final stages."

"I'm sure it does, dear. And I suppose there is a sense of adventure in spending other people's money for something you know you'll never have yourself?" Lydia had worked with decorators and knew how stupid they could be, at least the first one she had hired to redo her San Francisco home. She had been totally unreasonable and had no idea what Lydia had wanted. She had a feeling that Sage would be the same with her clients.

At this Sage smiled because there was some truth to it. "You do get to buy priceless pieces of furniture or antiques that normally you wouldn't see," she admitted gaily. "But many of the places I've worked on I wouldn't want to live in myself. After all, we decorate to fit the client's preference, not our own."

Quinn was fed up with Lydia's patronizing tone and ways. He said the first thing that came into his head and where it came from, he had no idea. "As a matter of fact, Sage and I are planning on having a long chat about what she can do with my house. When the new house was finished, I just moved all the old furniture in and haven't really done much to fix it up."

Cheyenne didn't betray any surprise. "My daughter does wonderful work and has received several generous bonuses for her efforts. I believe this evening would be a good time for you two to walk through the house and begin working up a plan."

Sage looked from Quinn to her mother hoping her astonishment didn't show on her face. Was her mother mad? And Quinn? What had gotten into him? She watched as Lydia's mouth almost fell open, but the odious woman caught herself just in time.

Quinn reached across the table to place a large hand over Sage's much smaller one. "That sounds like a good idea. We'll meet in my den right after dinner."

Lydia's eyes narrowed. "But darling, I was hoping we could go out this evening. Just the two of us to go over old times and get reacquainted?" If anyone was going to decorate that house, it was going to be her. Well, not her personally, but she would have the final say in everything.

"Sorry, Lydia. I have a lot to do when we get back home."

As she reached over to put a placating hand on his arm, a glass of grape juice flew across the table from the other side spewing all down the side and front of her white outfit. "You clumsy stupid child," Lydia shrieked jumping up knocking over her chair as she moved.

Cody hung his head, but not before Sage saw a hint of a smile play on his lips. Quinn had seen it also. "Cody!" he bellowed. "Get Miss Lydia some napkins, now!"

Cody reached for the neat stack in front of him. He turned to hand it to the red-faced lady only to have her smack his hand away. Tears filled his eyes, but he refused to let them fall. If daddy didn't like her, why was he yelling at him? "It...it was an...accident," he stammered.

"This dress is ruined!"

Kate giggled. She couldn't help it because the lady looked so funny. The mean lady's face was red and her dress had big and little purple spots all over it. She had known Cody was going to do it too and was glad.

"Kate! Cody! That's enough!" Quinn stated with quiet authority. "You will apologize right now."

"But Daddy..."

"I said apologize," Quinn restated firmly.

Cody fought back a sob as his little mouth firmed into a straight line. "I didn't do anything!" he said with a sidelong look at Cheyenne as if looking for help from that quarter.

Quinn turned to Lydia. "I'll replace the dress, Lydia. Just have the bill sent to me." Then he directed his attention to the twins. "You two will help Cheyenne and Sage pack up the picnic. Then we'll be going home. You have chores to do. And there will be no games or television for the next week."

"Daddy!" Kate cried then quieted when she saw the thunderous expression on his face.

"Now!" Quinn thundered. "Come on, Lydia, I'll walk you home." What a mess this had turned out to be! If Sage hadn't asked Lydia to eat with them, this wouldn't have happened. But then he couldn't blame it on her either. Knowing Lydia as he did, she would have invited herself. He had no idea what had gotten into the twins to pull a trick like this. He'd picked up on the look they had shared just before the glass skidded across the table and knew it hadn't been an accident. They didn't even know Lydia so why would they pull something like this? The only other time they had seen her was before their mother had died and that was over three or four years ago. He was sure they wouldn't remember her, besides they hadn't spent much time in her company. As he recalled, Lydia had only been in town a couple of days on that trip.

"Well, that was fun," Sage said getting up to begin packing. She could kick herself for inviting Lydia to eat with them.

"I guess this means we can't go to the park now?" Kate asked with a hint of hope in her voice as if she already knew the answer to that question.

"You heard your father, Kate. We're going back to the ranch as soon as we pack up." She took pity on the downcast expressions even though she knew they had done something wrong. If it had been anyone else but Lydia, she might be upset, but under the circumstances, it was difficult to work up any compassion for the woman or her

expensive dress. “Why did you do it, Cody? Didn’t you realize you would get into trouble?” She knelt down in front of him taking his hands in hers.

Cody scrubbed at the grass with the toes of his boot.

Sage lifted his face with a finger under his chin. She saw tears glistening in his eyes and also stubbornness so much like his father’s. Oh how she wanted to take this little boy into her arms and hug him close. But she was afraid if she did that it would make his actions acceptable.

“She made daddy look away during the races and she doesn’t like us,” he finally lashed out. “I hope her skin turns purple too!” His expression was set as he clenched his fists to his side.

Sage had seen his disappointment at the beginning of the race when Quinn had begun to wave to his son, only to be halted by Lydia demanding his attention. It was apparent the twins craved his attention and approval and would go to any lengths to get it, even doing something they knew was wrong. She didn’t know what to say. These were not her children so she had no right to say anything if it came to that. But her heart did cry out for not only the children, but for Quinn who needed to learn how to give of himself where they were concerned.

CHAPTER 10

Later that evening after the twins had been put to bed, Quinn retreated to his study on the pretext of working. In truth, it had been an excuse to be alone for a while. It galled him that he had to punish Cody and Kate because of Lydia, but he couldn’t let them get away with their latest prank. He sighed heavily as if the weight of child rearing were too much for him to contemplate. It had been easier when Sharon was alive. They had shared the responsibility; they had shared a bed; they had shared plans for a future. But what they had not shared was honesty, at least on her part.

All that time, married for almost six years and he had never guessed at the secret she had kept from him. Strange that if Kate hadn't been so badly hurt in the accident he would never have discovered the truth, discovered Sharon's well-kept secret. First losing his wife in the accident and then learning that the twins were not his had been almost too much to handle all at once. But he had survived. His hurt at her deception had turned into anger, but she was no longer there for him to yell at. And he would never know who had fathered Kate and Cody. Sharon was the only one who could answer that and she was gone.

Lyle was the only one who knew the truth about the children. He didn't know if his friend had told his wife or not, but if he had Quinn knew that Kim would not say anything to anyone. She was one woman he trusted, but the only one.

His thoughts turned to Cheyenne and he smiled. He trusted her too. He had seen her looking at him thoughtfully when the children were present and knew she wondered about the distance he kept from them. It would be easy to talk to her, but he hesitated because he was pretty sure what she might say and he wasn't ready to hear it.

Cody and Kate were not his children, but he would take care of them. The memory of that night when he had tried to give blood for Kate would be forever imprinted in his memory. Their blood types were not compatible. Did he know where the real father was so he could be contacted? That question had ripped a hole in his heart and torn his life apart. Pride had kept his silence but nothing was the same after that. Certainly his ability to father had suffered. This he was well aware of as attested by the looks Kim gave him from time to time.

His reverie was interrupted by a soft knock on the den door. "Come in."

Sage entered then closed the door behind her. "I know you're trying to get some work done, Quinn. But I would like to have a word with you." She had fought a silent battle with herself all evening about becoming involved. Never one to shun a difficult task, she decided to say her piece and if he asked her to leave the ranch, then so be it.

He glanced over at the computer screen realizing for the first time that he had pulled up a spreadsheet but hadn't entered any new figures. Shaking his head he stood to walk around to the front of his desk. "I wasn't really into it yet. Have a seat," he said indicating a deep brown leather chair in front of the desk.

"I'll stand. Look, I'll just say what I have to say and you can throw me out after if you want. I know what Cody did this afternoon was wrong, but he had a reason for it, Quinn." She watched, as his face became a mask unwilling to show emotion. She'd seen it before, but she had also seen and felt the desire he felt for her. He wasn't as emotionless as he would like everyone to believe.

"Cody deliberately spilled that grape juice on Lydia. I will not condone such behavior," he said folding his arms over his broad chest.

"I understand that and I do agree. What I hope you will understand is *why* he did it and why Kate was so pleased about it."

"Sage, the twins have been getting into trouble for a long time now. It's not as though I let them get away with it. If I did, they would be twice as bad and get into worse trouble as they get older," he said in his defense. Why did he have the feeling he knew what she was going to say? And he didn't want to hear it!

"They just want some of your attention. Cody was upset because at the race you chose to talk to Lydia rather than watch him. Kate feels the same way, Quinn."

He knew exactly to what she was referring. Damned Lydia and her interference! For some unaccountable reason he didn't want Sage to think that badly of him. Why that mattered he would think about later. "I did not choose to talk to her, Sage. I was there to watch the kids, but she barged right in to talk to me."

"I saw that, Quinn, and so did Cody. But where I understood what happened, he's too young to know. All he knew was that you looked away when he waved at you. Then I go and ask her to eat with us. That wasn't one of my more brilliant moves," she said disparagingly. She began to pace behind the leather chair.

Quinn ran a hand through his hair in frustration. "You're right, Sagebrush. But I still can't let them get off without some punishment. Why did you invite her anyway?" he asked really curious about her reasons.

"She made me mad!"

"So you invite her to eat with us. That makes a lot of sense."

"Your friend Lydia must be the most patronizing person I've ever met. I didn't want to embarrass you or myself with what I really wanted to say. My mother taught us that if you stoop to the same tactics, you're no better than the other person. Besides, I thought you might want her to join us. You'd spent most of the morning with her." That came out sounding a bit possessive, but she let it go and didn't try to cover it up. That would have made it worse.

"Let's get one thing straight right now. Lydia is someone I went to school with many years ago. I admit that I thought I was in love with her before she moved to New York, but it died a quick death. To be honest, I don't really like the person she'd turned into over the years." He relaxed his stance leaning his hips against the front of the desk with his long legs braced against the floor.

His confession made her heart race. He wasn't in love with Lydia! He was so handsome with his dark brown hair and eyes, a square chin that she wanted to kiss and a body that Apollo would envy. She licked her lips in an unconscious gesture. "I get the impression that she's back in Chance because of you."

"I don't really care why she's here. She'll get bored soon enough and head back to the big city. She might have been born here, but she's a city girl now, through and through."

He said that with such disgust making Sage frown. "Is there something wrong with being from a city? I grew up in Chicago, but I love the country. I think the two can go together."

"Maybe, but I'm not so sure. It's a lot different living out here than in the big city. There are no fine restaurants or nightclubs and fancy dress shops. Hell you have to drive ninety miles to the nearest mall," he snorted.

"I hope you're not saying that all woman are cast from the same mold; that we all have to have easy access to vast malls with stores for our every selfish shopping need? I will not stand here and be classified in the same category as Lydia or others like her. I am a woman in my own right, with likes and dislikes all my own. Furthermore..."

Sage was making him dizzy as she paced back and forth. Those marvelous lips of hers were pinched as if the thoughts she was trying to impart were unpleasant. Without giving it any thought, he reached out to clasp her in his arms. Lowering his head he captured her mouth beneath his savoring the feel and taste, sighing with delight as her

soft body pressed all along the length of his. She wrapped her arms around his neck and he forgot everything except the woman in his arms.

His tongue traced her bottom lip seeking entrance as her lips parted to invite him in to explore the velvet recesses of her sweet mouth. His large hands stroked her delicate shoulders, her back before cupping the firm roundness of her buttock pressing her into his loins. He was already hard and aching. It still amazed him that one kiss, one touch from Sage could affect him so quickly, make him ache to pull her beneath him on the floor and make slow passionate love to her.

Sage was lost and she didn't care. This was where she wanted to be; where she was meant to be. A golden warmth spread all through her body as his large hands worked their special magic on her. How could she ever have thought this man cold and unfeeling? His skin felt hot to the touch. Or was it her skin that burned. Burned for his touch. "Quinn!" she gasped as his lips burned a hot path down the side of her throat.

With a muttered groan, he picked her up to carry her to the sofa where he laid her down before coming down almost fully on top of her. His mouth covered hers once more as his hand worked beneath the hem of her shirt to cup her breast. He kneaded gently before moving down to replace his hand with his lips. The feel of his wet mouth against the lace of her bra made her arch closer to his hard body. The feel of his hard arousal didn't frighten her in the least. She should have been because Quinn was a large man, but she only felt desire and an insatiable ache to have him inside her. Sage had never made love with a man before, but she wasn't naïve about it either. The piercing shafts of pleasure drove her to touch him, to explore the contoured muscles of his broad chest with the mat of dark hair trailing down beneath the waistband of his jeans.

Blood was stampeding throughout his body. Quinn was on fire as his hardening arousal became almost painful. If he didn't stop this now, there would be no turning back. It was crazy. Cheyenne could walk in at any time and fine them. Pulling her shirt back down he stilled her restless hands before resting his forehead against hers.

Sage looked up at him for a few seconds not understanding. She didn't want this to end. But then she, too, realized where they were and the consequences if her mother should find them. Not that her mother would pass judgment. But it would make things decidedly uncomfortable for everyone.

"We've got to stop meeting like this," Sage said lightly trying to ease the atmosphere. She felt Quinn's laughter because he was still draped across her body in the most delightful, magnificent way.

"You drive me crazy, Sagebrush!" he replied with a grin that twinkled in the depths of his languid dark eyes. "No other woman has ever made me lose control like you do with just a look or a touch. You must have some witches in your background somewhere."

"No witches that I know of, but there might be a druid or two on my father's side of the family. If it's any consolation, I've never allowed anything like this to happen before." Sure she had enjoyed dates and the company of men, but there had never been anyone who made her long for more than a goodnight kiss.

"No one?" Quinn asked a bit stunned. He found that he wanted to believe he could be her first lover. And also be her last?

She blushed. "It's just me, I guess. Most of the girls I know have slept with their boyfriends. One girl even boasts that she'll sleep with any man who appeals to her. Here

I was beginning to believe there was something wrong with me because I've never been attracted to a man in that way... or at least enough to want to..." her voice trailed off.

Quinn smiled as he heaved to a sitting position pulling Sage up with him. "With society as it is today, that's probably a good thing, Sagebrush." He wasn't sure why but it please him that he had been the man to make her lose control. Why this was so, he would think about later. He had the feeling that if he gave it too much thought, he would be in trouble, if he weren't already way in over his head.

Sage looked at him as she re-adjusted her clothing. She was frustrated that he had called a halt to his making love to her. But she understood his reasons and couldn't fault him for them. That did little to assuage the unfulfilled clamor of blood surging through her veins. If this was sexual frustration, it was decidedly uncomfortable.

Quinn was thinking much along the same lines as he made an attempt to get his body and breathing back under control.

"That's true," she acknowledged. "But for the first time in my life I understand frustration." She bit down on her lip as she realized what she had just admitted.

Quinn's grin broadened. "Now what would your mother think if she heard you talking like that?" Sage had actually blushed. For some reason that pleased him. He had the feeling that Sage may make others blush by her honesty and directness, but it was a rare occurrence for her.

"Actually my mother is a pretty modern woman. If she wasn't do you think she would have run away from home to begin a new life like she did?"

"She's pretty special," Quinn agreed. He was relieved by the change of subject. "But why do you say she ran away from home. She just came out here looking for work. Was she this adventurous when your father was alive?"

Sage laughed. "They were quite a pair from what I can remember. Dad died when I was nine so I don't have as many memories of him as my sisters do. What I do remember is happy and fun. Mother may be small but she ran the house while my dad happily followed orders. She told me later that they always made joint decisions on important issues. Sometimes she gave in and sometimes it was Dad. Do your parents live around here? The twins have never mentioned any grandparents." She watched as a deep sadness flashed in his eyes.

"Mom and dad were killed in a plane crash five years ago. They were coming home from a vacation in New York when the plane went down. I'll never forget seeing the news flash nor the feeling of dread when they had announced the flight number." Sharon had heard it first and called him to the television. She'd been pale and shaking when he'd rushed into the room. She had been never been close to his parents. They had accepted Sharon because she was his wife, but no bond had ever developed.

"Oh Quinn! I'm so sorry. That must have been devastating for you?" She reached out to take his hand in hers. It was so much larger than her hand was; his palms were calloused from years of hard work.

Quinn squeezed her hand. "Lyle drove me to the airport and stayed with me. Kate was sick and Sharon didn't want to leave her." He wouldn't go into how disappointed he was at the time. He'd needed Sharon and she hadn't been there for him during that trying ordeal.

Sage didn't know how to reply. Knowing Kim as she did, she wouldn't be surprised if she had offered to stay with the children so Sharon could go with Quinn. But

she didn't feel she had any right to comment on that issue. She would have been at Quinn's side during something as tragic as that especially with someone so reliable to stay with the children. "I don't know how I could ever cope with losing someone I loved like that," she said softly. Then she remembered that he had also lost his wife a couple of years later. No wonder he was so reluctant to show any emotion or let anyone get too close to him.

"Lyle and Kim were great. The most difficult time was after the funeral when I finally had time to really think about it. But time does help," Quinn replied looking at their hands entwined in her lap.

She noticed that he hadn't mentioned his wife. It might not be right but she had to say something. "You didn't mention your wife except to say she didn't go to the airport with you. You can tell me to mind my own business, but she must have been devastated too, Quinn."

He looked at her for several long seconds before standing up to pace a short distance away. "Sharon and my folks were never close. I'm not sure why either. Mom and Dad got along with everyone. Oh they liked Sharon okay, but I don't think they were ever as fond of her as they were of Kim and Lyle. Maybe it was because Sharon didn't invite confidences or go out of her way to include them with the kids."

"But they were Kate and Cody's grandparents. What about her parents?"

"Her parents live in New York. I only met them once right after the twins were born. We took a trip so they could see their grandchildren. It wasn't a fun trip. She'd told me that they both drank, but I wasn't prepared for how much. Her mother only held Kate once for a few minutes and her dad never did show any interest. I could see how much this upset Sharon, so after that I didn't press for any more contact and left it up to her. I guess she wrote home now and then, but they never visited us and we never made another trip up there. Even when Sharon died, they didn't come to the funeral. *It was too far and besides, Sharon wouldn't know anyway*, was their excuse." He hadn't really wanted them there, but it was hard to accept the fact that someone wouldn't come to their own daughter's funeral.

There wasn't anything Sage could say so she just sighed thinking of her own grandmother. "The only grandparent I had was my mother's mother, Kumi." Sage grinned. "She was wonderful, Quinn. Mother looks a lot like her and gets her love of the West from Grandma Kumi. She would tell us stories about horses, ranching and cowboys and made it sound as if she had actually been there. Mother took over when she died."

"Do you sisters share your enthusiasm for ranching and cowboys?" Quinn asked leaning on the front of his desk, his long muscular legs stretched out in front of him.

Sage shook her head. "Oh no! They are both into the social scene, which entails a lot of entertaining and large homes to impress their friends. Don't get me wrong, I love my sisters but I wouldn't want to live like them. I've been to some of their parties and the people are so fake it was all I could do not to laugh."

Now Quinn smiled. "I can't imagine you holding back."

Sage looked a bit sheepish. "I guess I did let loose once. This guy who thought he was the world's gift to women came on to me and was determined not to take no for an answer. He thought I should have been delighted that he had chosen me to go home

with him that night. It wasn't until I poured a glass of ice water in his lap that he got the message that I wasn't interested."

"I'm surprised you didn't use those lethal heels on his foot to make him see reason." Quinn said it in jest, but for some reason it unsettled him to think about a man coming on to Sage like that. It wouldn't happen while he was around or he'd pound the guy into the ground.

"Believe me, I gave it serious thought. The water was subtler and really did look like an accident. Only he and I knew it wasn't."

"Remind me to watch myself around you when you have something very cold or very hot in your hands."

"I don't think you have anything to worry about. When you're around all you have to do is touch me and..." Her voice trailed off as she realized what she had been about to say.

Quinn gave her a broad smile. "What was that? I didn't quite hear."

Sage gave him what she hoped was a scowl, but knew it wasn't working when his smile grew broader. She licked her lips. "Not to change the subject, but I would like to say something about the twins and their week incarceration."

"What they did was wrong, Sagebrush. I can't let it go unpunished," he said eyeing her warily not sure what she was leading up to.

"I realize that. But a whole week is a long time when you're eight years old. Two days is a long time too. And before you say anything else, I'm aware that they did it because of the way Lydia was talking to me. So, in a way, I feel responsible."

"I'm not blind. I was watching them while Lydia was making an ass of herself. As I recall you were the one who invited her to eat with us. Why did you do that?" he repeated.

"Well, she's a friend of yours and you had spent the better part of the morning with her. Since we were getting ready to eat, I thought it would be the polite thing to do. Didn't you want her to stay?" That was something that had never occurred to Sage. Lydia was a beautiful woman and Quinn had been in love with her at one time.

"Hell no, I didn't. I'd have asked her myself if that's what I'd wanted."

Sage blinked. Then she smiled. "Wish I'd known that. I'm glad you're not interested in her that way. She's not good enough for you anyway."

"Oh? Have any idea who is?" he asked with a sexy smile.

She wouldn't give him the answer he was searching for because his head was big enough already. "I don't think the woman has been born yet who could put up with such a pompous, over-bearing man. But I'll keep my eyes open anyway," she said sweetly.

"And here I thought you might be after the job to put your shoes under my bed. We both know it won't be long before it happens, Sagebrush. It's not a matter of *if*, only of *when*." He knew that as surely as he was standing here. He wanted her more than any other woman in his life. The more time he spent in her company, the more he wanted to be with her. And when he was working, she kept popping into his thoughts and wouldn't go away. At night he'd lie in bed and see her face as clearly as he did this minute with her in front of him. After Sharon died, he had held himself back from any involvement with another woman. He had been content to work the ranch and raise the twins. But now his world had been turned upside down by a petite beautiful bit of trouble called Sage.

“You think so, huh?” Now that was an intelligent reply! Trouble was, the darned man was right. To cover her confusion, she reverted back to the subject of the twins. “You still haven’t said whether you will lighten up on the twin’s punishment. We had hoped you would be available to go on a picnic with us one day this week,” she added by way of encouragement.

Quinn leaned down so they were eye to eye. “I’ll let you scoot around the issue now. But it will happen. You want me as much as I want you. What I would like to do is sneak into your bedroom at night, but I couldn’t do that to your mother.”

Sage gulped. She had experienced the same thought recently only it was *her* slipping into *his* bedroom. The idea was so outrageous she had laughed at herself. Sage Mendoza simply did not do things like that. Heaven help her, if he ever came to her room she wouldn’t have the strength to send him away. “About the twins,” she began.

Quinn sighed. “I see your point, Sagebrush. Today and tomorrow and then they’ll be off the hook. I’ll try to arrange my schedule so that we can all go on that picnic the next day. Will that meet with your approval?” He reached out to take her into his arms. He should keep his distance, but she was too much to resist.

Placing her small hands against his chest, she leaned into his strength and grinned. “That would be wonderful. I knew you weren’t as mean and grumpy as you would like people to believe. Now I’ll be able to show you how well I can ride.” She hesitated not sure she’d worded that quite right. “When we go on the picnic, I mean. On Peaches, the horse.”

She was blushing again and Quinn was delighted. His mouth covered hers to stop the flow of words. When her arms snaked up to curve around his neck, he pulled her close against his body, into the cradle of his loins. Nothing had ever felt so wonderful. His hands cupped her bottom pressing her closer, slowly sending him over the edge.

A slight cough from the other side of the room finally penetrated their private world sending them hurriedly stepping apart.

Cheyenne stood in the doorway, her expression inscrutable. “Quinn, Slim called and needs to see you in the corral. Sage, I could use your help in the kitchen,” she said turning to leave.

“I’ll be right there, Cheyenne.” Quinn could have sworn his cook was smiling as she’d left the room. Now it was his turn to blush.

Sage took pity on him as she looped her arm through his as they turned to leave the room. “My mother is very modern in her thinking. And I’m no child. I’m twenty-five and an adult.”

“Then I don’t have to find a food taster?” Quinn asked hopefully.

Sage laughter filled the hallway. “I think it’s safe to say you’re not in any danger. If I know mother, she’s probably pleased by what she witnessed. She thinks you’re the best thing since...since...sliced bread. Sorry but it was the best I could do on short notice. And not to deflate that considerable ego of yours, but she’s not aware of your faults.”

“Me? Faults? I’m everything your mother believes and more,” Quinn laughed. He seemed to smile a lot more lately...since Sage arrived.

Sage just rolled her eyes as they walked down the hallway. The thought of going back to Chicago was becoming more and more unappealing as the days went by. She had come here initially to persuade her mother that this was no place for her to live, but found

herself becoming attached not only to the place but to the people as well. Sage had fallen hard for this grumpy rancher and his children. Only time would tell what the outcome would be. Her only recourse was to take it one day at a time. Unfortunately, patience was not one of her strong points.

CHAPTER 11

Two days later, Quinn and Sage rode away from the ranch with Kate and Cody. He was impressed with the way Sage sat Peaches and told her so bringing a warm smile to her lips. The twins were excited about the picnic and had talked of nothing else since last night.

Two days ago he had talked to the twins about their behavior and why it wasn't appropriate. Cody admitted he didn't like Lydia and that he liked Sage. Kate readily agreed only too eager to discuss all of Sage's fine points which seemed to include the ability to braid hair, tell funny stories and not be afraid of bugs or worms. While those were all fine virtues to possess, his reasons for liking Sage he couldn't very well discuss

with the children. As for the worms, he would find out more about that today because they were going to be fishing on this trip. He had to see her bait her own hook to believe it. Sharon had never liked fishing or riding much, so he had been the one to introduce Cody and Kate to the outdoors. Now that he really thought about it, he hadn't taken them very often the last few years.

Cody and Kate had taken the lead as they left the ranch behind. They had been with Quinn before and assured him they knew the way. So far they were doing a good job of leading them to the small lake about an hours ride from the ranch house. Every so often they would lean close to talk. He didn't know if that was good or bad. They had been on their best behavior the past two days and had been up early this morning to get their chores finished before breakfast.

Quinn glanced over at Sage on Peaches. He shook his head and smiled. She still insisted on wearing those high-heeled boots. He wondered what it would take to get her into a pair of regular cowboy boots. Probably a crowbar and some fast-talking. Still he had to admit that she filled out those jeans in ways that made him hard just looking at her. The long-sleeved red silk shirt she wore might cover her completely but to his eyes, it accentuated her firm breasts making him remember how they felt in his hands. He squirmed in the saddle in an attempt to ease the hardness filling his own jeans.

Sage would never have believed that she could be so content out in the country like this, but she was. There was beauty everywhere she looked, from the trees to the sparse grass to the mountains in the distance. Even the boulders and myriad rock formation held a natural stark beauty all their own. "This is so wonderful, Quinn. I can't believe how quiet and peaceful it is out here," she told him as they rode side by side.

"It's not too barren or open for you?" he asked. For some reason her answer was important to him.

"No, not at all." She shook her head. "This is the way people should live instead of stuck in cities living beneath or on top of each other."

"There are no malls, or fancy restaurants or theaters, Sagebrush. No museums or plush parties with over-dressed people."

Her laughter rode the slight breeze. "Nature paints much prettier pictures than man ever could. Malls and restaurants are crowded and noisy. Except for my work, I've never been a big shopper anyway. I'm glad mother came out here. I never would have discovered this if she hadn't followed her dream," Sage said with conviction.

When they arrived at the lake a short time later, Sage sat in stunned silence. It was breathtaking. The mountains in the distance were reflected in the still water of the small lake, as was the large stand of trees off to the right. Green grass grew around the edge of the lake while a colorful field of wildflowers dotted the open land at the other end. It was something out of a painting. Then she remembered where she'd seen it before. "It's the painting in the great room!" she said turning to Quinn who sat watching the expressions dance across her face. "Whoever the artist is, they did a fantastic job. I would have known this place anywhere."

"Daddy painted it," Kate told her proudly.

"Yeah, he paints and draws real good," Cody confirmed with a look of pride at his father.

Sage looked at Quinn in open-mouthed surprise. "Quinn O'Shea, why didn't you tell me? Does my mother know?"

Quinn looked a little sheepish. He enjoyed painting but hadn't had much time for it lately. And he did it for the pure pleasure it gave him. Another person's opinion had never come into it. Until now. "I did it a few years ago. And no, Cheyenne doesn't know. At least I've never told her." Whether he wanted to accept it or not, Sage's praise meant a lot to him.

"You're very talented, cowboy. I'm not an expert. but I know something good when I see it. Do you have other painting around the house?"

"There are some. But we're here to fish and have lunch. If we don't fish, we don't get to eat," he said changing the subject. "Now let's get unloaded and catch something to eat. Kate, you find a place where we can lay out our blankets. Cody, you find some firewood so we'll have it when we're ready to cook our catch."

Sage dismounted, smiling as the twins all but jumped off their ponies to get to work. "What are my orders?" she asked smartly once her feet were on the ground. But then her legs almost gave way beneath her. Quinn had his back to her giving her a splendid view of his backside. *No man should look that good*, she thought in appreciation, admiring his long muscular build and broad shoulders that looked wide enough to carry any burden. His faded jeans lovingly hugged his thick legs as he moved with panther-like grace. She was staring at him and couldn't seem to stop. He was beautiful. Then he turned to face her.

"Something wrong?" he asked puzzled by her expression.

She shook her head. "Nice buns!" She hadn't meant to say anything, but the words were out of her mouth before her mind could audit them.

His grin was pure sexual invitation as he sauntered over to stand in front of her. "Yours are pretty earth-shattering too, Sagebrush. We do have children with us, so you will have to control yourself." He lifted her chin to gently kiss her open lips. It wasn't enough; it never was. He pulled her close to deepen the kiss when he was brought back to sanity by giggles from the children. Kate and Cody stood a few feet away with their hands over their mouths.

Sage turned then looked up at Quinn who grinned down at her. "I think we had better get fishing." She felt a shaft of disappointment as she pulled out of his arms. It felt so right to be held by him; to be pressed so close to him.

"Do you like kissing our daddy?" Kate asked innocently. The memories of her mother were becoming dim with time, but she knew that people who liked each other kissed. Kevin had told them about his parents who kissed all the time. If Sage liked their daddy a whole lot, maybe she would stay with them.

"Yes, I do," Sage told her honestly. "Look, are we going to fish or not? Whoever catches the least or the smallest has to do the cooking. Okay?" They had better keep her busy doing something or she might end up making a fool of herself with Quinn...again.

Several hours later, it was Quinn who did the cooking. Cody and Kate each caught a nice trout while Sage caught two big ones. Quinn managed several catches but they weren't big enough to keep. But it didn't bother him. He truly enjoyed himself watching Sage and the twins. He'd taught the children how to fish when they were only four years old so by now they were experts. To his surprise, Sage really knew how to handle a rod and reel. And she baited her own hook without batting an eye. She had offered to help clean up after they'd eaten, but he told her to relax so she and Kate had gone to pick some wild flowers.

He and Cody had everything picked up and packed away except the blanket when they returned each carrying a bunch of flowers. “Sage is going to show me how to make a crown out of the flowers,” Kate said happily as she dropped down on the blanket.

Quinn sprawled out on the edge with his hands behind his head. He was relaxed and happy this very moment. It was pure contentment just to lie there watching as Sage patiently showed Kate how to wind the flower stems together and then weave in more as the crown grew. She was a beautiful woman with long black hair that he wanted to see hanging loose instead of in a braid. What would it be like to have it cover him in bed? To feel its silky softness against his bare chest? As if reading his mind, she looked up to smile at him. Her green eyes were striking. When you first met her you would expect them to be dark brown, but they were like precious emeralds that could either hold laughter or shoot sparks of anger. He smiled remembering that he’d been on the receiving end of both. The thought that he could easily spend a lifetime studying her gave him a jolt. He must be getting soft in his old age.

Glancing down he realized that Cody was lying next to him mimicking his position. His smile was automatic as he looked at the little boy. Cody’s smile tore at his heart for an instant before Quinn tamped down on that memory. He would not let anything spoil the first perfect day he’d had in a long time.

When he looked back at Sage, she was placing the crown of flowers on Kate’s head. The little girl’s smile was so wide he thought her face might crack.

“Daddy, look at what me and Sage made!” Kate laughed putting her hands to her head.

“You look like a princess,” he told her honestly and was rewarded with a bright smile. She was really a pretty little girl and would grow into a beautiful woman. He thought of the years ahead realizing that he would have to contend with her boyfriends or potential boyfriends. In spite of himself, a heady protective urge overcame him. He knew that any boy who came courting Kate would have to pass his inspection and approval first. This thought surprised him.

By the time the second pink, yellow and blue crown was completed, Cody was almost asleep next to Quinn.

Kate adjusted the crown on Sage’s head grinning with infinite pleasure at her handiwork. “Doesn’t she look pretty, Daddy?” she asked innocently.

“She looks like a queen,” he said softly admiring the way the wreath of colored flowers circled her head, sitting low on her forehead. She did indeed look as beautiful as any queen in history or fiction. “All she needs is a long flowing regal robe and a throne.”

Sage laughed. “A queen also needs loyal subjects.”

Without giving his words any thought, Quinn automatically replied. “I think you have some right here.”

Kate who was working on another crown to take to Cheyenne wasn’t paying any attention to the adults.

Sage wasn’t sure how to reply to Quinn’s statement but she wasn’t shy. “Do you consider yourself in that small group?” She had never been one to hold back if she had something to say, but this was inviting rejection. Her heart began to thud as he hesitated to answer.

Quinn finally decided to be honest, but tinged with humor to hopefully take some of the seriousness out of the atmosphere. “You can be a pain in the butt, still I have to

admit you're growing on me, Sagebrush. I don't think any woman has been able to rile me or drive me to distraction all within the breath of a few minutes. I never know whether to throw you over my knee or kiss you senseless." Right now he would dearly love to do the latter but, unfortunately or fortunately, the presence of the twins curtailed any actions along that line.

Sage smiled. She couldn't help herself. Never having thought of herself as someone who could stir a man's passions, Quinn's words were like the scent of honeysuckle on a clear summer evening. She hadn't expected him to be so direct, so honest. The least she could do was return the courtesy.

"We can make you a crown so you'll look like a king. Or maybe you're more the gallant knight on his mighty steed who rescues the maiden." Sage cocked her head to one side to study him more thoroughly. "Definitely the handsome knight. You could leave your chain mail under my bed anytime." Her eyes danced with merriment as she gave him a bright smile.

"What's a gallant night?" Kate asked as she continued weaving the other crown, her face scrunched up in concentration. Sometimes adults talked so funny. Night was when the sun went down.

"Long, long ago there were soldiers who fought for a king or other nobles in the land and they were called knights. They were the biggest and bravest men in the land. And handsome like your daddy," Sage told her remembering some of the stories she'd read over the years; stories of medieval times with handsome heroes and beautiful headstrong women.

Kate looked at her daddy as if seeing him through new eyes. "Were they big and tall like my daddy?"

"Oh yes! And they rode huge horses called destriers."

"Thor is a big horse, isn't he Daddy?"

Before he could answer, another question filled the air. "What's chain mail?" Cody asked sitting up rubbing his face.

Quinn laughed as he ruffled Cody's hair. "You're the expert on medieval times," he chuckled looking at Sage, delighting in the slight pink tinge to her face.

She rolled her eyes hoping that little ears hadn't picked up on what she'd said, but that was too good to be true. "It was like long underwear. It was made of small chain links. The knights wore it to protect them in battle."

"But why would daddy leave it under your bed?" Cody persisted. That didn't make any sense to him. Daddy's clothes were in his room.

"Because it needs to be kept out of direct sunlight and the dust that gathers under beds protected it from rusting," Sage said gathering up some of the flowers to help Kate finish the last crown.

"But why would daddy put it under your bed? His bed is really big," Cody persisted. Chain mail sounded like neat stuff. And warriors on big horses sounded even more interesting.

"Yes, Queen Sage, why would I do that when I have my own very big bed?" Quinn asked with a wicked grin. She started this and he was more than willing to keep it going if for no other reason than to see her struggle to come up with answers.

"Well...well you see...your father is so big that the mattress could sag and damage the chain mail. I, on the other hand, am so light that the mattress never moves."

“Oh,” Cody said trying to understand the reasoning in that reply.

“Come on, Daddy. Here’s your crown,” Kate said pulling on his arm. He let her put it on, and then he got to his feet in one lithe movement.

“Thank you, princess,” he said with a courtly bow to the little girl.

Stepping off the blanket he reached down to pull Sage up beside him to whisper for her ears alone. “That was a quick save, Sagebrush. For the record, if I were in your bed, I bet the mattress would move. We’ll have to continue this conversation later.” He gave her a saucy wink.

She looked up at him, her lips pursed in frustration. She couldn’t think of one suitable reply. Hell, all coherent thought had suddenly fled. His wicked wonderful smile made breathing a difficult task. Forget thinking!

“I don’t believe that I’ve finally had the last word,” Quinn chuckled. Then giving her another sexy wink and a quick kiss on her parted lips, he bent to pick up the blanket. “Okay everyone, let’s saddle up and head home.”

As they rode back toward the ranch, Sage had a difficult time keeping her mind on the ride. She was beside but just a little behind Quinn. The magnificent sight of his broad back and shoulders filled her vision, as did his long legs encased in tight well-worn jeans. Her treacherous mind kept conjuring up pictures of a naked Quinn in her bed. And the mattress did move! She shifted uncomfortably in the saddle, but it did little to relieve the tension in her body. This was not mental tension either, but of a nature she had never before imagined.

Halfway home, Cody pointed out that someone was headed in their direction. Quinn immediately recognized Slim with the horse and wagon. Apparently Cheyenne was getting her buggy ride, or as close as they could do today.

After getting permission from their father, Kate and Cody rode ahead to meet the wagon. When Sage rode up a minute later it was to find her mother wearing a Stetson hat and the biggest smile she’d ever seen on her face.

“Isn’t this wonderful, Sage? All of this open space with no cars or city noise. It’s more beautiful than I’d thought it would be.”

“Miss Cheyenne wanted to try out the wagon, so we thought we’d see how your picnic went,” Slim informed Quinn. “Fishing any good?”

“Not too bad,” Quinn said with a look at Sage.

“Ask him who caught the biggest and the most,” she told Slim cheekily. This wasn’t something she would soon let him forget.

Quinn gave her a mock frown that caused the twins to break out in giggles.

“That’s how it went, huh?” Slim chuckled. “Let me turn this wagon around and we’ll ride back with you. Guess we’re not having fish for dinner.”

“Now Slim, you know very well that I’ve got two stuffed turkeys in the oven. That’s why we can’t be gone too long,” Cheyenne said looking at her daughter. Whatever she saw in her eyes pleased her because she smiled. Looking over at Quinn she gave him a mischievous smile. “Wagon’s ho!” she said raising her arm.

Quinn shook his head in wonder chuckling to himself as he followed his small band back to the ranch.

But his good mood didn’t last beyond his shower later that afternoon. He’d no sooner gotten dressed and was looking forward to dinner this evening when Lydia called. She had been after him since she’d come back to Chance. He had taken advantage of her

trip back home to talk to her about buying that piece of land near the school. She'd inherited it from her paternal grandmother some years ago.

The property didn't even border his land, but Quinn wanted it so he could be sure Lydia and her friends didn't decide to put up apartments or strip malls. It galled him to think of the time he'd had to spend with her because of the deal, but it couldn't be helped even though he knew she was making excuses to get him to come to town. This would be the third trip this week and it was really becoming bothersome. If so much didn't depend on it, he would have told her he couldn't make it. But they were ready to sign the papers in the morning and he didn't want to do anything to upset the apple cart. Lydia had to realize he didn't have any interest in her beyond the land, or at least, he assumed she did. But then he wasn't an expert on women. Not even close. So he wasn't in the best mood as he descended the stairs to leave for town.

A laughing Cody came hurling down the hallway almost careening into him. Quinn caught him before they collided giving him a little shake. "Haven't I told you about running in the house?" he growled.

Cody's smile and laughter faded. "I was coming to tell you dinner is ready," he said in a small voice.

"Tell Cheyenne that I'll be eating in town tonight," Quinn said turning for the door.

"But Daddy, you haven't eaten with us at all this week!" Cody whined.

"That's enough, Cody. Just go have your dinner and don't forget to tell Cheyenne."

"But..."

"Unless you want to go to bed without dinner, I suggest you turn around and do as you're told," Quinn growled. Immediately he regretted his tone, but it was too late as Cody's small form disappeared down the hall.

At the same time Kate stepped out of the family room. No smile. No happy face. Just an accusing stare before she turned to run after her brother.

All the way into town, Quinn felt like hell. This afternoon had been wonderful; it had been the most relaxing time he'd had in a long time. He had actually enjoyed being with the twins and with Sage. He managed a smile as he recalled their bantering. Maybe he could make it up to Cody and Kate once this deal was signed? But...right now all he had to look forward to was a trying evening with Lydia.

Sage tried not to show her disappointment. This was the third night that Quinn had not eaten with the family. If he had been working, it wouldn't have been so bad. It was the wondering who he was with that bothered her. At least tonight Sage knew he was with Lydia because she was the one who had answered the phone. And soon after Quinn hurried off to town. It just didn't make sense. At the town picnic he had not been pleased with her company, so why would he rush off to see her now?

Her mind raced with all kinds of scenarios. She pictured them having an intimate candlelight dinner or dancing so close that there wasn't a breath of air between them. The worse one she refused to dwell on...Quinn and Lydia in bed. He had been in love with her at one time. Maybe they had even been lovers, so it was no stretch of the imagination to envision them returning to a quiet place to renew old feelings.

She noted that the twins were unusually quiet during dinner. Gone was the happiness of earlier this afternoon. After helping her mother clean up the kitchen she went to talk to them only to find them whispering in front of the television. As soon as she entered the room, they went back to watching the movie in the VCR, but she could tell they weren't really concentrating on it. "If you're not enjoying your movie, we could talk," she offered watching for their reactions.

Kate looked as if she wanted to say something, but after looking at Cody she just shook her head.

Sage sat down on the floor next to them. Thinking she knew what was bothering them, she was determined to talk about it. "Are you upset because your father wasn't at dinner tonight?"

Kate and Cody shared a look, and then nodded their heads.

Cody looked at the doorway and then at Sage. "He likes her more than us."

"He likes everyone more than us," Kate agreed sadly. "But he was fun this afternoon. I wish he could be like that all the time."

The wistfulness in her voice and the sadness of her expression tore at Sage's heart. She knew Quinn cared for the children. But there was something...

"I wish Mommy was here," Cody sighed.

"I know you do," Sage replied putting her arm around the little boy. "Do you remember her?" Now that she thought about it again, she hadn't seen any pictures around the house. That was unusual and she'd meant to talk to Quinn about it...again.

"A little," he said looking up at her with dark sad eyes. "When I was sick she would rock me in the chair."

"And she smelled like flowers," Kate said scooting over next to Sage who wrapped an arm around her also. "But I don't remember what she looked like anymore. I think she had short brown hair."

Sage wanted to cry. How could a man deprive his children of memories of their mother? He should be talking about her; telling them stories about her. There should be family photographs setting around to keep her alive in their minds. It wasn't fair to let Sharon fade into oblivion as if she'd never existed. The more she thought about it, the madder she became. She didn't know what to say which was a good thing because she might have ranted about what a cad their father was, and they didn't need to hear that from her.

"She used to read to us," Cody said almost reverently. "Would you read us a story?"

Sage gave them both a hug. "You bet I will. I might not do it as well as your mother used to do, but I'll give it a try. Come on, let's pick out a book." She scrambled to her feet to follow the children to the bookcase on the far side of the fireplace. The bottom three shelves were lined with children's books. They each picked one to hand to Sage. "Two stories? Well, I guess that's right since there are two of you."

Sitting cross-legged on the sofa with a twin on either side of her, Sage began to read. She improvised and gave each character a voice of their own as she read enlisting giggles from her audience. Before the evening was over she had read not two books, but six in all and two had two stories in one.

When Cheyenne came to announce bedtime, Sage was becoming hoarse from all the reading. After seeing them into bed she went to her own room and changed into a

short ivory silk nightgown. Sitting in the center of the bed she unbraided her hair and began brushing. The more she brushed the angrier she became. Where was Quinn? He should have been the one reading to Kate and Cody, not her. Not that she minded doing it; it had been fun. That wasn't the point. They were his children and he should be the one spending his evenings with them.

When her long black hair gleamed like ebony, she got up to pace around the room. She knew there would be no sleep for her until Quinn came home, even if it were not until very late. That thought didn't do much to help her rising anger...and jealousy. She didn't have any claim on Quinn O'Shea. But she knew that he wanted her as much as she wanted him. So why was he off with Lydia? Picking up a novel she'd begun last night, she curled up in a chair to read in an effort to take her mind of Quinn and what he was doing.

It was just before eleven when she heard him come up the stairs. If she hadn't known better, she would have sworn he had stopped by her bedroom door before going to his own room. *It must just be an over active imagination or wishful thinking*, she muttered aloud. With a sigh of frustration she slipped off her robe and slid into bed. Now that he was home, she should be able to get to sleep. Fifteen minutes later she was still wide-awake staring at the ceiling as the tree shadows did an eerie dance in the silence. Her mind kept going back to the twins, to their fading memories of their mother, and Quinn's obvious indifference to their needs in this area.

Finally she couldn't stand it another minute. She wouldn't sleep until she talked to Quinn. Unmindful of the lateness of the hour or her state of undress, she bounded out of bed, slung open her bedroom door and marched across the hall to Quinn's room. She was so mad she wanted to pound on the door, but restrained herself enough to knock lightly. She heard a muffled oath, some grumbling before the door was opened. "We need to talk," she announced stepping around him into the room.

CHAPTER 12

It wasn't until she turned around to face him that she realized maybe this hadn't been such a good idea. Quinn had obviously undressed, then slipped his jeans back on to answer her knock. He was shoeless and shirtless and took her breath away. His broad chest and arms were sculptured muscle tapering down to a narrow waist and those long thick legs. The mat of dark hair on his chest thinned down to a line that disappeared beneath the open waist of his jeans. She gulped. *Think Sage. Why are you here?* Her mind tried to get her back on track.

Quinn did his own bit of staring. Sage dressed was a delight to the eye, but dressed only in that silky scrap of material she was breathtakingly beautiful. Without her usual ankle-breaker shoes she was shorter too. Her lush black hair hung almost to her waist making him ache with the desire to run his hands through it. When she didn't say anything, he grinned. "Did you come to return my chain mail?"

His easy banter snapped her back to where she was and why she had come. "No, I have not," she bit out. "I came to discuss Kate and Cody."

Quinn had just spent a rotten evening with Lydia and was in no mood for more unpleasant discussions. They would sign the final papers in the morning and he wouldn't rest until that property was in his possession. "There is nothing to discuss, Sage."

"Oh, you think not? Well, unlike you who do not spend much time with them, I do and something they said tonight raised some questions," she stormed at him pacing about the room like an enraged mother.

"It's late and I'm not in the mood to argue with you," he said sprawling in the chair by the bed. "We can talk about it tomorrow."

“I won’t be able to sleep until I speak my piece, Quinn O’Shea.” Not waiting for him to reply she continued. “Do you know that they find it difficult to remember much about their mother? She was a part of their lives for five years and they should have pictures of her around the house. But you don’t have any family pictures anywhere, Quinn. They need to see her so they can remember.”

“I don’t need you to tell me how to raise my children, Sage! There were pictures in the old house, but when I built this house they just didn’t get put up. I’m not exactly into interior decorating. I’m a rancher and my place is outside.” He was angry now. She had hit too close to home. Sure, what he had just said was true and he knew exactly where all the pictures were stored. He just hadn’t had the heart to put them back up. In all honesty, he hadn’t given much thought to how that would effect Kate and Cody. Maybe he had been wrong.

“Hey, I’m a decorator,” Sage said stepping forward to stand in front of him. “Just point me to the family heirlooms and I’ll do what I can.” She read the indecision in his eyes as her anger dissipated. “I just want to help, Quinn. And I do realize I might be interfering where I shouldn’t. But the twins have come to mean a great deal to me.”

Quinn wearily rubbed his face with his hands before standing up which brought him close to Sage who barely reached his shoulder. She really was a miniature beauty. “I’ll show you where they are in the morning,” he said on a sigh.

“Thank you,” Sage said placing her small hand in the middle of his chest.

Quinn looked down at her hand, so soft and pale against his darkly tanned chest. Her touch was gentle, but he felt it all throughout his body, and in one area in particular. His eyes darkened as blood began to stampede through his veins. His body was suddenly alive, hot and aching in need. One arm snaked around her shoulders pulling her into the heat of his body. Slowly he lowered his head as his mouth captured hers, caressing, tasting, savoring the feel of her soft lips against his. When her arms wound around his neck, he pressed her closer cupping her firm rounded buttock in his large hands. He felt heat wherever their bodies touched, wherever her breath touched him. He wanted, longed to lose himself in her soft warm body.

Sage was lost to the taste and feel of this man as she thrilled to the feel of his skin against her, soft against his rougher tanned skin. Shivers of anticipation shook her body, as she pressed closer, opening her lips to his questing tongue. “Quinn!” she groaned as his mouth covered hers again and again demanding more and more. Still she wasn’t satisfied as primitive desire took control. Sage was more than ready when he scooped her up into his arms and carried her to his bed.

Instead of laying her down, he let her slide down his body. He cupped her face gently in his large hand. “Tell me to stop now, Sage. In another minute, I won’t be able to,” he groaned against her lips.

“You talk too much, Grumpy,” she whispered reaching for the waistband of his jeans.

His hands covered hers. “Let me, Sagebrush. If you touch me, I’ll go to pieces and I want to make this special for you.” In seconds he had removed the jeans to stand spectacularly naked in front of her. He felt himself harden even more under her open gaze. Reaching down he lifted the hem of her short nightgown to pull it over her head.

For the first time in her life, Sage stood totally naked before a man, but she didn’t feel any embarrassment; just a sense of power and wonder at the dark promise in Quinn’s

eyes. For such a large man, he was gentle as he picked her up and placed her in the center of his bed before coming down beside her.

“Are you sure...?” was as far as he got before she placed her fingers over his lips.

“Does this feel like uncertainty?” she asked running a bare foot up the side of his leg. Seeing a faint scar on his shoulder she leaned over pressing her lips to the lighter tissue. She was rewarded by a swift intake of breath, his sexy grin and the look of wonder in his hooded eyes.

All thought of talk vanished as Quinn’s mouth closed over hers, his breathing harsh and uneven. His tongue probed the deliciously sweet softness of her mouth as his hands began an exploration of her slender neck and shoulders. His lips soon followed a sensual path as he gently nipped at her throat and then lower to worship the tender curve of her breasts. The feel of his calloused hands on her body as they slowly moved, teased and aroused drove her to arch closer to him, encouraging him to explore further.

His soft kisses on her stomach and the underside of her breasts drove her wild, but when his mouth closed over the hard nub her nipple had become, she almost soared off the bed. The spiraling coil of pleasure merged in the core of her being as he sucked on her breasts, his eyes closed in heady enjoyment. If that wasn’t enough, his hand moved to cup her soft curls working magic never before imagined. Quinn swallowed Sage’s cry of pleasure, as his lips possessed hers once again as he moved to cover her body with his.

Quinn was on fire. Sage felt like silk under his hands, soft and delectable and combined with her light floral scent that was hers alone, he was quickly reaching the point of no return. His body cried out to discover her warm depths; he longed to be encased inside her beautiful body. With gentle pressure he spread her legs, his hand cupping the nest of soft curls. He felt her dampness and knew she was ready for him.

Sage clutched at his shoulders to pull him more fully against her.

Slowly he penetrated her womanhood, striving to give her time to adjust to him. Lowering his mouth, he took a nipple and began to suck hungrily. When she arched against him in heady approval, he drove forward, past the barrier deep inside where no man had ever been. She was tight, wrapping him in a cocoon of silken warmth.

Sage gasped at the brief stab of pain, but then it was gone leaving her wondering if she had felt it at all. Other sensations, wondrous sensations took over her body. Quinn’s weight was a special pleasure holding her captive beneath him; it was too magical, too pleasurable to put into words even if she could have uttered coherent sound. Even the pressure of him filling her became a torturous pleasure as he moved slowly at first, then harder and harder. She wanted, needed this as she felt her body go rigid as the coil within shattered sending a cascade of splintering pleasure surging through her limbs, throughout her body. Seconds later she heard Quinn’s triumphant cry as he gave one final thrust before collapsing on top of her. Sage didn’t want to move for fear of ending this pleasure, this unique closeness consuming them. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders holding him, lovingly running her hands over his back.

Quinn finally rose up on his elbows taking some of his weight off of Sage. For an unexpected happening, on a scale of ten this would easily rate a fifteen. He stared down at Sage seeing his own sense of wonder and satisfaction reflected in her gorgeous green eyes. “Are you okay?” he asked reaching over to brush a long strand of hair from her cheek.

She sighed at his touch and tender concern. “Would you believe I’ve never felt better in my life? Is it always like this?” she asked in wonderment.

Quinn chuckled, pleased that he’d given her pleasure. Then he turned serious. “I can only speak for myself, Sagebrush. It depends on whom you’re with. I have never felt so satisfied in my life as I do right this minute. It’s almost as if you were made just for me.” The physical side of his marriage to Sharon had been pleasant, but not earth shattering as it had been just now with Sage. He didn’t know how or when she’d done it, but Sage had managed to get by the barriers he’d set up around his heart. Maybe it had happened the first time he’d seen her walking down the drive in those ridiculous shoes.

Sage smiled as she cupped his face in her hands. “You make me feel special,” she said softly luxuriating in the freedom to touch him as she’d only thought of doing before. She delighted in the differences in their bodies; hers was soft where his was hard and muscular.

Quinn pressed kisses to each eye, her nose and then her lips. “I love you,” he whispered almost reverently and was rewarded by her brilliant smile. He never thought he would be saying those words to any woman again. But he was an honest man and could not deny Sage what he felt. He might have some reservations about her living on the ranch, but right now, he didn’t think there were any obstacles they couldn’t overcome.

“I love you too, even if you are grumpy some of the time,” Sage grinned up at him.

“Then how come you went out to dinner with Brad?” he asked with a groan of possessiveness.

“That was right after I had arrived and you weren’t exactly glad to see me. Besides, Brad knows that we can be nothing but friends. No chemistry. Where with you, well, there is the chemistry and much more, cowboy.”

“We have a lot to talk about, you realize that? There are the children and…”

Sage put a finger against his lips. “I adore the twins, Quinn. They are not an obstacle, but are a bonus as far as I’m concerned. I have a job, not a glorious career so that’s no problem either.”

“The ranch is my home. I know Cheyenne loves it here. How do you think you could adjust to living out here all year long? We don’t have any malls nearby,” Quinn said closely watching her reaction.

“I don’t like malls. Too crowded.”

“No fancy restaurants.”

“I prefer simple cooking and home cooked meals.”

“We get snowed in sometimes.”

“Good. Then we can spend more time in bed,” she replied with a saucy smile. “You might as well stop trying to give me all the reasons why I won’t like it here because it won’t work. I might have spent my life in Chicago, but I’m young and adaptable. But I do draw the line at butchering anything. I honestly don’t think I could do that.”

Quinn laughed. “I hate to tell you, but even when there’s snow on the ground, we still have to go out and work. But we could work on early bedtimes.” He ground his body against hers to remind her that they were still joined. This had never happened to him before, this need so soon.

Sage opened her eyes wide as she felt him inside her. “Maybe we can save the talking for the daylight hours,” she gasped drawing his mouth down to hers. “This time is ours.”

“I like the way you think, Sagebrush,” Quinn proclaimed before his mouth claimed her lips and his body began to work its magic once again.

Quinn was a little disappointed when he woke the next morning to find his bed empty, but he understood why Sage had returned to her own room. It would be difficult to explain to the twins why she was in his bed. Then he thought of Cheyenne. Would she be able to tell that he and her daughter were now lovers? He shrugged. Maybe they should talk to Sage’s mother this morning about their relationship? He wanted to make Sage Mendoza his wife and would like to have Cheyenne’s approval. They would talk to her together as soon as an opportunity presented itself today. Quinn wasn’t sure when the idea of marriage became an issue with him. All he knew was that it felt right. That he wasn’t shying away from the idea said quite a bit about his feelings for Sage. He knew he hadn’t even said anything to her about marriage and hoped he wasn’t jumping the gun. Somehow he didn’t think Sage would have made love if she didn’t have strong feelings for him. He could think of marriage, but that word love was still difficult, even though he’d finally used it.

As soon as his morning chores were done he returned to the house for breakfast. Sage and the twins had just entered the kitchen. He looked her over to see if he could tell any difference, but couldn’t see any outward signs of their lovemaking. Quinn wasn’t aware of it, but the wide smiles he and Sage exchanged spoke volumes.

If Cheyenne noticed anything, she didn’t give voice to her suspicions. A small smile played around the edged of her mouth as she put the last of the breakfast dishes on the table.

After seeing Sage seated, Quinn turned to Cheyenne. “I have to go into town this morning. If you need anything, I can pick it up,” he offered. Now more than ever, he was anxious to get this land deal settled so he could concentrate on Sage and their future.

“I do have a list,” Cheyenne replied looking at her daughter.

Quinn quickly picked up on her hint. “Sagebrush, why don’t you come with me? You can do the shopping while I take care of business.” And it would give them time alone. Damn, but he wanted her again. Just looking at her in those jeans and plain red shirt made him hard and aching. What would he be like seeing her in fancy dress? That didn’t bear thinking about right now he concluded with a silent groan.

“Great, there are a couple of things that I want to pick up too.”

“Can we come?” Kate asked hopefully.

“Not this time,” Quinn said giving her a wink to soften the blow. A quick look at Sage warned her not to offer to look after them while he was busy. He wanted her alone so they could talk. “Besides, those chicks are about to hatch and Parker might need some help.” Where baby animals were concerned, the twins could be counted on to be right there to see the new born babies.

So it was decided that the twins would monitor the baby chick’s development while Quinn and Sage went into town. They left right after breakfast. Quinn didn’t wait for Sage to climb up into his truck. He scooped her up into his arms to place her on the seat.

“I could have gotten in myself,” she gasped.

“I know. But this way I got to hold you in my arms,” he told her grinning as he closed her door before his long strides carried him around the front of the truck to the drivers side.

“Oh!” Sage was grinning herself as she did up the seatbelt. Maybe there were advantages to this big truck after all.

Once they were on the road, Quinn glanced over at her. “Do you think your mother suspects anything?”

“Probably. She gave me one of her special looks. It’s the one that tells me she knows what I’ve been up to and is waiting for me to confess. I’m not quite ready for that yet,” Sage sighed.

“I missed you when I woke up this morning,” Quinn told her truthfully.

“I thought it was best that I return to my own room. You know, I really hadn’t gone to your room to seduce you? I was mad and wanted to throttle you,” she said candidly.

“As I recall you were upset about the twins.”

“Yes, well...I think that was only part of it. You were with Lydia last night, weren’t you?” It hurt like hell to ask that question, but she had to know where the other woman fit into his life.

“As a matter of fact, I was with her. It was a business meeting, or at least it was supposed to be. I’m buying a large parcel of land from her and we’ve been working on the deal,” Quinn said glancing over at her.

“Is that your business in town this morning?”

“That’s right. We sign the papers this morning. Then Lydia can go back to New York or wherever she wants to live.”

Sage broke out with a wide smile. “Good. I don’t particularly care for that woman.”

Quinn laughed. “You’re not alone there, Sagebrush. Not many people in Chance can stand to spend much time around her.”

“Is this parcel of land adjacent to your property?” Sage wanted to know. She had no idea how large the Circle Q ranch was, but from what her mother had related, it was very large.

“No. It’s across from the school. As I said, it’s a sizable piece of property and just right for hotels or a small mall.”

“Quinn O’Shea, you’re not going to build something like that are you?” Sage demanded outraged at the thought.

“Hold on to that temper, Sagebrush. I’m buying the land to be sure nothing like that can happen. If anything, I’ve got ideas for a large park with an indoor swimming pool and basketball courts. It’s an idea I’ve had for some time now, but I haven’t put anything down on paper. The east side of the property is close to the school and the football and baseball field. Maybe we can make it a real family area.”

“That sounds wonderful.” There was much more to this man than she had realized. She wondered if other people knew how special he was; how thoughtful and caring.

“Enough about me. Tell me about the rest of your family. Cheyenne hasn’t said much about her other daughters. Do they get along okay?” Quinn asked.

“Dallas and Helene are a lot older than me. They’re both married with children, big homes and into a very busy social life. It’s not that they don’t care about us. They’re just so wrapped up with their own families so we don’t see them very much,” Sage told him honestly.

“Does that upset your mother?”

“I think it did for a while, but now she sees that they are happy. We have a great time when we do get together. I guess I’m closer to mother because I was only nine when dad died. Helene was already married and Dallas got married a couple of months later. So it was just mother and I in the apartment.” Her sisters had made more trips to see their mother back then, before they moved up the social ladder. It wasn’t that Sage envied them their social status, just that she couldn’t understand how they could go so long without seeing or talking to mother.

“I guess I can understand how upset you must have been to find out she’d moved way out here. If it had been one of my parents, I would have reacted the same,” Quinn admitted.

“That’s very understanding considering how you reacted the first time we met,” she laughed.

Quinn smiled. “You can block my road anytime, Sagebrush.”

By the time they reached town, they had covered a great many subjects from movies and books to politics and the environment. It pleased and surprised them to realize how much they had in common on many issues. Quinn parked the truck in front of the café where they were going to meet later. He left the vehicle unlocked so Sage could put her purchases inside instead of having to carry them all over town. She headed for the general store while Quinn strode across the street to the lawyers office.

Miles Brady stood offering his hand when Quinn entered his office. “Good to see you, Quinn. Bet you’ll be glad to have this deal all signed?” Miles was pushing sixty and carried a little paunch front spending too much time in his office and not enough walking.

Quinn smiled at the older man whom he had known for years. “In more ways than one,” he replied firmly grasping the offered hand.

“Lydia isn’t here yet as you can see. Knowing her, she’ll probably be fashionably late. Care to have some coffee while we wait?” he offered indicating a coffee pot on a side table.

“Sounds good, Miles,” Quinn replied with a glance at his watch.

It was a full half hour later before Lydia flounced into the office wearing so much perfume that Quinn wondered if they would all suffocate from the fumes. She wore a one piece, figure hugging pink outfit with more cleavage than one usually saw exposed in Chance. High-heeled pink sandals accompanied her outrageous outfit. They were similar to the ones Sage favored, but for some reason, they looked totally ridiculous on Lydia.

Both men shared a knowing look before they got down to business. An hour later, the papers had been signed. Lydia had a hefty check in her purse and Quinn had the deed to the property. After shaking hands with Miles and thanking him for his diligence in this matter, Quinn turned to leave the office.

“Quinn, why don’t we go somewhere to celebrate?” Lydia asked coming to press against his side invitingly. “Somewhere quiet where we can talk.”

“Don’t have the time, Lydia. You know how ranch life is? There’s always work to be done.” Disengaging himself from her grasp he turned and left before she could say more.

Only Miles heard her disgruntled, “well!”

If Lydia was upset before she left the office, it was nothing compared to a few minutes later when she saw Quinn with Sage. She watched as he cupped her face in his hands and kissed her. The big oaf actually kissed the upstart. Lydia’s temper flared but she knew enough not to cause a scene here on the street. Her eyes narrowed in contemplation.

Quinn had not come around as she had hoped he would. He had given her one excuse after another why they couldn’t get together. The only times he’d consented to see her was due to the land deal. She wasn’t used to being treated this way. So he thought he was in love with that little pipsqueak? Well, maybe she could throw a spanner into his relationship before she left Chance. It would teach him not to snub her! She didn’t need Quinn O’Shea’s money anyway. But he was the one man who got away and that rubbed her raw.

Later that afternoon, Cheyenne and Sage cooked a special dinner to celebrate Quinn’s latest purchase. Parker manned grilling the steaks while the women saw to the other fixings. When they finally sat down to eat there was a huge platter of biscuits, two of mashed potatoes, corn on the cob, green beans and sliced tomatoes and cucumbers.

The twins were excited and impatient to report their news of the day. All but three of the eggs had hatched so they had a dozen new chicks to care for. They didn’t appear to have minded being left home at all.

“We watched them being borne,” Cody said around a piece of steak.

“They were yucky at first, but then they dried out real good,” Kate continued. “Can we have one for a pet?”

“I don’t think chickens make good pets,” Quinn laughed.

“Why not?” Kate demanded.

“Cause you can’t teach them tricks or walk them on a leash,” Cody informed his sister.

“They don’t have to do anything. I could love it anyway,” Kate replied wisely.

Quinn looked at her in surprise. For some reason her remark struck a strange cord in him. He frowned not understanding why her words made him uneasy. But he was quickly distracted by the laughter around the table.

Later that evening, after everyone had retired for the night, Quinn quietly walked down the hall to Sage’s room. She greeted him at her door wearing a silken robe with nothing underneath. That night, her mattress did move!

Sage was late down to breakfast the next morning so she missed Quinn.

“They left about fifteen minutes ago,” Cheyenne informed her. “Quinn wanted to round up some strays. He says the weather doesn’t look too good and he wanted to locate them before a storm breaks.”

“Where are the twins?”

“Where do you think? They gulped down breakfast so they could get back to watching the new chicks.” Cheyenne fixed her daughter a plate, then sat down with a cup of tea. “Is there anything you’d like to tell me?” she asked directly.

Sage quickly took a bite of the lightly scrambled eggs. “You always said he was a good man,” she said evading the real question.

“Yes, I did. I have the feeling you’ve discovered that for yourself?”

Sage laid her fork down. “I never could hide anything from you, could I?”

“Oh, I think you managed to surprise me a time or two over the years,” Cheyenne chuckled. “Is it so hard to say the words?”

“Okay, I love him!”

“And he loves you!” Cheyenne countered happily. “I knew it! I knew if you two got together, sparks would fly. If I were forty years younger that man could put his boots under my bed any day.”

“Mother! I don’t believe you just said that?” Sage choked. It was so close to the talk about chain mail that she was astounded. It made her wonder if one of the twins had said something.

“Why not? I’m seventy, not dead. Does he make your toes curl?”

Sage just stared at her mother for several seconds before she began laughing. “As a matter of fact, he does. What we feel is new and we haven’t really talked about the future yet. So don’t say anything to him, mother.”

Cheyenne reached across the table to cover Sage’s hand. “Don’t worry. I won’t say a word. I’ll let him come to me. But I will tell you that I couldn’t be happier. He’ll make a wonderful son-in-law.”

“Don’t jump too far ahead. We haven’t talked about marriage.” But Sage knew this was where her heart belonged. Quinn was the man she had been waiting for all this time. That’s why the other men in her life had left her feeling empty. That certain quality that was Quinn had been missing in them.

“I can just think about the wedding then. Until Quinn formally asks for your hand.” With this parting shot, Cheyenne went to work tidying up the kitchen while Sage finished her breakfast wondering at the workings of her mother’s mind.

Quinn and the men had not come in for lunch so it was just Sage and the twins in the kitchen. As soon as they’d eaten, Kate and Cody took a basket to go out to gather eggs for Cheyenne. While her mother took a rest to read for a while, Sage went into the den to write to Dallas. She’d just picked up a pen when someone knocked on the front door. She hurried out into the hall to open the door before it disturbed her mother. Lydia stood there poised for another knock on the door.

“May I come in?” Lydia asked then barged past Sage before she could utter a reply.

Sage closed the door behind her. “Sure why not? Although I’m afraid that Quinn is not here at the moment.”

“I didn’t come here to see Quinn. I came to talk to you...woman to woman. Shall we?” she asked indicating the den.

Sage frowned but followed Lydia into the den leaving the door ajar. She hoped this woman wouldn’t be here that long. “I can’t imagine why you would want to see me.”

Sage didn’t hear the tread of two pairs of small boots or the rustle of bushes as someone crouched just outside beneath the open window. Kate and Cody had seen Lydia arrive and wondered why she was there.

Lydia glared at Sage. Her plans had gone up in a puff of smoke all because of one little interloper. She had always wanted Quinn and now after all these years it could have been a reality. Nothing was going to stop her from getting what she wanted or so she'd thought. Well, Lydia might not have Quinn, but she could leave him a pack of trouble before she left town. "You know dear, it's really pathetic the way you moon after Quinn like this. The poor man is embarrassed, but doesn't know how to let you down easily. Take my advice, Sage, from one woman to another, go back to Chicago and leave him alone."

Sage studied the other woman. Apparently Lydia didn't know Quinn as well as she thought she did. "Quinn is not shy about speaking his mind. If he wants me to leave, he wouldn't hesitate to tell me. I'm beginning to think you live in a different world than the rest of us mere mortals."

Lydia's face reddened with fury. "Stay if you must, Sage. Maybe you can be a bridesmaid at our wedding? You see Quinn has already asked me to marry him," she lied waiting for Sage to admit defeat. She was disappointed when Sage didn't break down in tears.

"I don't believe you. Quinn has better taste than that!" Sage didn't know what game Lydia was playing, but she wouldn't give her the satisfaction of knowing how close she and Quinn had become.

"Why you little bitch! I've known Quinn much longer than you have so don't go around pretending you can read his mind."

"It's not mind reading, Lydia. It's just common sense. I can't quite see you as a rancher's wife or even spending most of your time in the country. You would be bored silly within two weeks," Sage told her honestly.

"Who said we would be spending all of our time on the ranch? Quinn is more than happy to travel with me and spend time in New York and California."

Sage burst out laughing. "Quinn in New York? Maybe you might drag him away on a short vacation, but not on a regular basis. Besides, there are the twins. They have school to attend. You don't strike me as the maternal type."

"I don't pretend to be. Why do you think they have boarding schools? Kate and Cody will be well taken care of in one of the finest we can find." The last thing Lydia wanted or needed was a child underfoot. Especially not those two brats. She was sure Quinn didn't want any more children and that was fine with her. She wouldn't go through that for any man. "We've already discussed one in Connecticut and another in Atlanta. There's one in New York that looks promising also. Don't look so upset, my dear. The little darlings can come home for Christmas...if we're in Chance. Children adapt quickly. It's not as if Quinn is a doting father anyway," Lydia added quite pleased with her story.

Sage's hands balled into fists at her side. "He wouldn't send them away," she replied angered by Lydia's casual dismissal of the twins. "He's not that hard or unfeeling."

"No he wouldn't," Quinn said with soft menace from the doorway. His eyes narrowed coldly on Lydia as he stepped into the room.

CHAPTER 13

“Quinn, darling. Sage has been just terrible to me,” Lydia pouted. “You should have heard the terrible things she said to me.” She didn’t know how much Quinn had heard, but decided to brazen it out. After all, she had nothing to lose.

“I heard most of it, Lydia and everything you said was a pack of lies. Sage, I have never asked her to marry me, not now nor in the past. Whatever relationship she thinks we might have is all in her head.” He directed his words at Sage but his eyes never left Lydia’s red face. He’d never noticed before how really homely she was when she got angry.

“You were insufferable when we were in school and I can see that you haven’t changed at all. Don’t you see what I could offer you, Quinn? Travel, excitement and fun are some things that your little friend here wouldn’t know a thing about. Heaven knows you deserve it after working this ranch for so long and being saddled with two children.”

“You really are a piece of work, Lydia,” Quinn said shaking his head. “You offer me all that but with one stipulation. I have to pay for it. Sorry, lady. That’s *your* preferred life style, not mine. And working this ranch is a labor of love, not a penance as you would assume it to be.”

“And what about the children,” Lydia snarled. “Everyone can see you don’t give a damn about them. Even...”

“Kate and Cody are my responsibility and none of your business. Now I think it’s time you left. And don’t bother coming back because you’re not welcome here.” He watched as her face turned almost purple with indignation. “You were wrong about

another thing, Lydia. I do know how to speak my mind. There must be some poor bastard out there who will fall for your feminine charms, but the pickings in Chance are pretty slim. I suggest you stick to the big cities. Apparently the men there aren't as choosy about their women."

"Go to hell, Quinn O'Shea," Lydia spit out. After shooting Sage a look that was pure venom meant to kill, she stomped out of the den, slamming the front door behind her.

Sage took a deep breath. "Well, that was fun," she told Quinn with a grin.

Running a hand through his hair he returned her smile. "It did feel pretty good. All through school Lydia was a manipulator, trying to set the guys against each other with lies or promises. Guess she hasn't changed."

"Were you one of the guys she used?"

Quinn gave her a lopsided grin. "Sorry to say I was. We dated on and off all through high school. I was so enamored with her that I thought we'd get married and be together forever."

"But that didn't happen?"

"No. She had a cousin in New York who asked her to come and stay with her after graduation. This cousin introduced Lydia to her wealthy friends. All of a sudden, Chance became a backwater town. And I didn't have the money to keep her in the style she had come to admire and long for. She was married within six months to a man twenty years older than her. He had the money to give her everything. I understand that each succeeding husband has been even better off than the first. Her second died and left her very well off."

Sage frowned. "I don't understand why she's back here after you now?"

"After husband number two died, she returned to claim me as number three. I was married to Sharon and not anymore interested in her then as I am now. Then she married number three and was traveling in Europe quite a bit. But I know she found out about Sharon's death. I guess when it came time to get rid of the current husband, she figured that since I was now free I'd be more amendable to her plans."

"But surely she must realize that you wouldn't send Kate and Cody away to school? Their life is here with you," Sage replied. When Quinn didn't reply, she noted that he had retreated behind his mask of indifference once again. Her temper flared. "Lydia was right about one thing though."

"And that is?"

"Sometimes you do act as though you don't really care about them. And..."

"It's none of your business either, Sage," he bit out.

"Fine. Cut me off like you did her. But I'm not leaving until I say what I have to say. Those two children love you. They adore you and you barely give them the time of day. It's heartbreaking to see Kate's eyes light up by just a few kind words or a smile from you. And Cody wants so much to be like his daddy. I know you haven't noticed, but he even tries to walk like you. I know some people find being tactile and loving doesn't come easy. But they're your children, Quinn. They need hugs and to know that you love them," she told him earnestly. "They..."

"That's enough!" Quinn was breathing hard to keep his emotions under control. He couldn't keep it in any longer. Not from Sage. "*They're not my children!*"

Sage stared at him blankly for several seconds. "I don't understand?"

Quinn snorted. “Neither did I until the accident.” He ran a shaky hand through his hair. “Sharon was killed instantly in the accident. Cody was hurt, but not badly. Kate was in very bad shape and needed blood. So naturally I was willing to give whatever she needed. But low and behold...our blood types were not compatible. My blood type is O and Kate and Cody are B.”

“I’m not sure I understand?” Sage said softly, but she hoped she was wrong.

“That means that there is no way I am their biological father. Sharon lied to me all those years. Whoever their real father is he has to be either A or B. That put me out of the running. I felt like someone had kicked me in the gut.” He walked away to stand in front of the window behind his desk. He turned to look at her over his shoulder. “You don’t look shocked?”

Sage followed but stopped a few feet away from him. “Tell me something, Quinn. Did you love Sharon?”

“What’s that got to do with anything? She lied to me!”

“Did you love her when you got married?”

He sighed. “Yes, I did. More fool me!”

“Do you think she loved you? Was she a good wife?” Sage pressed.

“I thought we were in love. And yes she was a good wife. She loved the ranch almost as much as I do. But that doesn’t excuse her deceit.”

“Were you with her when the twins were born?”

He turned from the window to look down at her. “Of course I was. We were so excited about them. We knew one was a boy but didn’t know the gender of the second until the birth.” His eyes became unfocused as his thoughts turned back in time.

“What did you feel when you held them for the first time?”

Quinn gritted his teeth. These memories were too painful. “I don’t remember.”

“Don’t lie to me, Quinn. That is something no mother or father would ever forget. How did you feel holding them for the first time?” she persisted.

His mouth worked but nothing came out. Then he found his voice. “They were so tiny, Sage. Kate was the smallest and fit in my hand. I was filled with so much love that it was almost overwhelming. It was unexpected that instant bond of love. I’ve never felt so protective of anything or anyone in my life,” he admitted softly.

Sage put her small hand on his arm. “So for the first five years of their lives you loved and cared for them. You made them *your* children, Quinn. No matter who supplied the biological material to create them, *you* are their daddy. I don’t know anything about your late wife, but it seems to me that she must have loved you and the twins very much. She’s gone so you can’t discuss this with her. But Kate and Cody are alive and need their daddy. *They* didn’t do anything wrong, Quinn. Please, stop blaming them for something that Sharon did! They need you so much. Why do you think they get into so much mischief? It’s the only way they can get any attention from you. It’s better than none. Don’t you see?” She shook his arm to try to make him understand.

When he spoke his voice sounded hollow to his own ears. “I was so angry, so full of bitterness at her betrayal that I wouldn’t let myself grieve at her passing. I tried to tell myself she deserved to die. But that was wrong, wasn’t it? I didn’t know how to...couldn’t face the fact that she’d been with someone, gotten pregnant and never told me.” He sat down in his chair burying his face in his hands. A well of buried emotion

rose up within him; his eyes burned with tears; his shoulders began to shake as he finally gave way to his grief.

Sage knelt in front of him wrapping her arms around his waist. His arms crushed her to his chest as he cried. Her own tears overflowed as she shared this cleansing with the man she'd come to love. She understood so much now. Nothing could be done to wipe out the past three years, but she knew Quinn would be a different man after this.

They sat wrapped in each others arms for some time after the tears had subsided. Quinn pulled Sage up to sit on his lap. His mouth found hers in a kiss of love, a kiss of thanks and wonder at what she had done for him. "I have a lot to make up for where Cody and Kate are concerned," he said at last. "I never want them to know the truth, Sage. I was there when they were born and I'm the only father they know. Since we have no way of discovering who their real father is, there is no need to tell them about it."

Sage nodded. "That's your decision to make, Quinn. You know, maybe Lydia coming here turned out to be a blessing for you in the long run."

Quinn managed to smile. "That would really make her day. Here she was out to stir up trouble and she only managed to help give me back my children."

"Maybe we should send her some flowers. That would drive her mad wondering what they were for."

"Anyone ever tell you that you have a devious mind, Sagebrush?" Quinn replied with a deep sigh of relief. He felt as if the weight of the world had been dumped from his shoulders. He felt whole again, if more than a little bit concerned about what his behavior towards the twins had cost him the past three years. They were still young and he hoped he would be able to make it up to them. Sage was right. They were the innocents in all this and he did love them very much.

Cody and Kate slowly rode away from the ranch cautiously looking over their shoulders to see if anyone was watching. No one was. Everyone was busy. As soon as they were out of sight of the ranch, they spurred their ponies forward. They rode for almost half an hour before they dared to slow their pace.

Kate had been crying but now the tears had dried on her cheeks. "Do you think they know we're gone?" she asked riding beside her brother.

Cody shrugged his slender shoulders as if he didn't care. But there were tear stains on his cheeks too. "*He* won't care. This way he won't have to bother with sending us away to school," he said defiantly.

"Sage might miss us though. And Cheyenne," Kate commented in a wishful tone.

"Maybe. But we can live in the cave and take care of ourselves," Cody announced with conviction.

Neither child realized that they would need more than the half loaf of bread, the small jar of peanut butter and the bag of cookies to survive for more than a couple of days. Cody had filled their canteens with water so they would have something to drink.

Nothing more was said until they reached their secret cave. Kate didn't say anything to Cody, but she did wonder if Sage would tell their daddy about it. She had promised she wouldn't, but adults didn't always keep their promises. The fact that she and Cody had broken their promise to Sage was something she didn't think about.

They tethered the ponies under the strand of trees a short distance from the trail down to the cave. Carrying their bags of food and canteens, they made their way down to

their secret place. Once settled, they went back out to collect some firewood oblivious to the darkening sky.

Sage left Quinn in the den to work on some paperwork. She knew her mother was busy on some project in her room so she went upstairs. The house seemed unduly quiet, something that put her on edge. Something didn't feel right. Maybe it was just the confrontation with Lydia that was the root cause of her unease.

Realizing she hadn't seen the twins in a while she retraced her steps downstairs. She rapped on her mother's bedroom door before entering. "Mother, have you seen Kate and Cody?"

"They went out to gather eggs a while ago, dear."

A tingle of apprehension shot up Sage's spine. "Did they use a brown long handled basket?"

"Yes, the one with the blue heart in the middle. What's wrong Sage?" Cheyenne asked laying aside Quinn's shirt she'd been mending. Her youngest daughter didn't ruffle easy and there was no mistaking her anxiety.

"The basket is sitting on the counter, but the twins are not anywhere in the house."

"Maybe they went back out to check on the new chicks?" Cheyenne offered.

"Do me a favor, mother. Check to see if anything is missing from the kitchen. Something the kids might take to eat."

Before Cheyenne could question her further, Sage was out the door. Something was wrong, she had read the fear in her daughter's eyes. She headed for the kitchen to check her cupboards.

Sage ran out to the barn. The chicks were doing fine, but the children were nowhere in sight and they didn't come when she called. With a sinking feeling in the pit of her stomach, Sage went to look for their ponies. The stall was empty and their saddles were gone from the place next to the wall.

She turned to race back into the house. Her mother straightened from looking in the bottom cupboard. "Sage, it looks like some bread and peanut butter are missing. And some cookies. Now are you going to tell me what this is all about?" Cheyenne demanded folding her arms over her chest.

"I think they've run away. I can't talk now, mother. I've got to tell Quinn," she said hurrying from the kitchen.

As soon as Sage entered the den, Quinn knew something was terribly wrong. He jumped to his feet to come around the desk. "What's wrong? Has something happened to Cheyenne?"

Sage shook her head. That he was immediately concerned about her mother only endeared him to her more than ever. "Oh, Quinn! Did you see Cody and Kate when you came home? I can't find them anywhere," she wailed wringing her hands.

Quinn felt a tightening in his gut, but refused to acknowledge it. "Maybe they went for a ride. We'll check the stable."

"I already have. Their ponies are gone."

"They've probably ridden out to the east pasture to watch the sheep. We've got two new lambs."

Sage didn't think that was so. "What if they had heard what Lydia was saying about sending them away to school? Quinn, if they heard that they would be devastated!"

"But it's not true!"

"We know that, but they are only eight years old. They wouldn't understand why Lydia would say something that wasn't true."

Quinn's face turned into a mask of determination as he grabbed the phone to bark out orders to the person on the other end of the line for them to scour the ranch for the twins. "Check to see if the small tent is gone from the barn," he snapped before turning to Sage. "They weren't anywhere around when I came in here and found you and Lydia. There's no way they could have scampered away without my seeing them."

Sage sighed in frustration. Then her eyes lit on the open window.

Quinn's gaze followed hers. "Shit!" he exclaimed heading for the door. Sure enough, under the window behind the bushes were two sets of easily identifiable boot prints. That tightening in his gut turned into a lead ball. "Where in the hell can they be? Why didn't they come and ask me instead of running off?" Then he swore again. "That's a laugh. Why would they come to a father who hasn't been there for them for a long time?"

"They're just children, Quinn. They react first. They don't like Lydia and they were afraid," she said rubbing his arm as if it would help in some way.

Quinn laughed, but it lacked humor. "I've been a hell of a father to them the past few years. It's no wonder they would believe I'd send them away. If anything happens to them..."

"They are going to be fine," Sage interrupted. She refused to believe anything else.

Just as they returned to the den, the phone rang. Quinn sprinted across the room to snatch it up on the second ring. It was Parker.

"The tent and camping gear are all accounted for except for a couple canteens. We haven't seen any signs of the twins though."

"Okay, Parker. Let me know as soon as you confirm that they're not just hiding around here somewhere."

While Quinn was talking to Parker, Sage remembered the cave. She'd promised not to tell, but they had promised not to go back alone. If she were wrong, she'd apologize to the kids later. She paced by his desk until he finished the call.

"They didn't take the tent, so they don't plan on camping," Quinn told her as he raked a hand through his hair.

"They don't need a tent if they have a cave," she told him biting down on her bottom lip. Maybe she should have told him about the cave because she knew it had to be dangerous for them to be so far from home alone. But they had promised not to go back.

"Cave? There are caves all over the area. They know better than to..." his voice trailed off as he studied Sage's expression. "Where is it? And how do you know about it?" he demanded.

"That day we went riding to the pond, they took me on a scenic tour to their secret cave. It's part way down the side of a ravine about half an hour ride from here. They'll be okay there, won't they?" she asked concerned by the flicker of alarm she saw in Quinn's dark eyes. "Please tell me they're okay!" she demanded shaking his arms.

“I can’t, Sage. We have a storm coming and some areas are prone to flash flooding if it rains hard enough. Just where is this cave? I’m heading out there now.” He would ride through any kind of storm to get his children back to safety. Then he was going to work on being the kind of father they needed and deserved.

“I’ll go with you,” Sage said turning for the door.

“No. It’s going to be too dangerous if the weather turns as bad as I expect it will.”

“I’m going, Quinn. I feel partly to blame because I didn’t tell you about it before, but that’s something we can talk about later.”

“We’re going to ride hard and fast, Sage. You’re not up to it. Besides I want you here where it’s safe. I can’t do what I have to and worry about you too,” he stated firmly.

“I can take care of myself. I can’t tell you where that cave is, but I can show you. You need me,” she said sticking out her chin.

“What makes you think you can find it when I’ve lived here all my life? You’re a city girl. Trees and rocks all look the same out there,” Quinn growled.

“You forget that I wasn’t on firm ground when I went riding with your children. You don’t think I would blindly follow them without studying the terrain? They could just as easily rode off and left me behind on the way back. Besides, I have a terrific sense of direction.” She watched as he fought an inner battle. “You said yourself that we need to get to them as soon as possible. Time could be lost while you check out the area looking for one specific cave. I can take you right to it, Quinn.”

The fear he felt for the safety of the twins battled with the fear of taking Sage with him. But the fervent plea in her beautiful green eyes was his undoing. “Okay, Sagebrush, but you stay close by my side.” Grabbing her hand he pulled her out of the den down the hallway. They met Cheyenne coming out of the kitchen. “Show Sage where the rain slickers are kept and get ones for the twins too. I’ll get the horses saddled and ready to go.

As she and her mother grabbed up the rain slickers, Sage gave a brief accounting of what had happened. “You run along and I’ll get a big pot of hot soup cooking. You’ll be chilled to the bone when you get back and need something warm,” Cheyenne said halting Sage when she would have rushed out the door. “Be careful. And don’t worry. Quinn will make everything right.”

Sage managed a smile. “I know. See you soon.” With that she raced across the yard to the stable. Quinn had their two horses ready. Slim, Parker and Colt were already mounted. Before she could get on Peaches, it began to sprinkle.

“Get your slicker on, Sagebrush,” Quinn ordered slipping his on before swinging effortlessly onto Thor’s back. “We’ll head out for Scar ravine. When we get closer, you can direct us from there, Sagebrush,” he said once she was settled on Peaches.

She simply nodded as the small rescue party headed out with dark ominous clouds behind them and gray fast moving clouds above and in front of them. Once they were away from the stable, Quinn set a fast pace making sure that Sage was always close by his side. It seemed that as each minute passed, the weather worsened. After ten minutes the rain started to come down in driving sheets making it difficult to see very far ahead. Quinn slowed their pace, but not by much. The lightning that had been from cloud to cloud now seemed to dance to the ground in blinding white arcs. The very air seemed charged as the wind drove the rain at their backs.

Sage was thankful that at least the rain wasn't pounding on their faces. It was bad enough on her head and back.

When Quinn raised his hand they all stopped. "Okay, Sagebrush. Which way?" he asked when they'd reached a cluster of huge boulders.

She looked around wiping the water from her face. When she spotted the boulder shaped a little like a pyramid, she pointed. "That way. When we reach some trees we go to the right."

It didn't take long to reach the point where they were to turn to the right. It was slower going from that point because the wind and rain was coming at them from the side. After what seemed like an eternity, Slim pointed off to their left. "There's the ponies," he shouted to be heard above the noise of the storm.

They rode over to the trees to tether their horses next to the ponies. "Where is the cave from here?" Quinn shouted. His fear for the twin's safety escalated when he heard the sound of rushing water.

CHAPTER 14

Sage would have rushed forward but Quinn stopped her with a hand on her arm. "You stay here. Just tell me how to get down to the cave."

“It’s just over there,” she shouted pointing at a large flat rock. “Climb over that and there’s a narrow trail that leads down to the opening. It’s not too steep, but I don’t know how it will be in this rain.”

Quinn nodded then hurried over to the rock. It was only late afternoon but, with the heavy cloud cover and rain, visibility was strained. Taking a large flashlight from his slicker he panned the light over the downward path to the cave. His heart skipped a beat as he watched in horror as water flowed like a waterfall down the now impregnable path. “Shit!” he exclaimed turning back. Even more frightening was the river of water surging through the ravine about twelve feet from where he estimated the cave to be.

Sage stepped forward. “Why didn’t you go down to get them?” she yelled when she saw Quinn turn around to come back.

He didn’t address her but looked at Slim. “We have a problem. There’s no way to walk down that path now. It’s like a river. I’ll have to go over the top on a rope. Get Thor ever here.”

“How far down it is?” Slim asked worriedly. He didn’t like this one bit, but knew Quinn didn’t have any other option open to him. Time was not on their side.

“It looks to be about fifteen feet, but it’s hard to tell for sure with this rain.”

“Parker, get that fifty foot rope and get it tied to Thor’s saddle,” Slim yelled as he mounted Quinn’s horse. As if Thor knew he was on a rescue mission, he obeyed Slim’s every command.

Sage rushed forward grabbing Quinn’s arm. “Quinn?” she asked, her green eyes wide with fear.

“There’s no other way, Sagebrush. It will be a piece of cake,” he told her reassuringly. If only it would turn out that way. He’d seen the damage flooding could do and knew time was not on their side.

“Be careful.” She jumped up to wrap her arms around his neck to kiss him. His arms pressed her close before reluctantly putting her away from him. Sage felt alone and scared once more.

“I’m scared, Cody,” Kate whimpered into the growing darkness. It was much darker in the cave than before the rain started. The small fire they’d managed to light at the mouth of the cave had been extinguished by the first of the heavy downpour. By the time they had decided they wanted to go home, it was too late. They couldn’t get back up to the top to their ponies.

“I’m scared too,” Cody said putting an arm around his sister. “We’ll be okay as soon as it stops raining.

“But there’s so much water!” Kate wailed scared not only by the growing darkness, but also by the sound of the water and wind. “I want my daddy! I want Sage!” she wailed her small body shaking with sobs of fear.

They sat huddled together near the back of the small cave to get away from the rain that was being blown into the cave opening. Because of the noise from the raging storm they were unaware of the rescue team just above them. It wasn’t until a large figure suddenly appeared, dark and ominous, on the ledge just outside the cave, that they realized they were no longer alone. Kate screamed as the figure stepped forward.

“It’s okay, princess. Its daddy,” Quinn said quickly to stem their fear. He was so relieved to see them safe that his knees almost buckled under him.

“Daddy!” they cried clamoring to their feet, rushing forward to throw themselves into his waiting arms.

Quinn gathered them close, hugging them, as he hadn’t done in several years. A sense of shame washed over him. Why had he been so stupid? Why had he punished them for something they had no control over? Then he realized he could beat himself up later. Now it was imperative that they back up to the top to safety as quickly as possible. He knelt in front of them, making them look at him in the fading light. “I want you to listen to me and do exactly what I tell you. Okay?”

“I’m scared,” Kate said clinging to his arm.

“I know you are. But we have to get out of here and we can’t walk up.”

“We were going to come home, but there was too much water and we couldn’t get back up,” Cody said rubbing his eyes with the back of a dirty hand.

“Slim and Thor are going to pull us up on a rope. I’m going to tie us together so we can all go up at one time,” Quinn said quietly as he began tying a rope around Kate’s waist and under her arms. When he was done he did the same to Cody. Urging them forward they neared the mouth of the cave. He picked up Kate in one arm and Cody in the other. “Now I want you to put your arms around my neck and hold on as tight as you can. Whatever you do, don’t let go. Can you do that?”

Neither child uttered a word. They nodded and did as they were told.

Quinn could feel their fear. He watched as Kate squeezed her eyes closed, but she didn’t let go of the death grip she had on his neck. He gave two jerks on the rope tied around his shoulders and waist. Immediately his feet lifted off the floor as they were pulled upward. It had turned out to be about twenty foot drop to the cave, but the slow trip up seemed like a hundred feet. He was relieved when they reached the top where helping hands were there to pull them safely over the rim and away from the edge.

Sage rushed over throwing her arms around all three of them as tears spilled unheeded down her cheeks. Quinn hugged the twins close to his chest as Slim and Parker undid the ropes. Parker handed Sage two smaller slickers that she helped the twins into even though they were already soaked.

Kate placed a small hand against Quinn’s cheek. “You came,” she said almost in wonder.

“You bet I did!” he said giving her a big kiss and one for Cody who stared wide-eyed at him. “I love you!”

“That lady said we would have to go away,” Cody stated still not sure.

“She lied about that, Cody. You won’t go away to school until you’re ready for college. But we’ll talk about everything when we get home. You two will ride with me. Parker will bring the ponies.” Quinn mounted Thor and then Slim handed Kate up into his waiting arms to settle her in front of him. Cody was placed just behind him with his arms around his father’s waist.

The ride back to the ranch took longer because of the fading light and the pounding rain. Jack had been keeping watch and called Cheyenne as soon as he saw them approaching. She rushed upstairs to draw hot baths for the children and to lie out warm pajamas. She already had some hot home made chicken soup warming on the stove along with fresh made biscuits.

She met them at the back door with large towels. “I’ll get these two upstairs and into the bathtub. I suggest you two get a warm shower and into dry clothes,” Cheyenne ordered as she stripped the sodden clothing from Kate and Cody who were shivering.

Sage and Quinn were in no condition to argue as they removed their soaked footwear and socks. Wrapped in huge towels they headed for the stairs. “Care to share a shower?” Quinn asked with attempt at humor.

Sage would have loved nothing better, but her mother was up here with the children. If she came to check on her and found her bathroom empty, she would wonder. “I don’t think that’s a good idea right now. But we can talk about it later.”

“I didn’t think so.” He nodded as they parted in the hallway to go to their own rooms. As he stood under the hot water, he thought about Sage. They had to talk. This wasn’t going to be easy, on either of them. But he had to think of Kate and Cody right now.

Half an hour later, everyone was back downstairs in the kitchen. The twins ate as if they were starving, no worse from their ordeal. Sage only ate to gain warmth from the wonderful soup. The events of the day had robbed her of any appetite.

Quinn ate but didn’t taste much. His eyes devoured *his* children. It was as if he had just discovered he was a father and couldn’t get enough of looking at them, like when they were first born. He would stand for long minutes at their crib just staring down at those two small beings, so fragile and so loved. When he looked over at Sage, he wasn’t aware of it, but his eyes held a message.

She felt the cold finger of fear slide down her spine as Quinn quickly looked away. This was going to be a turning point in all of their lives, and she wasn’t sure she was going to like where it led. Calling herself all kinds of coward, she stayed in the kitchen to help her mother clean up when Quinn took the twins into the den. She knew he was going to be talking to them and wanted to stay out of the way. This was between a father and his children. At least this had brought them together. She knew from his reaction that their running away and the danger they had been in had made him face his true feelings for them. But what of his feelings for Sage Mendoza?

An hour later, she knew she couldn’t hide in the kitchen any longer. Her mother had gone to bed, giving her a hug. “Everything will work out, Sage.”

As she neared the den she could hear the television. Stepping into the room she stopped dead. A kid’s movie was playing softly on the TV while Quinn slept on the floor with Kate curled on one side and Cody on the other. All three were obviously sound asleep, still hugging even in slumber. A fire burned in the fireplace, but Sage knew that wouldn’t be enough to keep them warm through the night. She found a large comforter in the linen closet and returned to gently cover the sleeping forms. She stood for several minutes watching them, marveling at how much they had come to mean to her in such a short time. Then she turned to go upstairs to her own bed.

After breakfast the next morning Quinn asked to speak to Sage in the den. As soon as the door closed, Sage spoke up. “I have to go back to Chicago, Quinn. You need time with Kate and Cody.” She died a little with each word, but knew they had to be said.

Quinn nodded. “There’s so much to make up to them, Sage. I could have lost them yesterday and it would have been my fault,” he said pacing. “You were right. I’ve

been punishing them for something their mother did. I was the one who helped change their diapers; I was the one who fed them their bottles and walked the floor with them when they were teething. I taught them to ride their ponies, a bike and to swim. The fact that I'm not their biological father doesn't enter into it. I couldn't love them more if I were." It was a long speech for him and he hoped he'd gotten it right. He must have because she beamed him a bright smile.

"I'm happy to see you've finally opened your eyes, Grumpy," Sage said trying to keep the mood light. "I understand that you have to devote time to them now. But where does this leave us?" She was scared, but not knowing would be even worse.

He crossed the distance between them in long strides, pulling into his arms and rested his chin on top of her head. "I love you, Sage. Don't ever doubt that." He lifted her chin with a gentle finger. "I don't know what the future holds for us, but I want us to be together. It just can't be right now."

Sage laid her hand on his. "I understand that. I really do. It's just not an easy thing to accept." She gave a small laugh. "I guess that's what being an adult is all about...making difficult decisions."

"It won't be forever, Sagebrush. I can't live that long without you."

She nodded. "I'll go home and work. We can always talk on the phone and E-Mail."

"When do you plan to leave?" He knew her vacation time was quickly coming to an end. He also realized this was the right thing to do at this time, but it ate at him. He'd just found Sage and didn't want to lose her. When she returned to Chicago, what if she discovered the city held more appeal than she'd previously thought? What if she decided that life in Utah would be too hard on her? These thoughts and more filled his head.

"The day after tomorrow. I have to be back to work Monday and that will give me a day to clean up the apartment and rest a little." Her apartment was going to be very lonely with her mother gone. It hadn't taken Sage long to adjust to the big kitchen filled with people at mealtime. Now it would be just her and the television or a video instead of laughter and loud conversation.

"Let's go for a ride tomorrow, just the two of us. We need a few hours for us," Quinn suggested as he lowered his mouth to hers not waiting for a reply.

They were interrupted as the twins burst into the room. "Daddy! Why are you kissing Sage?" Cody demanded with a grin.

"That's what people do when they like each other," he said stepping away from Sage as Kate launched herself into his arms. He gave her a big hug and kiss.

Sage couldn't contain her smile as she watched the little girl almost sigh with happiness. Even Cody had loosened up and had wrapped his arms around his daddy's leg.

"Can we sleep on the floor again tonight?" Cody implored looking up at his daddy. He had been amazed to wake up this morning to see all three of them were still sleeping on the den floor. It had been like a camping trip. And daddy had stayed with them all night!

Quinn looked over their heads at Sage as he rubbed his back with his free hand. "I don't think that's such a good idea, son. Your dad's back isn't used to sleeping without a mattress." That wasn't altogether true, but he had plans for tonight. "Maybe

we can do it Saturday night. We'll watch a special movie and have popcorn. How does that sound?"

"Yippee!" both children shouted. Kate gave him a big hug before scooting to the floor as she and her brother ran for the kitchen to tell Cheyenne about their next treat.

After the children had gone, Sage grinned up at Quinn. "When I looked in on you, the lack of a mattress didn't seem to be bothering any of you."

"I guess we were all pretty tired," he replied with a smile. "Thank you for putting those covers over us." He pulled her into his arms once again.

"How do you know it was me?"

"It was something a mother would do."

"Like my mother?"

Quinn nodded. "Except I know that it was you who took care of us. You'll always look after us." It wasn't a question. It was a statement of fact.

"Did you talk to Kate and Cody about the cave?" Sage asked changing the subject.

"We had a long talk. They won't be going back there alone again, or to any other caves. By the way, they're not angry with you for telling. They were really scared by the time we arrived and were relieved you had remembered how to find them." As long as he lived he would never forget the looks on their faces when they had realized it was he in the cave opening, relief, happiness and love all rolled into one. But it was nothing to his happiness when they had finally made it to the top. He and Slim knew that if anything had gone wrong, it would have been a long drop to the bottom of that ravine. With everything so wet there wouldn't have been a decent handhold anywhere even if he would have been able to grab on to something.

Sage nodded giving him a sad smile. "I just wish I had told you before. But they had promised me they wouldn't go back."

"Don't fret about it, Sagebrush. Now that it's over, I'm glad it happened because it opened my eyes like nothing else could have done. I have my children back," he said with a sense of wonder in his voice.

"And they have their daddy," she said wrapping her arms around his waist, resting her head against his chest. They stood that way for several minutes, just finding pleasure in the holding. Then Sage looked up at him. "My bed or yours?"

"Mine. It's bigger."

"Doesn't really matter," Sage told him with a saucy grin. "Wherever we are the mattress will move."

Quinn threw back his head and laughed as he scooped her up into his arms to swing her around. "You can count on that, Sagebrush!"

They were still kissing when Cheyenne came to tell him the Slim was waiting. Seeing them together, she smiled to herself before simply retracing her steps back to the kitchen. Slim would just have to wait a little longer.

Six weeks later, Sage sat on the sofa in her apartment. It had been cleaned down to the baseboards over the past weeks. She was caught up at work and bored to tears. She had discovered two weeks ago that she wasn't pregnant. On that issue she wasn't sure if she was disappointed or happy. Part of her was disappointed because a baby

might be all that she ever had of Quinn. The other part was happy because if they had a child, she didn't want him to have any doubts as to its paternity.

They talked almost every day on the phone, but it wasn't the same as being together. Even her work, something that had once thrilled her, seemed to have lost its luster. Now the sounds of the city, the smells and the traffic seemed dull and uninteresting. She sighed as she looked at the video cabinet. There wasn't much on television so she usually opted to watch a movie if she wasn't into a good book. As she mentally reviewed the selection she wished she had stopped by the video store to rent something she hadn't seen before. Maybe that would have taken her mind off of Utah.

She had just inserted "Aliens" into the VCR when her doorbell rang. Wondering whom it could be she slowly made her way to the door. "Who is it?" she asked.

"It's me, Sagebrush!"

Hearing that wonderful voice, Sage tore at the locks to get the door open. "Quinn?" she gasped as soon as she flung the door wide. God, but he looked wonderful! He was wearing jeans, a dark blue shirt and denim vest. And he was juggling several packages in one hand and a suitcase in the other. As soon as he entered the apartment it seemed to shrink in size. "Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"Then it wouldn't have been a surprise," he said grinning as he dropped the suitcase to the floor, but he held on to the gaily-wrapped packages. "I sure have missed you," he said pulling her against his long hard body with his free hand. Then his lips were on hers, tasting and rediscovering her all over again.

Sage clung to him barely daring to believe that he was actually here with her. When he released her lips she buried her face against his broad chest. "I can't believe you're really here."

"I've come to take you home, Sagebrush."

At this her head snapped up. "What?"

"I think these will say things better than I could with words," he said indicating his mysterious packages. "This one is from Kate. The twins miss you almost as much as I do. And your mother sends her love." When Sage just stared at the package, he prodded her. "Open it."

Young hands had obviously wrapped the package, but to her it was beautiful. With hands that shook just a little, she peeled back the paper and opened the box. Inside was a flower crown just like the ones she and Kate had made on the picnic. "Oh, it's beautiful," she cried taking it out and putting it on her head. It sat lower on her forehead than it should, but that didn't matter in the least.

Quinn handed her the second package. It contained a coffee can with holes in the top. Giving him a questioning look, she lifted the lid. Inside were several big fat night crawlers. Tears formed in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"Those are from Cody. He says that you need to come back so we can go fishing. These are his best night crawlers. You should feel honored." He smiled gently as he wiped away a tear that spilled down her cheek.

"I'm going to cry," she wailed looking at this wonderful gift from Cody.

Quinn grinned. What other woman would get weepy over night crawlers? "This last one is from me," he said handing her the biggest package.

Sage tore the paper away and lifted the top to find a pair of beautiful black cowboy boots with the initials S.O. on them. "Oh, Quinn! They're wonderful," she cried throwing her arms around his neck. "But what is S.O.?"

His smile was pure happiness. "Why Sage O'Shea, of course! Marry me, Sagebrush? Can you bear to give up the city for..." was as far as he got before Sage launched herself onto his lap?

"Yes! Yes! Yes!" she gushed between kisses. "You don't know how lonely I've been; how much I've missed you and the twins and Thor and Peaches and..." Quinn's kiss silenced her rambling.

His big hands cupped her bottom pulling her closer. His body was already hard with desire as he lowered her to the sofa before coming down beside her. "How soon can you be ready to leave?" he asked unbuttoning her silk robe. He groaned when he parted it to reveal the soft scrap of material that made up her nightgown. His lips caressed her neck, the soft skin of her shoulder before gently skimming the delicious curve of her breasts.

"Business is slow right now, so I don't have to give much notice at work," she gasped as his hands began to rediscover her soft curves. "Maybe a week?"

"Make it three days," Quinn groaned against her shoulder glorying in her clean floral scent. "I want to take you back with me."

"There's the apartment," she began.

"Is there any furniture you want?" he asked raggedly.

"Not really. Just my personal things, I guess." Sage was finding it difficult to think at all with Quinn's weight a marvelous distraction. Her hands helped him shrug out of the vest and then immediately went to work on the buttons of his blue shirt. When that was finally removed, she ran her hands over his bare chest, up over his broad shoulders and then down his arms.

Quinn groaned his approval as his hands worked their own magic on her. Standing up in one swift movement, he scooped her up off the sofa and headed for what he hoped was a bedroom. His sense of direction was right on as he laid her down in the middle of a full sized bed before sitting down to yank off his boots.

Sage watched him with love-filled eyes as he undressed and then stood gloriously naked. *No man should be this beautiful*, she thought to herself. When he reached for the hem of her nightgown, she was ready and raised her arms. Then they were together again, with no barriers of any kind between them.

When he finally nudged her legs apart, Sage was more than ready as he drove deep into her womanly warmth. "Quinn!" she breathed on a sigh of ecstasy glorying in the feel of his body on hers, of the feel of him filling her so completely. She rode along on the wondrous wave of pleasure he created with his body, his hands and his mouth as they kissed and touched. With one final push, Quinn sent them tumbling over the brink as cascading shards of intense pleasure swelled before exploding in bursts of joy.

As they floated down on a cloud of satisfaction, Quinn raised up on his elbows to look down at Sage. She met his gaze with a saucy grin that he'd come to love.

"Maybe I can be ready in two days," she sighed wrapping her arms around his neck.

"I think I can stand it in the city for that long. We can pack what you want to take and have it shipped. But you are coming home with me! After Sharon died I said I

would never again let a woman into my heart, but there weren't any defenses against you, Sagebrush. Now when I think of the words never again they take on new meaning. I will never again let you out of my sight or out of my heart." This woman had worked a miracle in his life. Who would have thought when he'd found her stalled in the middle of the road to his ranch, walking with such determination in those ridiculously high heels, that she would change his life so completely?

"I love you, Quinn O'Shea," Sage told him simply. "I know I have a lot to learn about being the wife of a rancher, but I will do my best. The twins will help me and so will mother."

"I just want you to be yourself, Sagebrush. You're the woman I fell in love with and the woman I want to spend the rest of my life with." As he said the words he realized how true they were. What he felt for Sage was much more than anything he'd ever felt for a woman before. This was real and solid. It would stand the test of time.

"Are you going to always give in so easily?" Sage grinned as she slowly drew a finger down the middle of his chest. This freedom to tease was wonderful, almost as wonderful as his smile. That beautiful smile he'd kept hidden for much too long.

Quinn slowly lowered himself as he whispered against her lips. "I may be easy, Sagebrush, but I'm no pushover."

Sage's laughter was pure joy. "We'll see about that, cowboy," she purred rubbing a small foot down the back of his leg. She had a feeling that they wouldn't get out of bed anytime soon. But tomorrow was another day and they could begin her packing then.

EPILOG

Four weeks later, Kim was helping Sage put the finishing touches to her wedding dress. It was a simple long white dress with wrist-length lace sleeves, a scooped neckline beaded with small pearls. Sage held her plain white veil in place while Kim placed the crown made of yellow and purple flowers on to hold it in place.

Kim shook her head. "We looked at some beautiful tiaras, but you insisted on this," she commented indicating the crown. Kim's gown was the same shade of purple as the flowers.

"Kate wanted to make it for me and I couldn't let her down. This makes her feel a part of the wedding," Sage said looking at herself in the mirror. She thought it looked perfect, if not a little big. It was the love it represented that concerned Sage.

Since their return to Chance, Sage had made a few changes around the house. The main one being pictures. Quinn helped her dig out all of the family pictures and they picked out some of Sharon to place in the family room. Kate and Cody had each asked for one for their rooms also. Quinn had been reluctant to place one of him with Sharon and the twins in the family room, but Sage was adamant. Sharon had been their mother and shared the house with their daddy. She didn't want them to forget that. No matter what Sharon had done, she had been a good mother to those children.

They were having the wedding at the park in town. So far the weather had cooperated giving them a beautiful blue sky. She was dressing at Kim and Lyle's house where they were going to have the reception. Lyle was best man. He and Quinn were already at the park awaiting the arrival of the rest of the wedding party.

Slim, who was giving the bride away, waited at the foot of the stairs to drive them to the park. "You sure look pretty, Miss Sage," he told her as she and Kim came down. He wore a suit and looked distinctly uncomfortable.

"You look pretty wonderful yourself, Slim," Sage said giving him a kiss on the cheek. "You can take the jacket off as soon as the pictures are over." She was rewarded by a wide smile.

When they got to the park, chairs had been set up with an aisle in the middle. An arbor of yellow and purple flowers stood just beyond where Quinn stood with Lyle and Cody by his side. Sage caught her breath when she first saw Quinn in his white tuxedo. He was magnificent. There was no other word to describe how wonderful he looked standing tall and straight. Lyle and Cody each wore a dark gray tuxedo. Sage smiled at Cody who grinned back at her.

Quinn had to fight back the lump in his throat as Sage slowly made her way down the aisle on Slim's arm. He had been surprised that she hadn't asked one of her brothers-in-law to give her away. She'd insisted that she felt closer to Slim and would like him to walk her down the aisle. Her sisters and their families had arrived yesterday. He liked them well enough, but honestly didn't think he would ever be a real friend with them or their husbands. They were staying at the ranch, but would be returning to Chicago early

in the morning. Apparently Sage's sisters didn't care to spend any more time with their mother either. Since it didn't seem to bother Cheyenne, he hadn't said anything.

He smiled as Sage drew closer with Kate in a purple dress leading the way with Kim right behind her. But it was Sage who drew his attention. She was stunning...even with that purple flower crown that had been Kate's contribution to the wedding. He could love Sage for that alone. Then she was beside him and they joined hands.

When the vows were spoken and the ceremony concluded, they turned to face their guests. "May I present Mr. and Mrs. Quinn O'Shea!" the minister announced to the large crowd of family, friends and neighbors.

Quinn leaned down to give his new bride a quick kiss. As they began to walk down the steps, Sage raised the hem of her long gown. "See?" she said to Quinn sticking out one foot.

Quinn looked down to see a pearl white cowboy boot with the initials S. O. in purple stitching on the side. He threw back his head and roared with laughter. "*Now* she gets it right!" He swept his delightful new wife up in his arms to carry her back down the aisle to the delight of the assembled crowd.