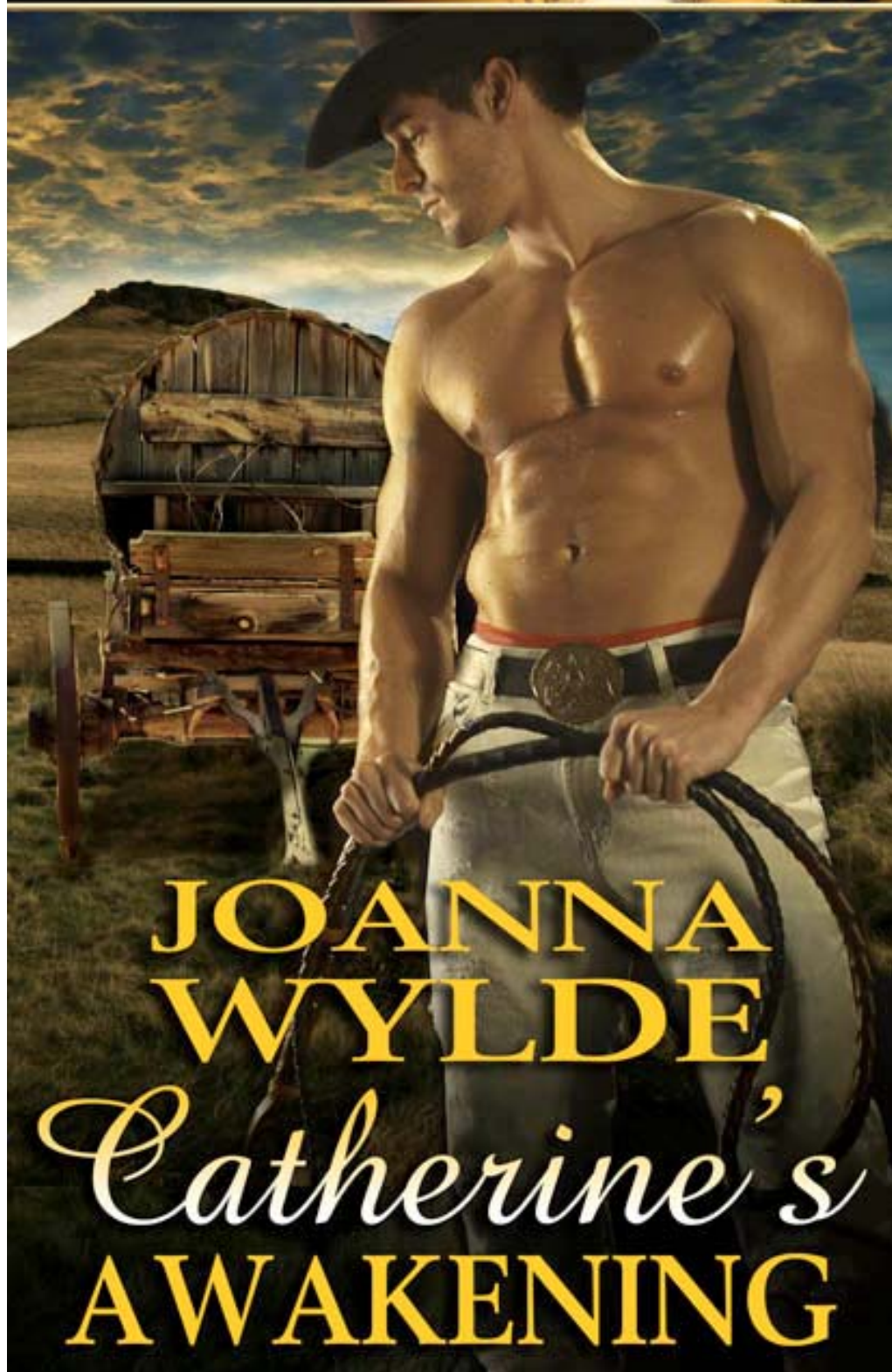


ELLORA'S CAVE **LAWLESS**



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Catherine's Awakening

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# *CATHERINE'S AWAKENING*

Joanna Wylde

### *Dedication*

This book is dedicated to Lori, who helped me find the Oxford English Dictionary.

### *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

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## **Chapter One**

*Near Forth Worth, Texas, 1867*

"Dammit all to hell, hold the horse steady!"

Wade's profane shout burned Catherine's ears. *Typical*, she thought, disgusted. But not her problem, at least for the moment. Putting him out of her mind, she resumed her stalking through the hayloft, hunting for the newest batch of kittens. From below a horse whinnied loudly and she froze. It sounded like Ginger, her mare. Catherine ran over to the hayloft window, standing on her toes to see, and looked out across the paddock. Sure enough, there was Ginger. Catherine's brother-in-law, Wade Masters, had her on a lead, steadying her as one of the ranch hands ran across the dusty ground toward the gate. Two others stood by in the dust, watching. In the background she heard a stallion trumpet.

What was Wade doing with Ginger?

She studied him, which was a mistake. His tall form was covered in dust and sweat, but even from the hayloft he looked better than any man should. The thin fabric of his shirt clung to his work-toughened body, outlining his every feature. Work-hardened, strong as the horses he loved so much, unwilling to compromise. Everything about him called to her, and she hated him for it. Wade made her gut twist with longing, and watching the play of his body as he held the horse firm didn't help. Ginger reared up, and his broad-rimmed hat flew off his head. He steadied her, speaking in gentle, soothing tones that ran right along Catherine's spine, making her wonder just how good he might sound next to a woman in the middle of the night.

She shook her head, warding off the thoughts. She might be a widow, but it still wasn't decent, the way she sometimes dreamed about Wade. No good woman would spend her meals studying his firm, full lips across the dinner table. And a prudent

woman wouldn't take an extra ten minutes every time she trimmed his sun-streaked brown hair in the kitchen, running her fingers through the soft locks and imagining them against her stomach.

The ranch hand swung open the gate and led Wade's stallion, Baron, into the fenced area. Suddenly she realized what was going on down there—Wade was going to breed Ginger to Baron. Catherine's eyes narrowed in anger.

"Wade Masters, you stop that right now!" she yelled out the window without a second thought. The men looked up at her, startled, and then a slow grin stole across Wade's handsome face.

"You want to help breed the horses, Cat?" he called back, his tone taunting. "I didn't know ladies liked to watch these things, but we can use the help."

Anger washed through Catherine and she gritted her teeth, even as she felt a hot blush rising across her face. Women didn't talk about horse breeding. But Wade knew exactly how she felt about Ginger. They'd discussed it last week. She didn't want the mare bred this season. She needed time to recover from her last foal. Not to mention that Catherine wanted Ginger in good riding condition. If she got that teaching job in town, she'd need her. She hadn't mentioned teaching to Wade just yet, but that didn't mean she had to just sit back and let Wade wreck everything by getting her mare pregnant. Catherine stormed across the loft to the ladder, only to find Wade climbing up toward her.

"What's happening with Ginger?" she asked, toying with the idea of kicking him back down to the barn floor if she didn't like the answer. Perhaps her intentions showed in her face, because he didn't answer her until he'd pulled himself up into the loft.

"Go to the window and see for yourself," he said, nodding toward the opening.

She shot him a suspicious look, then headed back to the window. José, another of the hands, had taken Wade's place holding Ginger's lead, clicking at her as the other hand brought in Baron.

"Wade, you have to tell them to stop," Catherine said, whirling around to confront him, too angry to feel embarrassed. He'd come up behind her, though, and she found herself face-to-face with him, far too close for comfort.

"It's too late, he already has her scent," Wade said. His voice was low and smooth, holding just a touch of condescending exasperation. She hated that tone. Bully. The man was as full of himself now as he'd been as a ten-year-old taunting her, "*Here, kitty Cat, Cat, Cat!*" before catching her and pulling her braids. But soon she'd be rid of him. The teacher's job came with a *house*.

"She's fine, look for yourself," he continued, and something in his tone caught her attention. She looked up at him, really looking this time, and realized her studied her far too closely. His face was hard, brown from years of sun, his eyes cold with the shadows they'd held since coming home from the war. Their green color startled her, as they always did. He focused on her face so intently it was uncomfortable. And he was too tall, looming over her, making her feel small and powerless.

To avoid facing him, she turned back toward to the window to watch her mare. The gentle female had gone still as Baron sidled up next to her, intently sniffing, nudging her with his nose. The ranch hands continued holding the leads, but they kept them loose, allowing the horses some space. Baron reared up just a little, and Catherine saw the mare twitch her tail to one side. They were about to mate, right in front of her, and while she'd seen animals breeding before, she wasn't prepared to witness it with Wade.

Dear heavens, they had too much tension between them already.

But Wade stepped closer to her, putting one hand on the window frame on either side of her head, trapping her. She felt his hot breath on the back of her neck as he leaned forward to speak low and soft.

"Ginger knows what she wants," he said. "She's not afraid of Baron. You don't need to worry about her, Cat. She's doing what she was designed to do."

The words sent a shiver right down her spine, tickling her all the way to her toes. Enough was enough, she shouldn't stay here and watch. It wasn't proper. Ginger

squealed again, and then Baron reared up and covered her. Catherine's eyes widened as she saw the dark length of the stallion's enormous penis lengthen.

"I can't believe how big it is," she said softly, and blushed fiercely, damning her stupid tongue. Why did she always blurt out what she was thinking? Other girls never said foolish things like that, yet she'd been doing it all her life. Wade chuckled in her ear, and moved closer in, crowding her body against the wall. She felt the heat of him against her back, and in that moment her worst suspicions were confirmed.

Wade wanted her, the way a man wants a woman.

The way Catherine wanted him too.

The length of his body was hot against her, all too easy to feel through the thin fabric of her work clothes. Her mama had always warned her that leaving off her corset and petticoats would cause her trouble. But who could bear wearing the hot garments doing chores around the ranch? She'd planned to put them back on after returning to the ranch house. After all, respectable teachers always wore their stays... And now would be a real good time to head home and put them on, she thought. She pushed back against Wade, trying to free herself. Instead of giving, he moved closer, and the unmistakable feel of his hard erection pushing against her butt grew so prominent that she couldn't pretend not to feel it.

"You don't need to worry about her," Wade said. Catherine glanced down at the stallion as he reared up over her mare, then closed her eyes resolutely.

"Ladies don't see things like this," she said, hoping it would go quickly. He gave a low chuckle.

"Really?" he said. "You had a pretty strong opinion a moment ago. Afraid?"

Catherine tried to stomp on his foot, but he pressed her so close to the wall that she couldn't move. She sighed in frustration.

"Wade, this isn't what I want."



"For Ginger or yourself?" he asked, pushing his hips up against her butt, pressing his hardened penis into her soft flesh. It felt good. It had been so long since she'd touched a man like that. She reminded herself firmly that just because a male feels good at first doesn't mean it's worth a woman giving up her freedom.

"You shouldn't do that, Wade," she said. "You know better. You're like a brother to me. We're family."

His bark of laughter was harsh, filling her ears and making her wince.

"You're never been like a sister to me," he said. "I still don't understand why you were crazy enough to marry my brother, but he's dead and you can't tell me you regret it."

Silence hung between them. He was right, and they both knew it. She'd look like a fool if she tried to deny her relief when the sheriff told her about Ryan's death. In a brothel, no less. He'd made her life a living hell. Failing to mourn him left her feeling guilty, though. No proper woman would be happy to lose a husband, would she?

"You've been very good to me since Ryan's death," she said, choosing her words carefully. He nudged against her again, and she stiffened and spread her legs, unwittingly copying the mare's stance. She realized her mistake in an instant as he rubbed against her, but couldn't bring herself to back down. She didn't want to show him any weakness at all. Dear heavens, how could such a difficult man feel so good? She could sense her nipples hardening. Traitors. She needed to draw a line with him. Quickly.

"Your father too. I know he meant it when he said I could live here as long as I want. But the time's come for me to move on."

He froze behind her.

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"I've applied for the teaching position in town. I've been meaning to talk to you about it," she said, her voice calm, as if his organ weren't all but entering her from behind. She sensed the tremendous tension in his limbs, knew it was taking a great deal

of self-control for him to hold back his reaction to her news. She really should have waited until a better time to talk to him.

Perhaps in front of witnesses. Too late now...

"You keep house for me and Dad, and you're an important part of this ranching operation," he said. "Nobody wants you to leave, Catherine."

He crowded against her further as he spoke, and her breath caught. She could smell him, the tang of his sweat and the dirt, and just a hint of horse too. A working man's scent. Every breath made her more uncomfortable, and she knew all too well what her foolish body wanted from him. Even at his worst, Wade's physical form had always called to her. The image of Baron penetrating Ginger leapt to mind, and she shivered.

He thrust himself up at her imperiously, demanding her surrender with his body language. Liquid heat rose up along her legs. It would be so easy to give in to him, to let him toss her skirts up and take her body as surely as Ginger's had been taken. Catherine took a deep, steadying breath. Successful teachers didn't give in to wanton urges. Of course, she wasn't a teacher yet. *Stay focused*, she reminded herself.

"We can talk about this later, Wade," she said, her voice sounding far firmer than she felt. "It isn't right for you to be this close to me, whatever our relationship. Let me go back to the house."

"Are you sure you want to?" he asked, his voice deceptively smooth. He pulled one hand from the window and smoothed it down along her bodice. It skimmed over her nipples, and she felt the way his fingers jerked spasmodically the instant he realized she wasn't wearing anything but her dress and a thin chemise.

Then his hand cupped her breast, giving the nipple a little pinch. He might as well stick his hand between her legs, given the way sensation tore through her. She buckled against him, and he brought his other hand around to support her weight. Now he held both breasts, pulling her back to his body, grinding her bottom against his arousal.

"Are you sure you don't want me to keep doing this?" he asked, his voice a whisper. He let one hand drop down, pulling at the fabric of her dress until he reached under the hemline, skimming his fingers across her thigh.

Catherine gasped. His touch was like fire, and need tore through her so fast it hurt. With the pain came sudden clarity, and she wrenched herself free of him, banging into the wall painfully. Then she whirled to face him. Why couldn't the darned man give her some space?

"You don't get to touch me," she said. "Ever."

"This has been brewing between us for a long time," Wade said, his eyes hard and steady. "When I came home and found you married to my brother, I kept my hands off you. I didn't want to, but I did. And when he died I gave you time to recover. But it's been a year, Cat. It's time for us to sort this out."

His words caught her off guard. Had it really been a year since Ryan's death? She thought about the date, and realized he was right. Exactly right. Today was the anniversary. She gave a little shiver.

"Time for you to come out of mourning," he said, his voice grim. "I've been very patient with you, but it's over now. I want you, Cat, and I always get what I want."

"I don't want you," she said hotly. He raised one brow, mocking her, and she shook her head quickly. "No, what I mean is that I don't want to be married again, and I don't want to be under any man's control. Ever. I'm going to get a job and support myself. If I canoodle with you, that won't work. They won't let a loose woman be the schoolteacher. And don't call me *Cat*!"

"You don't need a job, *Catherine*," he said, his tone firm and final. "You already have one. You manage the ranch house, and do a hell of a job with it too. The men love you, Dad loves you and if I don't get my cock into you soon I'm going to explode. That's enough for any woman."

"Don't you dare use words like that with me," she said, shocked. "I may not be a fancy lady, but I am a respectable woman. You'll treat me as such."

He laughed, and backed away from her. The pressure in the air eased, and Catherine had to stop herself from bolting out of the loft. She had a feeling that might raise the predator in him. Instead she looked him right in the eye, holding his gaze like a sheepdog staring down an errant charge. Time to lay down the law with Wade.

"You don't have the right to tell me what to do, Wade," she said. "I'll make my own way, thank you very much. And if you can't treat me with respect, then you should keep your mouth shut. I'll go where I want to go."

She ducked around him, marching purposefully toward the ladder. Best to escape while she had the final word. His laugh followed her and she stiffened her spine.

"You go ahead and try to leave, Cat," he said. "See what happens. You belong to me, and I don't give up what's mine whether it's land, cattle or a woman. The sooner you understand that, the happier you'll be."

\* \* \* \* \*

His words followed Catherine all day as she worked, worming their way through her mind at inconvenient moments. She had to make the biscuits twice, after pounding them so hard the first batch lost its lift. She burned the stew for dinner, and took a certain amount of pleasure in the fact that she didn't have time to make a pie for dessert. In fact, she didn't have time to do several things, including mending a pair of Wade's pants. Until he saw fit to treat her with respect, it wouldn't happen.

Even if he did, it might not happen. Not if she got her teaching job. The position was more than just a way to earn money—it meant independence, a home of her own. A life free of men telling her what to do. Marriage to Ryan had been enough to convince any sane woman to swear off men. By the time the food was ready, she'd managed to build up a good head of righteous indignation over Wade's words to her earlier. He didn't own her. No man owned her. And a woman wasn't like a cow in any way. Although a nasty little voice in the back of her head whispered that in the eyes of the law, she might as well be.

Catherine certainly hadn't been able to get free from Ryan, no matter how poorly he treated her. Nobody would give her a job, and she seriously suspected only Wade's glowering presence had protected her from physical harm at Ryan's hands. He'd only hit her once. Wade had heard her scream, and he'd broken into their bedroom, pulling Ryan off her and hauling him out to the barn. She hadn't seen her husband for nearly two weeks after that, and he'd never laid a hand on her again.

The expression on Wade's face the morning after that horrific night had been terrible. She'd served breakfast to him and her father-in-law and then hid in the kitchen for the rest of the day. She simply couldn't bear to look at him, she felt so much shame and humiliation. He'd seen her at her lowest point, and half naked too.

Catherine shivered, then pulled herself together. Bad memories were like a plague, you couldn't get rid of them. Best to pretend they didn't exist. Still, she was feeling a little more charitable toward Wade as she set the table. He might be overbearing, but she didn't believe he'd hurt a woman. Ever. No, he was different than Ryan in that respect. *You married the wrong brother*, the traitorous little voice whispered in the back of her head, but she ignored it. The past was over, time to look to the future. And her future didn't include a man, not even one as attractive as Wade Masters.

"Supper's ready," she called as she rang the big bell hanging from the kitchen porch. The men came in quickly, washing up out at the pump before tramping into the dining room. There were six hands on the ranch, in addition to Wade and his father, John, although only two would be eating with the family tonight. The others were camped out on the range, watching over the stock.

Wade's temper hadn't improved, that was obvious from the way he glowered at her as they settled 'round the table. His father sat at the head, but they all knew Wade was the real man in charge at Sweet River Ranch. John was as retired as a Texan man could get, working for only a few hours a day, puttering around the barn doing small projects. That, combined with his hard hearing, left him detached from most ranch operations.

The men sat down as she took her place at the foot of the table, then they all bowed their heads for grace. Wade spoke, his words the same as always.

“Bless us, oh Lord, and these, thy gifts...”

To her annoyance, Catherine wasn’t able to keep her eyes focused downwards, stealing a peek at Wade from beneath her lashes. He didn’t exactly seem filled with the spirit of prayer. His eyes bored into her, and she realized that each word of the blessing was coming through clenched teeth. Yup, still pretty angry.

“Through Christ, our Lord, Amen,” he said, and the men fell to their food hungrily. Nobody seemed to notice that the stew was burned, or if they did, they weren’t saying anything. One of the things she’d learned as the daughter of a ranch hand was that a hungry man hardly cares what he eats. If it’s hot, that’s good enough after a long day of work.

Wade wasn’t eating, though.

“I hear that they’re looking for a teacher in town,” he said, the words a gauntlet thrown across the table. “I can’t imagine what kind of woman would want a job like that. A real woman wants to get married and take care of her man.”

“That’s definitely true,” John Masters said, dipping his biscuit in the gravy. “Too many men, not enough good women to tame ‘em. I don’t know who they’ll be able to find to fill the position—all the local girls have kids to watch. And no Eastern woman is going to come out here, not unless they’re prepared to pay a whole lot more. The last time they had a man take over he wasn’t worth a damn. It’s not men’s work, anyway.”

The ranch hands nodded sagely, as if they cared one bit about the teacher’s job. Catherine took a deep breath, and then spoke.

“I put my name in for the teaching position,” she said. Like a row of startled puppets, the men stopped eating and turned to look at her. “After all, it’s not like I have a husband or children. You’ve been very good to me here, but it’s been a year and it’s time for me to move on. There’s a house in town for the teacher, and I think I’d do very well there. I was always good in school, you know.”

"That's a damn fool idea," John said, sounding so much like Wade it startled her. "You belong here on the ranch, you're one of us. And the work you do here is important. We can't keep this place running unless all of us do our part."

She opened her mouth to protest, but to her surprise, Wade jumped in first.

"I agree, it's a damn fool idea," he said. "But the reason Catherine should stay isn't because of the work. We can hire someone to keep house if we need to. She should stay here because we're a family, and this is where she belongs."

"Beside that, you'll be marrying soon enough. They'll take your wages if you leave before the school year ends," John said, speaking to her directly. "It's about time you and Wade tied the knot."

"What?" she gasped, even as Wade spoke forcefully.

"Dad, keep your mouth shut."

Silence fell over the table, and Jim, one of the ranch hands, coughed nervously.

"Maybe we should be getting out to the bunkhouse," he said.

"Don't worry about it," Wade said. "I'll help Cat with the dishes, and we can talk about things privately. You finish your food." Wade stood up, walked over to Catherine and took her elbow, all but dragging her into the kitchen.

"What the hell is your father talking about?" she demanded as soon as they reached the kitchen. Wade clicked his tongue in mock reproach.

"Teachers don't use language like that. You definitely belong here on the ranch with us."

"Don't tell me what kind of language to use," she said, glaring at him. "What did your father mean? I'm not marrying you."

"He wants us to get married," Wade said, letting go of her arm, and leaning back against the kitchen table. "And I think he's right. You're a good woman, the kind of woman who can help me build this ranch into what it should be. We have the chance to make our own empire here, Cat. I've been making contacts, studying the markets. They

need beef back East, and we can give it to them. Maybe not this year or the next, but we'll figure out how to get our cattle to one of the railheads up north. When that happens, men like me will become cattle kings, we'll make our own destiny. You're the perfect partner for someone like me."

"You're insane," she said. "I don't want to marry you. I don't want to marry anyone. I want to live my own life. And it's Catherine," she added absently.

"If we got married, this would be your own life," he said, his tone reasonable. "You have as much to gain as me. We can do it together, really create something for our children to inherit."

"I don't think *we* is the right word," she said. "You and your father own the ranch. The men get paid. All I do around here is work, and while I appreciate the room and board, I want more in life. If nothing else, I'd like to be able to buy material for a new dress someday. You know, clothing that hasn't been mended a thousand times?"

He looked startled, and then ran an assessing eye over her body. She shivered, wishing she wasn't so sure he was picturing her without any clothes at all.

"If you want a pretty dress, we can get that for you," he said slowly. "We can even order something if you'd like, so you don't have to make it yourself."

"I don't want you to buy me a dress," she said. "I want to buy my own dress. I don't want to be dependent, Wade. I want to take care of myself. And I definitely don't want to be married ever again."

He took a step close to her, reaching out and touching her cheek softly. Tendrils of desire shot through her, and she crossed her arms over her chest protectively. She didn't need him touching her, confusing her senses any more than he already had.

"You feel it between us, I know you do," he said, his voice low. "There's always been something there, but you were too young before the war, and when I got back you'd already married Ryan. Why the hell did you do it, Catherine?"

She shook her head, denying his version of events.



"All I remember between us was you teasing me," she said tartly. "You pulled my braids and called me 'kitty Cat'. That's not a connection, that's bullying."

"Well, you were too damn young for me to do this," he said, pulling her forward in his arms suddenly, taking her mouth with his and chasing all the thoughts right out of her head. Ryan was the only man who'd ever kissed her, and his touches had been fumbling and moist, nothing like Wade's.

His mouth mastered hers and suddenly she couldn't breathe. His lips were hard, controlling, and his tongue pushed into her opening with a fire she couldn't fight. Didn't *want* to fight. Her entire body sagged against him, the firmness and strength of his arms holding her up. They pressed together, him lean and long; her soft and yielding. Every part of Catherine screamed that she should give in to him, to spread herself and let him thrust between her legs with the same fervor he was thrusting his tongue into her mouth.

He stopped the kiss, pulling away from her slowly as she gasped for breath.

"That's between us," he said, his eyes dark in the barely lit kitchen. The sun was setting outside, and the last pale reflections of light making the room intimate and close. She swayed, wiping her hand across her mouth.

"You can kiss, I'll give you that," she said. "But kissing is only one part of life. I learned something from my time with Ryan—a woman can't afford to give in to her heart. I've already been charmed by one Masters man, I won't fall for another. It doesn't matter how much you kiss me, Wade, I won't be marrying you. Ever. I'm going to be a schoolteacher."

With that, she turned away from him, deliberately pretending she couldn't sense him looming behind her. In fact, she could hardly hold herself upright, she was so unnerved, but that was the last thing she wanted him to know.

"Cat, you're a stubborn woman," Wade said. "I like that—I don't need some silly girl who doesn't have a mind of her own. They're not worth a damn out on the range. But you're wrong about us. We belong together, and I've known it since you were

thirteen years old. You got away from me for a while, but Ryan was stupid enough to get himself killed and give me another chance. I won't make the same mistake twice. You *will* marry me."

He strode out of the kitchen, his words hanging heavy in the close kitchen air. Catherine took a deep breath, stretched her arms above her head, and forced herself to release some of the tension she'd built up.

"Some help with the dishes he is," she muttered, picking up a pot and slamming it down on the table. The thud it made was satisfying, so she did it again, this time banging so hard that a spoon fell off the table and rattled to the floor.

She should have banged it against his stubborn head.

## **Chapter Two**

Wade sat back on his bed, turning over the small velvet pouch he held in his fingers, toying with the drawstring.

He'd really screwed things up this time. Or rather, his father had. Wade wasn't a subtle man, never had been, but even he knew better than tell a woman who she should marry in front of a roomful of ranch hands. He'd always wanted Cat. Coming home from the war to find her hitched to his brother had been one of the worst days of his life. And the day Ryan died? He'd decided to marry the new widow within an hour of getting the news. He still felt guilty about that—a man should be angry to learn his brother's dead, not happy. But Ryan had been broken inside, twisted in a sick way that only Wade seemed to have noticed when they were kids. In adulthood, Ryan's behavior had been so God-awful that nobody could miss it. Fighting in the war had made it worse, and Catherine had been foolish to marry him as soon as he came back.

She'd definitely paid the price, and then some, poor woman.

Wade had waited patiently over the past year, even though sometimes he'd wanted her so badly he'd had to leave the ranch house, joining the men on the range for weeks at a time. The smell of her hair haunted him, the quirk of her mouth when she smiled, the way her head tilted when she looked off into the distance. He hadn't seen that smile for a long time after Ryan's death, but it was back again these days. When he'd found her watching the horses, something inside him just snapped. He knew he should regret what he'd done, but he couldn't. That one touch of her body was the most heavenly thing he'd ever experienced. He'd be damned if he regretted anything about it.

Wade opened the little bag and tilted it, allowing the star sapphire ring and matching sapphire eardrops inside to slide out. They were exactly the same color as her eyes. He'd been carrying them for four years, ever since a grateful Georgian woman had

given them to him when he'd saved her husband's life. He'd known they were for Catherine even then. Hell, he'd known he wanted her since she was thirteen and he was seventeen. She'd always been part of him on a certain level—when he'd come home to find her married to Ryan, it was like one of his arms had been cut off.

The ring glinted in the candlelight, the star within shining bright. Bright as her gaze. He thought of her lips, the way she'd fallen under his spell the moment he'd kissed her. She wanted him every bit as badly as he wanted her, there was no question of that. But this business of the teaching job... He couldn't allow that to happen. He'd hardly ever see her, and worse, every man in town would be able to court her. He had no illusions as to how long she'd last—young, single women who knew how to work were hard to find. One as pretty as Catherine was as rare as the sparkling gems he held in hand.

He'd have to convince her to marry him, that's all there was to it. And unlike his original plan, where he'd hoped woo her long and slow until she fell into his arms without thinking, now he had to get right to work. Catherine's parents might be dead, but they had been well-respected in the community. She'd get the job, no question about it. The school board would be thrilled to have her.

He had to put a stop to it. Immediately.

Resolved, he swung his legs off the bed and strode to the door. He'd never been a man to wait once he'd made up his mind, and tonight was no different. He walked out into the hallway, glancing under his father's door to make sure his light was out. Sure enough, it was. John slept like the dead these days, and his hearing wasn't much better. Catherine's door was at the end of the hallway, the same room she'd shared with Ryan. He wondered what it had been like for her as a young bride, moving into her father-in-law's home under the control of a man like Ryan. Hellish, he imagined. In all honesty, he probably should have expected her to try to bolt before now.

And he could kick himself for not thinking about money for her. She was right—everyone else who worked on the ranch got paid, yet they'd just expected her to be

happy with a roof over her head. Wade shook his head. He just wasn't used to thinking about stuff like that. In his mind they were already partners. She could have as much of his money as she wanted.

When he got to the door, he raised one hand to knock, and then thought better of it. After all, what did he expect, that she'd invite him in with a welcoming kiss? Instead he reached down and opened the door, stepping inside quickly and quietly. He heard her gasp, the breathy noise she made rushing straight to his cock. It was always like that around her. Everything about Catherine turned him on, even when she was spitting fire at him for something he'd done wrong. *Especially* when she was spitting fire, he thought ruefully.

"You get right out of here, Wade Masters," she said into the darkness, sounding like an enraged kitten. He laughed, and then something flew through the air and hit him in the head.

"Goddamn it!" he muttered, rubbing his head and reaching down to find the missile. A book. "What is this, your Bible?"

She didn't answer, and he knew he'd guessed right. He gave a low chuckle.

"You really should do something about your temper, Catherine," he said. "You'll get yourself into trouble one of these days. I should tell the school board about this."

"Care to explain to them why you were in my bedroom after dark?" she shot back. "You leave, right now, and we'll pretend this didn't happen."

"I'm not leaving. We have to talk," he said. He walked across the room, sitting down on the soft bed. He felt her body roll toward him, and the quick movements she made as she scrabbled back across the mattress.

"I don't have anything to say to you," she said quickly.

"I seriously doubt that," he said. "If nothing else, I'll bet you'd love to tell me how wrong my father is about us marrying. He sure as hell shouldn't have brought it up like that, but he didn't mean any harm. You can believe that, can't you?"

"I don't think your father has any right to have an opinion on my marital status," she snapped. "And neither do you."

He leaned over the bed, feeling her shrink back from him. Something about it sparked his predatory side, and while he'd come in here with every intention of talking to her and nothing more, he couldn't quite remember why. He wanted to touch her, to taste her again. This attraction between them, she couldn't deny it any more than he could. She might pretend they didn't share a connection, but her body answered his. He could sense it in the way she'd stilled, waiting for him.

"I'm going to kiss you," he said. "If you really aren't interested in me, all you have to do is not kiss me back."

"Keep your mouth away from mine," she hissed. Wade leaned in closer, coming over her until his body all but touched hers. He dropped his head down, letting his lips whisper across hers.

"Just don't kiss me back," he said, and then his mouth took hers. In the kitchen, he'd claimed her, attacking like a man starved. He *had* been starved for her, still was, but this time he forced himself to move slowly. His lips touched hers once, twice, drifting back and forth, catching on the contours of her mouth. Each brush of skin sent fire rushing through him, his heart starting to beat faster, but he held himself back. This was about proving a point, not giving in to his desires. He'd tease her until she responded. Then she couldn't deny the attraction between them. From there, all he had to do was convince her that she could trust him with her safety.

His lips brushed against her once more, and Wade felt the trembling of her mouth as she struggled to ignore his touch. Her scent hung heavy in his nose, almost as sexy as her body, and he wondered if he smelled half as good to her as she did to him. Her lips twitched once, twice, then they quivered as she opened for him. He wanted to groan in triumph, but knew that was the last thing she needed. Now was the time to woo, not gloat. He sank into her mouth, plunging his tongue into her hot opening, wishing desperately that he could plunge something harder into her.

Instead he lowered his body over hers, allowing Catherine to take his weight, pressing the hard ridge of his penis into her yielding stomach. He rubbed against her rhythmically as she reached her hands up to bury her fingers in his hair. She pulled him closer, her entire body straining toward him, and he kissed her deeply until neither of them could go without taking a breath even one second longer.

Wade gasped as he pulled away, burying his face in the curve of her neck, sucking in great gulps of air as the pounding of his heart rang through his head. Catherine strained up at him, whimpering with need. She wiggled under the quilt, spreading her legs for him, and he settled between them gladly, rubbing his cock against her most sensitive spot. He wanted inside so badly he could hardly stand it. She wanted him just as much. Every time he ground against her she moaned, her hips gyrating with desperation. He took a deep, calming breath and forced his body to stop moving. She protested wordlessly, but he shook his head against her body.

"Do you want me to take you?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered. "I do."

"You'd let me fuck you without the benefit of marriage?" he asked, demanding absolute clarity. The crudity of his language stilled her, but she nodded her head resolutely.

"Well, I'm not that kind of man," he said, pulling away from her to sit back on the edge of the bed. She seemed stunned, utterly still in the darkness of the room.

"What kind of game are you playing, Wade?" she asked finally, levering herself to sit up in bed. He leaned over and kissed her gently on the mouth before standing up.

"I won't sleep with a woman I'm not married to," he said. She burst out laughing.

"You've slept with half the county, Wade," she said. "Ryan told me all about your adventures. I don't believe you for one minute."

"I've had my share of lovers," he admitted. "But now I've decided to marry you, and I won't sleep with you until I get a ring on your finger. If you want me, you'll have to marry me."

She laughed again.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Wade,” she said. “I’ll admit it, I want your body. Maybe that makes me a whore. But I’m not a stupid whore. I won’t let myself get trapped by a man again.”

“I don’t want to trap you,” he said, his voice quiet and intense. “I want you to be my partner. And I think you want it too.”

He reached across the bed, cupping her cheek and then running his hand down into the loose bodice of her flannel nightgown. She gasped, leaning closer to him. Her breasts hung loose, and he cupped one, fingering the nipple. She sighed, and he felt his resolve fade, his cock giving him clear orders to push her down and take her before she changed her mind.

He ignored the orders, pulling away and standing up instead.

“Nope, you don’t get me unless you marry me,” he said, forcing his voice to sound flippant. “Otherwise you’ll have to satisfy yourself. Although if you need someone to watch you or offer tips, I’m your man.”

Her shocked gasp was the only answer, and he laughed as he left the room. That hadn’t gone as he expected. He’d planned to tempt her, not challenge her. And he couldn’t understand why he hadn’t given in and bedded her for the life of him. He’d never wanted a woman more in his life.

But he’d been telling her the truth about one thing. He wasn’t willing to simply plow her and be done with it. He wanted more—marriage and a family. And until she gave it to him, she could damn well spend the night writhing in her own frustrated juices.

He knew he would.



### **Chapter Three**

Catherine could hardly look at Wade the next morning as she tossed hot flapjacks onto his plate. The talk at the table was subdued, the ranch hands escaping as soon as they'd shoveled the bare minimum of food in their mouths. She wished she could go with them. Tension hung palpable in the air, although John seemed oblivious.

"I'm going to town today," Wade announced. "Catherine, why don't you pack a picnic lunch for us and come with me? I'm sure you'd enjoy the chance to visit with someone besides sweaty cowboys."

Catherine sucked her breath in, glaring at him as she spun the offer over in her head. It would give her a chance to check on the teaching position, and to see some of her friends. On the other hand, it would mean several hours spent with Wade in the wagon. What was the blasted man up to?

"I thought you didn't want me pursuing that job," she said finally. "Why would you make it easier for me?"

He smiled at her benignly.

"You aren't a prisoner here, Catherine," he said. "I don't want you taking the job, but I can't force you to do anything. And you mentioned you wanted to buy some material for a dress."

"I don't have any money," she said flatly, raising an eyebrow at him. "Remember? I work for free around here."

"That's an oversight," he said. "You're a family member. You can buy whatever you need. Just put it on our tab at the store."

She shook her head, wishing she could make him understand. Putting something on the ranch tab was not the same as having her own money.

"Oh, and here's this," he said, sliding a handful of gold coins across the table. She scooped them up, and then gave him an incredulous look.

"That's fifty dollars!" she said. "You're crazy. I didn't know you had this kind of money lying around."

"We didn't trade our gold for Confederate script during the war," John said, looking a little sheepish. "The family actually came through all right, although we don't advertise that. No reason to give thieves any reason to come poking around here. I buried it myself out on the range, and only the boys knew where to find it. But you've earned your share, and that's enough to give you some spending money. Or save it for something special, girl. You've taken good care of us, and we appreciate it."

"Thank you," she said, meaning it. She'd never had that much cash of her own in her life. Neither had her parents, at least not that she knew of. Her father had been a hardworking cowboy, and while they always had enough to eat, there was never any extra.

"I'm sorry we didn't give it to you earlier," Wade said. "But you need to understand, as long as you're part of our family, what we have is yours, Catherine. You don't have to worry about money. I just assumed you knew that. Now are you up for a trip to town?"

She nodded her head, still feeling a bit stunned. Back in the kitchen she wrapped the gold eagles in a bit of cloth, then stuck them in her pocket. She wasn't quite sure what to do with them, but she figured she should put them away for now. No reason to make any decisions just yet.

She had their lunch packed and ready by the time Wade pulled around to the kitchen in the platform wagon. She thought of the chores she should be doing today, but shrugged her shoulders. They'd still be there tomorrow, and a trip to town in the middle of the week was a treat. She often made it in on Sundays, but not always. Everything depended on the weather and the needs of the stock. Wade gave her a hand up and they set off.

In the wrong direction.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "Is this some kind of trick?"

He gave her a hurt expression, patently false.

"Of course not," he said. "But I promised George Watson I'd stop by his place and look at a horse."

"That's six miles out of the way," she snapped. "Wouldn't it be faster and easier to ride over some other time?"

"I'm already losing a day to go after supplies," he said. "Makes sense to combine the trips."

"We won't get to town until this afternoon," she replied. "I think you planned this."

He shot her an unrepentant grin.

"Of course I did," he replied. "I don't get a lot of time just with you. Figured this was as good a day as any to grab some more."

She snorted, and turned her head away from him. He'd gotten her, no question of that. A trip to town was too good to pass up, and he'd been so nice this morning she'd figured he was feeling guilty about last night. Stupid thing, to imagine Wade Masters capable of shame...

But after twenty minutes her foul mood dissolved. The sun was shining, and while the spring air was still a little brisk, all around her birds sang and tiny flowers bloomed. She loved springtime—especially since the end of the war. They'd all lived in fear for so long, and now it lay behind them. She wasn't happy that Texas had been defeated, but she was glad to be finished with the bloodshed. Let other people be bitter—there were too many opportunities ahead of her. After a while she broke the silence.

"It was a dirty trick to lie to me about this trip," she said. "Especially since I would have come, anyway. I'm not afraid of you, Wade."

"I didn't think you were," he replied. "So far as I can tell, you aren't afraid of anything. It's always fun to rile you up, though. You look pretty when you're mad."

"You shouldn't talk like that," she snapped at him automatically, but the compliment made her glow a little inside. Like the land around her, his touches yesterday had awakened something within her after a long winter. She raised her arms up and sighed happily, thrusting her chest out a bit as she stretched.

"You're the one who chickened out last night," she replied. "I don't remember saying no to you. Like I said, I'm not afraid."

"Aren't you worried about your reputation? I thought you said the school board wouldn't hire a loose woman."

"I know you too well, Wade," she said, smiling. "Anything that might happen between us would stay between us, as long as we weren't obvious and it didn't last for long. You don't tell tales about women."

*Unlike Ryan.* The words hung unspoken between them.

"I think I made my position clear last night," Wade said. "I'm looking for a wife, not a mistress. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to do my best to convince you to marry me."

"Well, I don't see quite what you have to offer," she replied, laughing. "I already have access to the ranch, and so far as I can tell, being your wife would be a lot of work. Work I already do."

"You do the work, but you don't get to do the playing that comes with it," he replied, his voice dropping in tone. "I know how to make a woman happy, Catherine. Very happy. You should let me show you sometime."

"I'm game if you are," she replied, turning to grin at him. The look in his eyes stopped her, though. Their banter might have been light, but the expression on his face was dead serious.

"I'm going to have you, Catherine," he said. "Don't mistake me. And when I do, you'll be begging for it."

"At least you aren't short on ego," she replied.

"No true Texan is."

\* \* \* \* \*

They stopped for lunch at midday, and even Catherine had to admit the visit at the Watson ranch had been nice. Hope Watson was a plump, happy young woman with three little children hanging from her skirts, and the two of them had enjoyed a cup of tea together while the men looked at the stock.

They ate lunch beside a little stream that she'd gone swimming in as a child—swimming with Wade and Ryan, actually. About a mile outside town, it was a magnet for kids on hot summer days. There was even a swimming hole and a rope swing. It was still far too cold for swimming, though, so they had the place to themselves. Catherine spread their picnic blanket on the ground and pulled out the basket she'd put together for them. Nothing too exciting, just thick slices of her own bread spread with jam, a couple of boiled eggs and some cheese, but they both enjoyed it.

"That was good," Wade said, leaning back on the blanket. Catherine looked over at him, secretly admiring the view. Wade wasn't a pretty man, but his features were strong and clear. And those penetrating green eyes... Every girl in town had been in love with him at one point or another. Even her, although she didn't like to admit it. She'd had a huge crush on him before he left for the war.

Heck, she had a pretty good crush on him right now. Her eyes wandered down his body, noting how well his faded wool pants outlined his figure. Between his legs in particular. There was bulk there, enough to make a girl wonder, and she felt her cheeks heating up. Of course he chose that moment to look over at her.

"See anything you like?" he asked in a slow drawl. "You can touch if you want."

She opened her mouth to give him a snappy comeback, and then a smile stole across her face. Two could play at this game.

"Sure," she said, scooting across the blanket toward him. "Looks like you have a nice enough package there, but maybe a little small. I think I should check things out."

She reached across his lap, rubbing her hand boldly along his thigh. He gasped, and they both froze, captivated by their game of sexual taunting. She'd never done anything remotely like this before, not even when she was married to Ryan. But she wanted to touch him, she could admit that to herself. Wade darned well wanted to be touched. No question of that. And if she managed to break past his self-imposed boundaries? Well, then she won. And if she didn't, at least she'd have some fun before settling into her new role as town schoolmarm.

She felt his flesh rising beneath her touch, the hard length of his erection thickening under her fingers. She ran her fingers back and forth, each time holding him a little more firmly. He gasped, and then let himself fall back on the blanket, one arm over his eyes as he allowed himself to fully enjoy the moment.

After a little while she decided this wasn't enough. She didn't just want to feel him, she wanted to look at him. Maybe even taste him. She'd heard about that from some of her girlfriends, although she'd doubted at the time that any woman would willingly do something like that. But being around Wade, smelling him, seeing the tension in his body as she touched him—it made her wonder...

Catherine opened his pants, sliding her hand in and finding the hot length of his penis. It was bigger than she'd imagined, and the skin was very smooth. She ran her fingers up and down, finding the ridge below the head, tracing it to the notch on the bottom. A tingling sensation grew between her legs, a certain eagerness to be close to him that reminded her of the way his kisses made her feel.

Wanting more, Catherine used both hands to ease his pants down his hips, Wade lifting himself to make it easier for her. She pulled out his penis, awed. It wasn't as large as Baron's, of course, but it was pretty big. The head was flushed red, and a whitish pearl of moisture had gathered at the tip. She ran a fingertip through it, painting the slippery substance around his sensitive flesh. Wade gasped, and Catherine smiled. She loved how it made her feel, so powerful and special. Wade was a strong man, yet all it took was one of her fingers touching him to conquer him completely.

Catherine leaned closer, examining him carefully. Wade reached down and grabbed her hand, cupping it around his length and showing her how to run it up and down. She followed his lead eagerly, loving the way he moaned as she worked his stiffened shaft.

"You're killing me, Cat," he muttered finally. "You need to stop now."

"Or what?" she asked, rubbing him even faster. "You'll throw me down and have your wicked way with me? I dare you to do it!"

He moaned, and lifted a hand as if to push her away. Before he could act, she wrapped her lips around the head of his erection, sucking him in deeply. Wade gave a groan of pain and need, then clutched her hair with his fingers, pulling her more fully down and over him.

Now that she had him in her mouth, Catherine wasn't quite sure what to do with him. He tasted salty, and from the quivering of his body and the strength of his hands, she knew he liked what she'd done. She tried sucking at him like lollipop, reveling in the little noises he made. Then she swirled her tongue around the tip for a while. A surge of salty fluid came out, and she wondered if he was done already. But it didn't seem like it was enough, and his hand still urged her on, so she kept sucking. She'd never tried anything like this with Ryan, and frankly had never wanted to. But sucking Wade felt right.

His hands grew more urgent, and his penis got harder the longer she sucked. Then Catherine had a brilliant idea. Wade wanted to come, she knew enough about men to understand that. And she wanted him to make love to her. Maybe all he needed was the proper motivation.

Pulling free of his hands, she released him with a pop and sat up next to him. His eyes flew open and he groaned, his penis standing so straight and hard it could have been a fence post.

"I think I'm done," she said lightly, looking out over the pond. "That was fun, but I don't want to take advantage of you. You made it very clear that you wouldn't have sex with me unless we're married, and I don't want to cross that line."

Wade's moan of frustration was everything she'd hoped it would be, and she couldn't keep the smile off her face as he lunged toward her. He tackled her, flinging her back onto the grass and pushing her hands up above her head. He held them there, looming over her, his face dark with frustration. For a moment she felt fear, but then her mind registered that this was Wade, not Ryan, and she didn't need to be afraid.

At least, that's what her head told her. Catherine's body had other ideas. Her heart thundered in her chest, her entire being poised to fight or run.

"You little tease," he ground out, eyes flashing at her. "I'll bet you have no idea how dangerous it is to do that to a man. That's a good way to get yourself raped."

She licked her lips, took a deep breath and smiled at him. Time to be bold, not chicken.

"It's not rape if the woman is willing, Wade," she said. He groaned and fell on her, kissing her wildly, pushing a knee between her legs and thrusting his raging penis against her. She lost all sense of time and reality, everything in her body focused on his touch, so that she hardly noticed when his hands let go of hers. He reached down to her skirt, pulling the heavy fabric of her dress and petticoats up. Then his fingers reached between her legs, sliding into her pantalets and plunging into the moist opening hidden there.

"Dear heavens," she moaned, eyes closing as his clever fingers found the spot she'd only ever explored in the darkness of her room at night. Wicked, wicked man... He flicked it, running his fingers against it over and over until all the blood in her body seemed to rush down toward him and her head felt light.

Wade pulled away and she whimpered in protest, but he only scooted down the blanket, dropping his head down to that spot he'd touched earlier. His tongue was like hot, white fire against her nubbin, wiggling and fluttering until her heart pounded in



her ears. She felt a terrible tension growing stronger and stronger deep inside, and every breath caught in her throat. Catherine strained up toward Wade, needing something from him that was just out of reach. He seemed to sense her distress, giving a low, mocking chuckle against her flesh that vibrated through her skin all the way down to the nerves.

She shuddered, moaning and gasping, and then he pulled away from her.

"What do you want, Catherine?"

She had trouble understanding him at first, her need overwhelming everything else. But then he asked again, and she heard the gloating triumph in his voice.

"I need you to keep touching me," she whispered. "Dammit, Wade, I need you to finish it."

He shook his head, making little "tsk-tsk" noises, then raised himself to his feet and turned away from her, straightening his pants.

"Do you want to marry me, Cat?" he asked, the question tossed over his shoulder. "I'm not looking for a mistress, remember?"

She threw her skirts down, flushing deeply, hating him so much in that moment that she'd have shot him dead if she had a gun. Her entire body felt restless, itchy with desire. It was all she could do to keep herself from walking over and rubbing against him like a barn cat in heat.

"Doesn't feel so good, does it?" he asked, his tone strained. She didn't answer, getting up and gathering the picnic supplies as quickly as she could. Then she threw them in the back of the wagon and pulled herself up onto the seat. She considered grabbing the reins and leaving without him, but he was too quick for her, reaching up and snatching them before she had the chance. Then he swung up beside her and clucked at the horses to go.

"You might want to pull some of that grass out of your hair," he said shortly. "Otherwise everyone you see will know exactly what we were doing."

Catherine felt her face grow hot, and jammed her bonnet up and over her head. She tied the strings tightly, refusing to acknowledge him.

Her little game with Wade hadn't turned out like she'd planned at all.

## **Chapter Four**

"Mrs. Masters spoke to me about the teaching position," George Reynolds mentioned to Wade as both men leaned against the counter in the post office. Wade grunted.

"She's a better candidate than we'd hoped for, that's the truth," Reynolds continued. "But I can't help but wonder if she'd last. She's never lived on her own before. You think she's up to the challenge? I suppose she could always board with one of the families, but she said the house was one of the greatest attractions for her. What do you think?"

Wade stayed silent for a long moment, choosing his words carefully before he spoke.

"She's young and pretty," he said. "Do you really think she'd last all term without getting married? It's been a full year since Ryan died."

Reynolds gave him an assessing look.

"Anyone courting her?" he asked.

"Not my place to say," Wade replied. "We'd sure hate to lose her out on the ranch, though."

"You trying to tell me something?" Reynolds asked. "I know you're not on the board, but you give enough support to have a say in the decision. We couldn't have built the school without your family's help."

Wade opened his mouth to speak, then closed it as Catherine walked into the post office, heels clicking on the polished wood floor. She held a largish bundle wrapped in brown paper. Fabric for a dress?

"I'm finished at the store," Catherine said brightly, smiling as she saw Reynolds standing next to him. "Why, Mr. Reynolds, I was hoping to run into you today! I wanted to ask you if the board has made a decision about the teaching position yet."

"I was just discussing it with Mr. Masters," he said, and his expression grew puzzled. "Mrs. Masters, did you fall down?"

She shook her head, offering him a questioning look.

"No, why do you ask?"

"You have grass all over your skirt," he replied.

"I told her to be careful where she sat when we stopped for lunch," Wade interjected, keeping his voice utterly bland. "But she's so impetuous. I guess she rolled right off the blanket. You know how women are."

Reynolds looked startled, and Wade had to bite back a smile. Catherine's eyes spat fire, but she kept her smile firmly in place.

"We stopped for lunch at the swimming hole after visiting with the Watsons," she said. "I guess I wasn't as careful as I should have been. The picnic blanket wasn't very large, and I like to give my brother-in-law plenty of space when he eats. You know how cowboys are, you don't want to get between them and their food."

She laughed and Reynolds joined her.

"To be honest, we haven't made a formal decision about the job yet, Mrs. Masters," he said. "There's some concern that you'll get married before the term ends. You do realize there's a substantial pay penalty if that happens?"

"Oh, you don't need to worry about that," she said. "I have no intention of marrying, Mr. Reynolds. I very much like the idea of being self-sufficient. That's why I'm so interested in the house."

"Yes, well, I'm sure you'd do a wonderful job," he said, nodding and smiling at her. Wade had to keep himself from grinding his teeth—she had every man who met her

crawling at her feet and she didn't even realize it. Half the town would be all over her the moment she moved into that house.

"Do you really think it's a good idea for a woman to live alone like that?" he asked Reynolds, ignoring the daggers she shot at him with her eyes. "When we built the house, it was with the understanding that there would be a schoolmaster—a man—living there. Texas is a dangerous place for a woman alone. Not only that, nobody's lived there for several years now. Is it even habitable?"

Reynolds frowned, and shook his head.

"I don't think it's in that bad a shape," he said. "But you're right about a woman living alone. Perhaps I should talk to the board about it."

"Surely it's safe," Catherine said, giving him a winsome smile. "It's in the heart of town, not far from where you live, Mr. Reynolds. I can't imagine any woman would feel unsafe there. In fact, I believe I'm probably in more danger out at the ranch. Sometimes the men are gone for weeks at a time, and I'm left to fend for myself."

Wade narrowed his eyes at her. He'd never left her alone for weeks. There were always ranch hands around, and his father.

"I think you're exaggerating," he said. "You probably have no idea how unsettled this area still is."

"I know I lived here all through the war," she said. "You men were gone, and the women were left to keep the town running. It didn't dry up and blow away, now did it?"

He opened his mouth to retort, but Reynolds stepped between them, looking slightly alarmed.

"I don't think we need to settle this here and now," he said, his voice sounding a little strained. "Mrs. Masters, I'm sure you're perfectly capable of running your own household. We'll have to discuss the situation at the board meeting. Will you be attending the spring social and dance next week?"

"Of course," she said, looking quickly to Wade. "That is, unless the countryside is too dangerous for me to travel?" She arched one delicate brow at him, challenging him.

"We'll be there," Wade said, his voice gruff. Somehow he felt like he was the loser in this little exchange, although he wasn't quite sure how or why.

"Wonderful, I'll let you know then," Reynolds said. "Good day to both of you."

He tipped his hat and left. Catherine looked up at Wade, her eyes cold and hard.

"What did you say to him before I got here?" she asked. He took her arm and started walking her out of the office. For a moment it seemed like she might fight him, but then she realized that they still had an audience, albeit a small one. She let him walk her back toward the wagon before she started speaking again.

"I swear to God, Wade, if you told him something to keep him from hiring me, I'll make you wish you were never born!"

"Sometimes you make me wish that already," he replied, feeling the blood start to pound in his head. "So I guess that's sort of an empty threat. For your information, the only thing I told him was that we'd miss you out on the ranch. Oh, and that I thought you might not make it through the term without getting married."

"How could you say that to him?" she demanded, turning from him and shaking off his touch. "I want that job, Wade. I need it."

"Because it's the truth," he replied. "You won't make it through the term. I'm going to marry you before then."

"Wade, you may not realize this, but we don't live in a monarchy and you are not the king. You don't get to marry a woman unless she agrees to it."

"Oh, you'll agree to it," he replied. "I've never had to force a woman I want, and I won't have to force you. By the time we're done with this, you'll be so damn frustrated you'll marry me just to make it stop hurting. I won't let up until I get what I want."

"Just get in the damn wagon," she said turning away from him. As she swung around, she ran right into Mrs. Cordelia Jackson, who had clearly overheard their

exchange from the startled look on her face. Wade chuckled softly behind Catherine, grabbed her arm and tipped his hat to the matron.

"You know how young ladies are during courting," he said, and the sour expression melted off Mrs. Jackson's face. Wade heard Cat's disgusted huff, and tried not to laugh out loud.

"You really shouldn't use language like that, Mrs. Masters," Mrs. Jackson said, clucking. "But I remember how men can be. Try to be a little more patient with him, dear."

Catherine nodded her head politely, but Wade could tell she was ripping mad.

"You know, it's not my fault the ladies like me," he said as he handed her up into the wagon. "It's just the burden I've been given."

"You should save your charm for someone who's interested."

"Oh, I think you're interested," he said, swinging up beside her and starting the wagon rolling with a snap of the reins. "You just don't want to admit it."

"Horseshit."

"Watch that mouth," he chided gently. "And if you insist, I'll prove it to you. I'll kiss you right here in the middle of Main Street, and we'll see who's fighting off whom by the end."

She didn't answer, and he knew he'd won. Good enough for now, he decided.

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Catherine was pumping water into a bucket when she saw José riding up with a woman on a horse. The young Mexican man was shy, and she'd never heard anything about him having a girlfriend. She saw Wade walk out to greet the travelers, and her curiosity got the better of her. She set down the bucket and walked over, wiping her hands on her apron as she went.

"Catherine, I have a surprise for you," Wade called to her as she walked toward them. She studied the girl as she approached—she was young, probably seventeen or

eighteen. She had dark hair, pulled back in a thick braid running halfway down her back, and she wore a loose white blouse tucked into a wide, flowing skirt. Her skin was nut-brown, and she wore a pretty mantilla over her head and shoulders.

"This is Maria," Wade said. "She's José's sister, and she's agreed to come and help you around the house. You do a lot, and I thought you could use some feminine companionship. And if you end up taking the teaching job, we'll need someone to keep house for us."

She studied him, wondering what kind of game he was playing. She knew he had no intention of letting her take the job, although she'd fight him to her last breath on that one. Still, the idea of having help was a good one.

Catherine turned to Maria, who gave her a bright smile.

"I help you, *Señora* Masters," she said. "José says you're a good lady, and I work hard for you."

"It's nice to have you here," Catherine replied, forcing herself to smile back while noting how lovely Maria was. And young. Younger than her.

"Where were you thinking she'd be staying, Wade?" she asked, turning to him. He kept his gaze on Maria, his expression pleased and appreciative.

"I figured she should stay in the house with us," he replied. "There's the empty room next to mine that will do."

Catherine nodded, realizing it was the only good solution. A young girl like Maria wouldn't be safe out in the bunkhouse, and it might be nice to have some company. But still... She didn't like the idea. Wade could slip right out his door and into her room without anyone noticing. Catherine felt a dark feeling stirring in her gut. Dammit, she was jealous! It surprised her—why should she care who Wade looked at? Sure, she found him attractive, but she didn't want anything from him. She needed to get rid of this emotion right away. Teachers didn't have time to moon over cattlemen. Even a cattleman as handsome as Wade.



"Come with me," she said to Maria, making herself to keep a civil tone. "I'll get you settled and you can help fix supper."

That night all but one of the ranch hands made it in to eat, the single men eyeing Maria hungrily enough to make José bristle protectively. Wade even pulled her chair out for her, and when she gave a pretty blush Catherine had to walk back into the kitchen to keep from making a snide remark. It didn't help her mood that she'd thrown Maria right into things from the start, putting her in charge of supper by herself. Catherine had assumed that the young woman wouldn't be able to put together such a large meal on short notice. Maria had done better than expected, though, making soft corn tortillas, beans and thin-sliced steak that the men loved.

"It's nice to have a little variety around here," John muttered as he wiped his mouth. "You're a great cook, Catherine, but this is different. I like it."

Catherine pasted a smile on her face as she picked up the dishes and carried them into the kitchen. As they cleaned, Maria chattered happily at her, oblivious to her hostility. Every word grated on Catherine, which really wasn't fair because Maria seemed to be a very nice girl. And they got the kitchen cleaned up in record time. Early enough that Catherine had time to heat water and take a bath.

Bathing was a luxury on the ranch, and she knew some of the men went for long periods without doing more than washing up at the pump before supper. But she enjoyed a bath as often as possible. Wade and his father liked to keep clean too, so they were good about hauling water in for the tub. She'd take the first bath, then the men would follow, everyone using the same tub they set up behind a sheet she would hang across the kitchen for privacy.

Tonight, Maria recruited José to help with the water, and by the time the crickets started singing the bath was ready to go. Catherine banished everyone from the kitchen, hung up the sheet and pulled off her clothing, sinking into the tub with a sigh of pleasure.

This was almost worth hearing about Maria's cooking at dinner, she decided, letting the hot water soak the tension out of her shoulders. The light of the lantern flickered as she relaxed in the tub. She couldn't afford to rest for too long—she didn't want the water to get cold for the men. But five minutes wouldn't hurt anything, she thought, sliding beneath the surface.

When she popped back up something seemed different in the room. She looked around, but couldn't see anything. Then she heard the thump of a booted foot against the floor.

"I'm taking a bath," she called out. "And I want my privacy."

"I want lots of things," Wade said, pushing aside the curtain and stepping into her little enclosure. "But I have a suspicion I'm not going to get them tonight. A man can hope, though."

Catherine glared at him, sinking down into the tub, covering her breasts with her hands.

"You can't come in here while I'm bathing!"

"I just did," Wade replied, grinning at her. He pulled up a chair and sat down, propping a foot against the kitchen table. "And I have to say, the view is a hell of a lot better on this side of the curtain. Although you give a pretty good peep show through the sheet. The lantern offers just the right touch."

Her breath caught, and she surged up, forgetting for a moment to keep herself covered, ready to tear a strip off his sneaking hide. His eyes followed her hungrily, and she sat back down just as quickly, sending a surge of water out onto the floor.

"How long have you been spying on me?" she asked.

"Well, it didn't start by spying," he replied. "I just walked in once while you were getting dressed. But after I saw how good the view was, I came back for more. Hell, you had to be suspicious—I was always offering to haul in the water for you."

She didn't reply at first, not knowing what to say to that. He *had* been very helpful when it came to hauling the water. She'd thought it was because he enjoyed the baths so much for himself.

"You're a disgusting, filthy pig of a man," she said finally. "And you need to get out of here so I can get dressed. And then I'm going to find a way to put a lock on that door."

"You don't need one," he replied. "I always keep an eye on you. Nobody else is going to see."

"I'm not worried about anybody else seeing, you degenerate."

"I'm no more degenerate than any man is around a beautiful woman. A beautiful, available woman who's living under my roof, no less."

She glared at him, and he gave her a crooked grin.

"Seems like we're in a bit of a standoff," he said. "Seems to me like you haven't finished your bath, and that water is going to get cold sooner or later. Would you like me to help you?"

"No," she snapped. "You can get the hell out."

"Nope, I don't think so."

"I'll scream!"

"If you do, someone will come in and see us and your reputation will be ruined," he smirked. "You'd have to make an honest man out of me. Of course, that's fine with me. Go ahead and scream."

She gritted her teeth, looking over to the length of toweling cloth she'd laid out earlier. If she stood and lunged for it, how much would he see? His eyes followed hers, and then he leaned over and grabbed the cloth, throwing it behind his chair.

"You aren't going to get off that easy," he remarked. Catherine glared at him, trying to decide her next move. Ever since the day at the creek she'd been avoiding him, but maybe it was time to confront the situation. Call his bluff. He wanted a show? She'd

give it to him. It had nothing to do with the way he'd been looking at Maria, she assured herself. She didn't need his attention or his admiration. But if he wanted to play this little game again, she'd take it as far as he would. After all, once she took the teaching job she wouldn't be seeing him much anymore.

"I'm going to finish my bath," she said haughtily, pulling her hands away from her breasts. His sucked in his breath, hard, and she closed her eyes. She didn't think she could handle watching him watching her. She'd die of embarrassment—she was pretty close already. Good girls didn't do things like this.

Of course, good girls didn't feel all jealous of their hired help, either.

She shook out her hair, smoothing it back, and then grabbed her precious bar of lilac soap. It had been a Christmas gift from Wade. She loved how it made her smell, bringing fantasies of being a fancy lady back East, the kind of woman who wore silks and satins and had a maid to do all the hard work.

"Mmmmm..." she murmured, rubbing the fragrant soap into her hair. She worked up a good lather, then ducked under the water to rinse it off. When she rose back up, she knelt up in the tub, rubbing the soap around her breasts. The cool spring air made her nipples stand up hard, but she didn't shiver. It felt good. She rubbed the tiny peaks, enjoyed the tingles that ran through her body, and then opened her eyes to look at Wade.

The expression on his face more than satisfied.

His eyes had gone dark, the hand resting on his knee clenched so hard that his knuckles turned white.

"Like what you see?" she asked. He nodded his head slowly, not bothering to respond with words. She let her hands trail down across her stomach, the soap smoothing her way until she reached the cleft between her legs. She'd touched herself before, of course. Alone in her bed at night.

Never with another person present.

The air hung thick between them as she slid her fingers into the thatch of hair, rubbing it sensuously and burrowing her fingers down to the little nubbin of her clit. She gasped as her fingers ran across it the first time, the delicious slide sending desire running through her body. Her nipples grew hard, and she tilted her head to one side. Holding it up straight just seemed like too much work.

"Open your eyes," Wade said, his voice grating. "Look at me."

She obeyed, unable to resist. His gaze bore into hers, dark with need and a desire terrifying in its depth. He was like a giant cat, a predator poised to leap on its prey, yet he held himself back with a visible effort.

Still holding her eyes, he unbuttoned his shirt, each button revealing more of his hard, bronzed chest. He must work without his shirt sometimes, she thought, wishing she could be there to see it. As the fabric fell open, he ran his fingers across his chest, rubbing against his tiny nipples. Catherine reached up with one hand and touched her own breasts, mirroring him. His low groan carried across the kitchen, the need in his voice raw and filled with pain.

"Show me more," she whispered, desire overwhelming common sense. "I want to see all of you."

Wade responded by opening the fly of his Levi's and slowly pulling out his enormous, erect penis. The head glistened, hard and red, and a tiny pearl of moisture gleamed at her in the light of the lantern. Without thinking, Catherine licked her lips and rubbed between her legs again, sagging as little as her knees threatened to give out. She wanted that shaft in her, thrusting hard into her softness. She wanted him to fill her up and shoot her with his hot seed, and she wanted him to do it now.

Instead she watched as he gripped his rod with one hand, sliding it slowly and steadily up and down the length as he watched her. After a few strokes it grew impossibly bigger. Catherine started caressing herself again, every slip of her fingers near-painful with the intensity of the sensation. Pleasure mixed with need rippled through her body, her nipples hard as rocks. They felt connected to her clit with an

invisible string that pulled harder with every movement, until she felt tight and on the verge of breaking.

Oh heavens, what had she gotten herself into?

Wade rubbed his cock up and down, each time his fingers pulling and squeezing harder. Looking at her hurt him, caused him actual, physical pain—he wanted to fuck her that badly. He wanted to rise out of his chair, pull her out of the tub and throw her across the table. He'd screw her until she screamed, until every muscle in her body was clamped tight around him, and push his seed so far into her body that she'd never forget his claim on her.

Instead, he simply watched, touching himself and pretending it was her hand on him, even as she slid her fingers in and out of the hot slit he should own. He already knew how good she tasted, how warm her juices were for him. But this—watching Cat stroke herself with her own fingers—that was something he'd never dreamed he'd get to see. Her breath came quickly now, her breasts heaving as her fingers flew faster and faster. He let his own hand copy hers, pulling so hard on his cock it would have hurt if he wasn't so damn close to exploding. His gaze held hers, and as her eyes darkened he felt his own responding. He'd never needed a woman more, never imagined one woman could be so desirable. The pounding of his pulse, the heat of his cock, the pressure building in his loins—all of it was completely centered on her. He'd never wanted a woman this much, not even as a teenage boy.

She started to gasp a little, mewling cries that sent shivers down his spine. She dug her fingers in harder and then she came, still watching him, her body convulsing as she sank to her knees in the water. Wade pulled his cock hard, allowing his own climax to wash over him. He saw her brows rise as the white fluid of his seed flew out of his cock, leaping for her. His hips bucked, and he gave a low groan. Then it was over, and he tucked his penis back into his pants slowly and deliberately.

He'd meant to confront her, to pressure her again about marriage. He hadn't expected this, the vulnerability he felt after exposing himself to her. He stood up abruptly, fastened his pants and tossed the length of toweling toward her. Then he grabbed a rag and cleaned up the mess he'd made, stalking out of the room without a word.

Catherine sat back in the cooling tub, dazed and stunned. Her limbs felt limp and flaccid after her powerful arousal, and she couldn't imagine how she'd ever face him again. The moment had been out of time, surreal and strange, and she hadn't felt any of the shame or embarrassment she knew she should. Up until now it had been a sort of game for her—she wanted Wade, but she didn't *really* want him. Not forever. But what they'd just experienced together, she'd never dreamed it could be like that. What would real sex be like with him? How would it feel to have those intense eyes following her every day?

What would it feel like to have a little boy look up at her with Wade's green gaze?

Catherine surged up and out of the tub, splashing water on the kitchen floor. She couldn't let herself think anymore. She needed to remember her goals.

To be independent. To be a teacher.

To never rely on a man again.

## Chapter Five

Wade left unexpectedly to check on the stock early the next morning, and Catherine didn't see him for three days. To her surprise, she enjoyed having Maria around to help. The girl worked hard, she liked to laugh and her English was good enough that they could really talk.

Unfortunately, the only person Maria wanted to talk about was Wade.

"*Señor Masters* is very handsome," she said as they hung wet laundry up behind the house. "And he isn't courting anyone, is he?"

"Not that I know of," Catherine replied, trying to keep her tone light. She didn't have a right to be jealous, she reminded herself. After all, *she* didn't want to marry him.

"I think he likes me, I saw him looking at me," Maria said, blushing faintly. "José says he's a good man, and that he's going to be very important someday. José says that *Señor Masters* is the best boss he's ever had, and that he wants to ride for this brand forever. Do you think *Señor Masters* is happy with the work I'm doing? Do you think he'll want to dance with me on Saturday night at the party?"

Catherine shook her head, wishing the girl would be quiet. Maria misunderstood her gesture, and tears started to well up in her eyes.

"Is it because I'm Mexican?" she asked, her voice soft and hurt. "I'm a good girl, *señora*, and my family has lived here for six generations. Do you really think he only likes American girls?"

"Of course not," Catherine said, feeling even worse. "I wasn't shaking my head at you, I was thinking about something else."

"So you think he likes me?" Maria asked, her face lighting up. "I have a special dress I want to wear to the dance. It's very pretty—he'll want to dance with me, I'm sure of it!"



She started humming a happy tune, gliding through the hanging sheets with the exuberance of the very young. Catherine stood, bemused, wondering how the conversation had gone so many places so quickly.

Maria was a fine girl, she thought. And she knew for a fact that Wade wouldn't hold her nationality against her. Lots of cattlemen married Mexican women, and she supposed the young woman would be good for him. She was sweet, pretty, hardworking and she knew everything there was to know about living on the range. Just the thought of them together made Catherine feel sick to her stomach.

She didn't want Wade with another woman—she wanted him for herself.

The thought had been creeping up on her at odd moments lately. The man was insidious, and while she hadn't seen him since the night in the kitchen, he filled her imagination. She wanted him to come home, she wanted to see him and smell him and touch him. And she definitely wanted to sleep with him. Her body ached with need every day. And the most tempting, horrible part of it was that she knew she could have him, have all of him, if she could just bring herself to trust him.

But what kind of fool stuck her head into the same noose twice?

\* \* \* \* \*

Wade rode up to the barn, dead tired from ranging the farthest bounds of the ranch, but not even exhaustion dented his desire to see Cat again. He'd wanted to get some distance between them, to try to convince himself that he didn't need her. She was slipping away from him, and if she took the teaching job it would be so much harder to court her. He wouldn't give up, he wasn't a quitter. But every step she took toward town would make it that much more difficult to win her over.

"*Señor Masters!*" Maria waved vigorously at him from the porch as he walked toward the house. "We're so happy that you're back. Tomorrow night is the dance in town—José said everyone will be going. Will you come with us?"

Her bright smile cheered him. Then he realized she waited for his answer with more than casual interest. Well, shit, that was the last thing he needed, some little girl with a crush on him. He should have gotten an old lady to help Cat, he thought dourly. But José had been lonely for his family, and she was a good girl. She'd probably end up marrying one of the ranch hands, and before long he'd have to build them a house. That would be perfect—he liked the idea of stable, family men riding for the brand.

"I'll be at the dance," he said, stepping up onto the porch. "But right now I could really use something to eat. Is Mrs. Masters in the kitchen?"

"Sí," Maria said. "But I can put something together for you, *señor*."

"Thank you, but I need to talk to Mrs. Masters," he replied, trying not to wince at her eager expression. "Privately."

She looked a little disappointed, and then nodded her head politely.

"I understand, *señor*," she said, although the expression on her face said that she clearly didn't. He sighed, stepping into the kitchen.

"Hello, Cat," he said. She whirled to face him, her face filled with surprise and what might even be pleasure.

"Wade, how was your trip?" Cat asked. "I didn't realize you were leaving."

"I just needed some time to think," he said, looking at her ruefully. "This little game of ours is getting out of hand. I wanted to cool off so I wouldn't make a stupid mistake."

"You mean, so that you wouldn't sleep with me?" she asked quietly. "We're playing with fire, Wade, but it feels so good. If I were a smart woman I'd be screaming at you right now, blaming you for taking advantage of me." She gave a soft laugh. "But we both know that wasn't what happened."

He stepped closer to her, reaching out to touch her chin, tipping her face up to look at him.

"I don't regret it a bit," he said. "But that's the kind of thing that should happen between married couples, Cat. Either that or with a whore. I don't think you qualify as one of those."

She blushed, and he leaned in, resting his forehead against hers. They stood still for long seconds, enjoying their closeness, and Wade felt his arousal stirring. No matter what he did, his body hungered for hers. He had a suspicion that nothing would ever change that.

"You know, what's between us doesn't just happen all the time," he said. "We have the chance to build something special. We could be happy together."

"Happy until you got bored?" she asked, her voice turning cool. "Ryan got bored."

"Ryan was an idiot and a bastard," Wade said, leaning back to study her face. He gripped her shoulders, squeezing just enough to catch her attention. "Ryan didn't care about anybody but himself, and he never did. He was charming and he played you for a fool, but don't judge me based on his actions. We're two very different men."

"I know you're different," she said, pulling away from him. "But I think it's too late for me, Wade. I just don't think I can trust anyone again, not after what I went through before. I'd rather be free to take care of myself."

"Even if that means you're lonely?" he asked.

"I think so," she said, meeting his eyes. "I can't take the risk, Wade. All I can offer you is my body, and only for a night or two, until I take the teaching job. That has to be enough."

He pulled away from her, shaking his head and walking out of the kitchen. How could she be so damn stubborn? He slammed the door behind him as he strode onto the kitchen porch, leaving Maria staring after him with wide eyes.

If they gave her the teaching job tomorrow, he wasn't sure what he'd do. One thing was certain—he wasn't ready to give up. Wade hadn't survived the War Between the States just to walk away from the woman he loved. Hell no.

Cat had better brace herself, Wade thought, because he'd already made up his mind. Time to play dirty.

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Catherine braided her hair with care, making sure it was loose enough to frame her face before she pinned the braid around her head in a pretty coronet. She eyed her reflection in the tiny mirror, satisfied with the results. She looked well-groomed, but not too showy. Just like a respectable teacher should.

And Lord, her waist was nice and small with her corset on!

Smaller than she'd seen it in a while. It helped to have Maria there to pull it tight for her. She'd never managed it well on her own. Now if only she could breathe, Catherine thought ruefully. She pulled her new dress over her head, the loose fabric of the skirts floating down around her petticoats. It was a little bright, she had to admit. But she'd never found a blue so exactly like her eyes before, and there had been just enough fabric in stock at Milton's store. She couldn't say no to it. Maria's quick fingers had helped with the detail work. Otherwise it never would have been done in time for the dance.

The dress was perfect on her, Catherine thought as she buttoned it up and across her bosom. Decorous enough for church, but pretty enough for a party. It covered her breasts fully, but the fabric fitted closely enough to really show her figure to perfection. She couldn't wait until Wade saw it.

Catherine finished dressing, and then pulled her biggest apron on over the gown. The last thing she needed was to get it dirty as she packed the food into the wagon. Every woman within miles had spent the day cooking pies and cakes and enough fried chicken to feed an army. They'd eat well that night at the social, and she'd be darned if Sweet River Ranch wasn't well represented at the supper tables.

The platform wagon and the buckboard both sat ready outside the kitchen, which surprised her at first. Usually they would only take one vehicle. Still, there was a lot of food, plus all the camping equipment, so it made sense. Most of the men would ride

their horses into town, but Wade and his father must be driving. They needed room for Maria too.

The girl was already outside, talking brightly to José as he helped her load the baskets of food. Catherine understood a little Spanish, but the brother and sister were talking far too quickly for her to follow.

Then Wade walked out of the house, and she lost interest in trying. He wore a new suit, one he must have ordered in town, because she'd never seen it before. It was made of fine, dark brown wool, with a vest and jacket to match. He wore a new hat too, and his boots had been polished to gleaming brightness. He looked like a prosperous cattleman, the kind of ranching king he aspired to be one day. Not bad at all, she thought. She wanted to slip her hands inside that coat and see if this new side of Wade was as much fun to touch as the cowboy, but she forced herself to turn away, taking off her apron and folding it carefully. Time to let him see her pretty new dress. The expression on his face when she turned back around didn't disappoint.

"You look beautiful, Cat," he said, giving her a smile that went all the way to his eyes. "But I think you're missing something."

"What?" she asked. He held out his hand toward her, and she saw an exquisite pair of sapphire eardrops lying in his palm.

"Those are beautiful," she whispered, reaching out to touch one of them. Her finger grazed his hand, and she shivered. His skin was hard, rough, and she knew just how good it would feel running across her flesh. She glanced up at him, eyes bright.

"But I can't take these, Wade," she said. "It's not appropriate to accept a gift from a man."

"It's perfectly appropriate to accept a gift from a family member. I'm just like a brother to you, remember?" he said, watching her steadily. "And they'll look beautiful with your dress and eyes. Let me put them on you."

She shook her head, but when he stepped closer to touch her ear, all she could do was lean in toward him. She wore very plain little earrings, ones that had belonged to

her mother. He slipped them off easily enough and put in the drops, sending shivers of desire through her with every touch. Then he put both hands on her shoulders, and looked over her with approval in his eyes.

"You're even more beautiful than I thought you would be," he said softly. She smiled at him, but before she could respond, Maria squealed and started clapping her hands.

"They're gorgeous, *señora!*" she sang out. "Oh, you look like a princess! You'll be the prettiest lady at the dance!"

Catherine gave a little smile, but didn't let herself get carried away. Maria was a young girl, expected to be excitable, but matrons like herself kept their emotions under control.

"You look pretty as a picture, Catherine," John said as he came out of the house. He was wearing a new suit too, although it didn't sit as well on his figure as Wade's did.

"But it's time to get going," he continued. "Maria, you ride with me on the spring wagon. Catherine, you and Wade can take the buckboard."

Catherine looked at Wade, who gave her a perfectly blank expression as he gestured toward the buckboard. He helped her in, then swung up beside her and started away from the ranch house toward town. John and Maria followed, trailed by José on his horse. Catherine figured she shouldn't enjoy riding next to Wade quite so much, but she loved the smell of him, the light hint of whiskey and tobacco that hung around him.

He was freshly shaven and about as handsome as a man could get without causing a riot. She had no doubt that the girls would be hanging off him at the dance. Of course, there wouldn't be a shortage of partners for her, either. There were always more men than women, and by the end of the night some of the cowboys would be dancing with each other. Still, it would be nice to arrive with a man as handsome as Wade by her side.

By the time they reached town they had joined a procession of wagons rolling in across the range. It looked like there might be a couple hundred people at the dance, most of whom lived far enough away that they'd be spending the night.

The spring social and dance was an old tradition revived after the war ended. It took place inside a barn built by one of the earliest American settlers. He and his ranch hands spent days clearing the building out and scouring in preparation for the big night. Trestle tables were set up outside for the food, and families from far and wide camped out in the pasture surrounding the building. The Sweet River Ranch contingent arrived early enough to get a good spot, which Wade and José quickly staked out with the tent. Maria and Catherine took care of the food. Everywhere Catherine found faces she hadn't seen for months. She discovered new babies to coo over, new dresses to study and enough hugs to keep her busy for hours. Throughout it all, she kept her eyes open for George Reynolds. When she spotted him, he gave her a pained look, and a sick, nervous sensation raced through her stomach. She put on a smile anyway.

"Mr. Reynolds!" she called, coming up beside him. "I'm so pleased to see you here. Has the board made a decision about the teaching position yet?"

He coughed, and looked a little nervous.

"Mrs. Masters, I'm sure you know you are an excellent candidate for the position," he said. "And I'd like very much to offer it to you, but you have to answer one question for me. Are you absolutely sure you won't be leaving the school to marry?"

She nodded her head firmly.

"Yes, although I believe I already told you that," she said. "Has somebody been saying something to the contrary?"

"Your brother-in-law," Mr. Reynolds replied. "He tells me that he's going to marry you as soon as possible."

"And when did he say that?" she asked, her tone ever-so-slightly shrill. The man winced, and she backed down immediately, offering him a conciliatory smile. "I mean, that doesn't sound like Wade."

"He told me himself less than ten minutes ago," he said. "And Mrs. Jackson said she saw you two courting in town. Are you sure I'm getting the full story?"

She nodded her head firmly, although she felt her cheeks heating up. She hated blushing, it made her feel like a schoolgirl.

"I can assure you that Wade Masters and I will not be getting married," she replied. "I guess I can't do more than offer you my word. Well, my word and a signed contract."

The man looked relieved.

"Well, I guess that's good enough for me," he said. "You realize the position won't start until the fall, but you'll have access to the house as soon as the current term ends. We'll write up the papers the next time you come into town."

He stuck his hand out, taking hers and shaking it firmly. She'd never had a man do that before, and it felt good. Like she'd accomplished something. And she had. A contract for a job, all on her own. A job that came with a house in town.

She thanked him again and turned away, walking back toward the barn. She'd expected to feel triumph, even a gloating sense of victory. Instead she just felt strangely empty, and a little disappointed. She wandered into the barn where a trio of local musicians warmed up. She knew all of them, exuberant cowboys who were always ready to play for a party. They'd make the dancing fun. Maria would probably get her wish and dance with Wade. Catherine supposed that she would too. The thought that it might be the last time he held her made her breath catch.

Catherine looked up to see him across the dance floor, watching her. He nodded in greeting, and she nodded back, almost formally. He walked over to her.

"I saw you talking to Reynolds," he said. "Did they offer you the position?"

She nodded again, crossing her arms over her chest protectively.

"Despite the fact that you tried to ruin it for me. That wasn't very nice of you, Wade."



"He asked me an honest question and I gave him an honest answer," Wade replied, his face unsmiling. "It's a mistake, taking that job. You'll regret it."

"I don't think that I will," she replied, although a part of her regretted it already. She didn't like the idea of him alone at the ranch with Maria. She didn't think she could handle seeing them together, much less teaching their children. The thought made her stomach hurt.

"I wish you hadn't told him that," she said. "I get a vote in this relationship too, you know."

"Since when do women get to vote?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Maybe that's the problem," she snapped back, his tone riling her. "You men think you should get to make all the decisions, and that's just not fair."

"I haven't gotten ahead by playing fair," he said, his gaze intense. He leaned forward, whispering in her ear. "You'd better get ready, Cat. I'm going to do whatever it takes."

The warmth of his breath gave her a shiver, awareness running down her body, her nipples tensing with desire for him. Dammit, why did he always have to do that?

"I think I've had quite enough of your company already," she snapped, turning and marching away from him. His laugh followed her, and she found herself wondering why he always ended up sounding like the winner in their little encounters.

Just once, she'd like to be the one laughing while *he* retreated.

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The music started at sunset, and Catherine had plenty of men vying for her hand. Of course, every woman did, but she still felt special in her bright blue dress. More than one man complimented her on her earbobs, but the sight of Wade squiring Maria around canceled out most of the pleasure. The pretty girl's face had flushed bright with excitement, and as the cowboys grew more boisterous the competition for her company grew.

Catherine drank cup after cup of sweet apple cider and by eleven that night she decided that it must have been spiked with harder cider. They weren't supposed to do that, of course, but after the youngest children had been sent to bed it was hard to keep the ranch hands under control. The men would keep carousing all night, although the ladies would retire in a few hours. It helped save embarrassment the next morning.

She kept expecting Wade to come and ask her to dance, but he didn't. He seemed far too busy with Maria. Every time she looked up they were together, and it was enough to make her forget caution when she went to the cider bowl. By the time she'd had her fourth glass of the sticky drink, her head was spinning. She tripped over someone's foot, and suddenly Wade was there, taking her arm and helping her out the door into the cool night air. Before she knew what he was doing, he'd started walking her toward their campsite.

"I don't want to go to the tent yet," she told him, tugging at him to get free. "I'm having fun dancing."

"You're having too much fun," he said, pulling her along as if she weighed nothing. "That cider smelled downright lethal. You don't need any more."

"But we didn't get to dance yet!" she cried, finally managing to tug free of him. Catherine overbalanced and fell down, laughing up at him in the moonlight. He stood, hands on his hips, looking down at her and shaking his head.

"You just don't know when to stop, do you, Cat?" he said, reaching down to pull her to her feet. She rose unsteadily, lurching forward into his chest.

"Are you going to dance with me?" she demanded, licking her lips. "I danced with half the men here, but none of them are as much fun as you, Wade. Let's dance together."

He shook his head again, but took her into his arms and started swaying with the music drifting faintly across the pasture. They weren't the only couple seeking a little privacy outside, but nobody around them was close enough for Catherine to identify, so she figured she and Wade were safe enough from prying eyes. She let herself relax into

his arms, enjoying the play of his muscles beneath her fingers, her head resting against his chest. Being with him just felt so right. Then she thought about how rarely she'd see him once she moved to town. Not a fun thought at all, so she pushed it away, focusing on how he smelled instead.

She loved Wade's smell. Just a touch of sweat, a little smoke and a hint of whiskey. No cider for him, she thought, giggling. And while he might have danced with Maria all evening, he'd left her behind quickly enough when he'd thought Catherine needed him.

"I don't think Maria is the right woman for you," she murmured. "You should stay away from her."

"Jealous?" he asked, a laugh rumbling through his chest. "Trust me, Catherine, the only woman I'm interested in right now is you."

He stopped swaying, pulling away from her and cupping her face, kissing her deeply. Dear heavens, the man could kiss. Catherine drank him in, letting all the wonderful feelings run through her body like water bubbling up from a spring. Every nip of his lips, every time his tongue grazed her it felt like a new part of her body caught on fire. And she knew just how it could end too, if she let it. She thought about the way he'd touched her by the stream, the way he'd looked as he watched her bathe, and she could hardly breathe. She'd never wanted anything in her life half as bad as she wanted Wade Masters right at that moment.

He wanted her too. She could tell by the way he stiffened as she started to slide her hands down his body, the way he groaned into her mouth as her fingers grazed the hard length trying to push its way out of his pants. Oh, he definitely wanted her too.

"Let's go back to the tent," she whispered, pulling her mouth away from his.

He stilled and took a deep breath, as if battling with himself. Then the battle ended, and he crushed her body against his possessively.

"The tent isn't safe, Maria will be back soon," he whispered. "José said they'd be leaving right after us. Come to my bedroll. I've set it up away from everyone else, under the wagon."

She knew that probably wasn't a good idea, but then his hands ran down her back, cupping her ass and pulling her up against his erection. All she wanted was to feel more of him, so she nodded her head.

He took her by the hand, pulling her across the pasture, dodging the scattered campsites almost playfully. She giggled, and he whispered at her to be quiet. She bit back her laughter. It was hard, though, she felt like a child skipping school. So naughty and delicious, absolutely the wrong thing to do, but she'd never wanted anything more in her life. And for once, he wasn't blathering on about marrying her. Finally they reached the campsite, which was dark and lonely. José and Maria were nowhere to be seen, and neither was anyone else. Laughing, they crawled under the wagon together, where Catherine had the sudden realization that she was wearing far too many clothes.

"Help me out of this thing," she whispered to Wade. He obliged, his fingers flying through the buttons holding her dress together with far too much ease. She shimmed out of the dress with his help, followed quickly by the petticoats, which he tossed away impatiently. Then she found herself laid out flat on his bedroll, his large figure looming over her as his hips pinned hers to the ground.

"Wait a second, we need to get the corset off!" Catherine said, but he shushed her with a deep kiss.

"I can't wait any longer," he whispered, pulling away to drop kisses down her neck and across the generous swell of her breasts. "And I like seeing you this way. I'll help you take it off later, I promise."

He reached down beneath her chemise and slipped his hands up her pantalets, pulling at them and drawing them down her legs. Then his hand slid between her thighs and the entire world went just a little bit hazy. She'd never felt anything half so good as Wade's fingers against her clit, and when he popped one breast up and out of

her corset to suckle, she practically fainted. His mouth drew her nipple in deep, sucking hard like he planned to consume her on the spot. She hoped he would—every time his mouth tugged at her, thousands of tingles shot through her limbs and center. The combination of that with his fingers below was almost enough to push her over the edge.

He pulled away, and for one horrible moment Catherine was terrified he'd quit on her again. But he only reached down between them to open the fly of his pants, freeing his enormous erection. Then he knelt between her legs again, his hot length pressed against her wet opening, and she shuddered with longing and need.

Finally, after all the teasing, she was about to discover what it felt like to be Wade Master's possession.

He took her mouth for one last, deep kiss, and started to slide into her body slowly and steadily. Every inch was a struggle, her tight, wet opening yielding only when he pushed hard. He pulled his mouth from hers, dropping his head down beside her, utterly focused on penetrating her. Each tiny motion pulled her tighter, and she knew he would have hurt her if she hadn't been so aroused. Fortunately, Catherine had never been more ready to take a man in her life. After what seemed like hours, he bottomed out. They lay together for long seconds, panting, enjoying the tight pressure of their joined flesh.

"I love you, Cat," Wade whispered. "I've never wanted a woman more in my life, and I can't imagine wanting anyone beside you."

Catherine smiled up at him, and once again the first thing in her mind popped out of her mouth.

"Not even Maria? She's really beautiful, and she's crazy about you, Wade."

"You are jealous!" he crowed triumphantly. Then his face softened. "She's just a little girl, and I want a woman. She doesn't come close to you in any way."

Catherine laughed with pure pleasure, and Wade gasped as her flesh tightened around him.

"Honey, you have no idea how good that feels," he said, his voice tight with strain. "But if you don't settle down, this is going to end a little faster than I'd planned."

With that, he pulled out of her almost all the way, only to push back in hard and fast. The stroke caught her clit and she gave a tiny scream, pleasure ripping through her so strongly it was almost painful. Wade thrust again, just as hard, the tension in her body winding tighter than she'd thought possible. Again and again he took her, until every breath was a strain and every thrust pushed her right to the edge of something she could only begin to imagine.

Ryan had never done this to her, not even close, and what she'd experienced in the tub was just a pale shadow of the cliff's edge of pain and desire she felt at that moment. Catherine couldn't get enough air, and her heart pounded in her ears as the corset constricted her upper body. The world started spinning around her, and she couldn't tell if it was from desire, the lack of breath or the incredible, gut-wrenching pleasure of him plowing her hard under the wagon. Whatever it was, it felt better than anything she'd ever dreamed of, and her hands grasped his body spasmodically, willing him to finish it off before she died of need.

Wade moved faster, his body pounding hers into the ground, every thrust pushing her toward the inevitable explosion of lust and desire. Each penetration slammed him down across her clit, until she saw stars even though her eyes were closed. Then it hit her. Hard. Explosions of pleasure raced through every nerve in her body, her muscles clutching him tight as he gasped and muttered her name. Wade came too, hot waves of seed hitting her, hips spasming as he groaned into her ear. He collapsed next to her, his arms holding her protectively.

"Wade, that was incredible," she murmured, dropping one arm across her eyes. "I had no idea sex could be that good."

"It sure as hell hasn't ever been that good before," he replied, rolling his head over to kiss her hair gently. "I knew it would be beautiful between us, but that surprised me. This is really special, Cat. Do you understand that?"

She nodded her head – she really did understand. None of her married friends had experienced this, not unless they were better at keeping secrets than she believed. She wanted him again already, wanted to feel his body over hers every night, to look forward to this kind of closeness whenever she saw him. But first she needed to get rid of her damn corset. She rolled over onto her stomach, presenting the laces to him.

“Get this thing off me,” she whispered. “I don’t care how much you like to look at it, I need to breathe.”

He gave another of those low chuckles, then reached over and started pulling at the laces. They were tight, but he managed to unravel them within a few moments, and she eased the constricting garment off over her head, tossing it away without thought. The chill of the spring air hit her for the first time, and she shivered. Wade crawled over her, warming her with his body, and she sank down into the bedroll on her stomach, enjoying the weight of him on her back. They lay like that for several minutes until she noticed his erection rising against her ass.

“You ready for more?” she asked, wiggling her butt against him.

“Hell yes,” he muttered, kissing along the back of her neck. Little tingles ran through her each time his lips grazed her skin. She started to roll over, wanting more of him, but he held her steady.

“No, let’s try something different this time,” he murmured. “Just follow my lead.”

She nodded her head, and when he slipped one hand under her stomach and lifted her to her knees, it felt strangely familiar. Then she remembered standing in front of him in the barn, legs spread as he thrust against her from behind. It was kind of like that. She wiggled her butt again, gratified to hear him groaning softly.

Catherine still wore her chemise, but he bunched the soft fabric up around her waist quickly enough, spreading her legs with his knees and thrusting into her without warning. She braced herself with her hands, pushing back at him, and had the satisfaction of feeling him in places she’d never felt before. This new angle had definite

possibilities... It took all she had not to fall down under the weight of his possession, but she held herself up, determined to take him just as her mare had taken his stallion.

Wade's fingers slid down her stomach, finding the nub of her clit and rubbing it roughly in time with his thrusts. It should have hurt, but the little bit of pain only heightened the sensations she felt as he plowed her from behind. Her breath came faster as the tension built deep within. Every part of her wanted him to move faster, to rub harder, to give her another of those incredible orgasms that burst her world apart into a million pieces.

Wade didn't disappoint her.

His motions roughened, and she suddenly flew apart with a pleasure she couldn't describe. Every muscle in her body stiffened, then released suddenly as she collapsed beneath him. He kept her hips held high, thrusting into her four more times before he released his seed. They both collapsed, panting, and he pulled the blanket up and over them.

Catherine felt exhausted, completely worn out from their efforts. She snuggled into his hard, warm form, startled to realize he still wore almost all of his clothing. She wanted him naked beside her, but she didn't have the energy to do anything about it. Instead she took a deep breath, inhaling his scent, and fell asleep.



## **Chapter Six**

"Holy God preserve us!" a woman shrieked in the early morning chill. "I cannot believe my eyes. Catherine Masters, you explain yourself this minute!"

Catherine's eyes flew open, and she clutched the blankets against her body, blinking blearily, trying to figure out what was happening. Wade lay beside her, a broad smile on his face. The bottom of the wagon rose above her.

"We have company, sugar," he said, dropping a kiss on her nose. "Better get yourself dressed."

He rolled out from underneath the wagon, his voice immediately conciliatory and filled with concern.

"Now, Mrs. Jackson, there's no need to get all worked up," he said. "Mrs. Masters and I are practically engaged. We'll just move the wedding up. It won't be the first time in this town a couple's jumped the gun."

Catherine peered out from under the wagon, realizing she wore only her shift and stockings. To her utter horror, Cordelia Jackson stood in the center of their campsite, shaking Catherine's forgotten corset in outrage. Beyond her hovered a small crowd of onlookers. On the ground just past the wagon lay Catherine's new blue dress, flanked by her bedraggled petticoats.

She ducked back under the wagon, thinking frantically. She'd fallen asleep with Wade, right in the middle of a pasture filled with her camping neighbors. And she'd left her clothing out on the ground like a damn flag to get their attention. Her eyes narrowed.

Wade.

She'd played perfectly into his hands. She wanted to hit him, to blame him, but as she ran through the blurred memories of last night, she couldn't quite blame him for

everything. The only thing he'd done wrong was letting her stay with him after she fell asleep. But should she really fault him for that? The whole thing had been her idea, after all.

Then she heard him speaking again, his strong voice cutting through the babble of the crowd.

"I know you're all upset to see this, but you know how courting couples are. It's not like I seduced an innocent girl. Catherine is a respectable widow and I have every intention of marrying her. Soon."

"You're darned right it will be soon," a man said, voice dripping with disapproval. "I can't believe we almost hired her to be our teacher. A woman of such questionable morals—"

"Now you just shut your mouth," John Masters' voice rang out across the campsite. Catherine slid deeper into the blankets, wishing desperately she could simply cease to exist. Not only had she slept with Wade, everyone knew it. *Everyone*. The crowd out there wouldn't keep their mouths shut, and more people joined them every moment, eager to see the show. Then the full magnitude of the situation hit her.

She was never going to have her little house in town. *Never*. They couldn't give her the teaching job, not after a spectacle like this.

"Catherine and Wade will be married as soon as possible," John was saying. "In fact, we might as well have the wedding this afternoon. We'll have another party tonight to celebrate. I'm sure nobody will have a problem with that?"

There were murmurs, but for the most part the crowd seemed appeased. Everyone liked the idea of another party, and there were precious few excuses for ranchers and their families to get together and visit. After a few more moments of muttering, John's voice rose again, shooing people back to their own campsites. Wade dropped back down under the wagon.

"Are you all right?" he asked, concern written all over his face. "It's not as bad as it sounded, everything will be fine."

"It will *not* be fine," Catherine moaned. "Why didn't you wake me up and make me move?"

He just gave her a look and didn't answer.

"You trapped me!"

"If I remember correctly, you jumped me, not the other way around," he said. "You took advantage of me, and now that you've gotten caught you don't want to face the consequences. Usually the man's in that fix, Cat, but I guess it works both ways. You made your bed..."

She snorted, utterly disgusted with him. Well, with herself, really. He was right, the whole thing really had been her idea. And that *really* rankled her.

"Can you hand me my clothing?" she asked after a pause. "Are any of them still out there waiting for me?"

"No, Dad chased them off," he said. "But they'll be waiting for us. You have to marry me, otherwise you'll never be able to face your friends again."

"What if I leave instead?" she asked. "Will you let me?"

"I'd follow you," he said simply. "I won't give up on you, Catherine, but I won't hold you prisoner."

"What about the ranch?" she asked. "Your plans? Your father?"

"With any luck you'd change your mind and we could come home," he replied. "I don't want to give up my dreams. But I don't want to force you to, either."

"That's a nice sentiment, given that I'm just about out of options. You've got me trapped, so you can afford to be kind," she said, her voice tart. Wisely, Wade didn't say anything.

He handed her the blue dress and she tried to put it on. Not an easy task under a wagon, and then she realized that it wouldn't possibly fit without her corset. Wade sighed and handed her his long overcoat without a word. She pulled it on and crawled out from under the wagon, face bright red with shame. John might have chased their

immediate audience away, but distant, judgmental gazes still followed her as she scuttled over to the tent. Maria stood inside, her eyes wide.

"I was so worried about you, *señora*," she said. "You weren't here last night, and José said to just go to bed. But then all the people showed up and started talking, so I came out to see..."

Her voice trailed off, and she blushed almost as fiercely as Catherine.

"Are you going to marry him?" the girl asked. "If you don't, people are going to say terrible things about you."

Catherine shrugged her shoulders, then sat down on her bedroll, dropping her head into her hands. Why had she done it? Everything she'd wanted had been right there for the taking, and yet she let herself go to Wade—no, practically forced herself on him, all because she didn't want him lusting after this pretty Mexican girl.

"I don't know how this happened," she said finally. Maria nodded knowingly.

"It was that cider," she said. "José told me not to touch it, because it would make me drunk. He said cowboys can't be trusted around pretty girls."

Catherine laughed weakly, wishing she could blame the cowboy in her life for everything, but that wasn't really fair. She'd done it to herself.

She knew what she had to do—she had to marry Wade Masters, and the sooner the better. Sure, she could take her gold eagles and set out on her own. Texas was a big state, and nobody would ever know about her tainted past unless she told them. But she didn't want Wade to leave his home. He'd be miserable away from the ranch. And he was right about one thing—there was opportunity to be had here, for people who worked hard and smart. She could make good things happen with him if she chose.

"I'm going to marry him," she said slowly, looking over to Maria. "Today, I guess. That's what they suggested. I suppose Wade will talk to the minister."

"Well, you'll be lucky in one way," Maria said, her voice matter-of-fact. "There are a lot of people here to celebrate if you get married right now. Not everyone gets a party that big."

"That's certainly true enough," Catherine said, laughing weakly. "I suppose I should get dressed. Can you help me?"

Maria nodded quickly, and offered her an encouraging smile.

"You'll be all right, *Señora* Masters," she said. "He's a good man. José says so, and he would know. We've met bad men before. During the war."

Catherine nodded her head, understanding Maria completely. Wade was a decent man in a country where too many devils came looking for opportunities. She could build a life with him. And Lord knew, the sex was good. She laughed at that thought, wondering if she'd lost her mind.

\* \* \* \* \*

Wade stood at the front of the barn, his suit brushed and straightened as much as it could be under the circumstances. The day had flown by, with several of the town ladies coming together to clean and press Catherine's dress while others prepared food. Maria had woven a lovely ring of flowers for her hair.

The wedding took place in the late afternoon, and almost everyone who'd come for the dance had opted to stick around for the nuptials. Catherine's cheeks burned bright as John walked her down the center toward Wade, who looked grimly handsome. As she took his hand, he stared straight ahead, and if his expression held any triumph he managed to keep it under control. The minister seemed faintly disapproving, as if it pained him to officiate at the joining of two such immoral people, but the mayor looked on proudly and John Masters' expression was fierce enough to quell anyone who might feel the need to whisper.

The minister launched into the brief ceremony, and Catherine felt herself grow almost dizzy as the words of the service washed over her. When she'd married Ryan

she'd been filled with hope and excitement, yet the marriage had been a nightmare. Perhaps this was better, to go into it knowing what to expect from Wade. He would be good to her, she knew that in her bones. But why, oh why had she let herself get trapped into this?

Then Pastor Eddings called upon them to exchange their vows, and her chest went tight. She turned to look at Wade, and his large hands took hers gently. His green eyes were bright with an emotion she didn't want to name, one that she thought she might understand. She felt a bit of it too. Because for all her protestations, she was a little excited about the marriage.

The thought stunned her.

*Marriage to Wade excited her.* She looked at him, watching his mouth form his vows, and realized she felt happy to hear them. Then she noticed the minister had stopped talking, and that everyone was looking at her.

"I do," she said quickly, blushing. Wade smiled, the grim cast of his mouth finally breaking. She smiled back, suddenly shy, and decided that she really didn't mind losing out on the teaching job so much. In fact, she wondered if a part of her hadn't truly wanted it in the first place. Sure, she'd had some cider to drink the night before. But had she really been too drunk to go back to the tent?

It probably didn't bear thinking about.

"Do you have the ring?" the minister asked. She looked up, startled. Wade couldn't possibly have a ring so quickly—why was the minister reminding everyone that this wasn't a planned event? To her surprise, John handed something to Wade. He took her left hand and slid a ring onto her finger, a beautiful star sapphire that matched her eardrops. Her eyes went wide.

"I am pleased to introduce Mr. and Mrs. Wade Masters," the minister proclaimed, and the barn erupted with cheers and shouts of approval. Wade pulled her close, giving her a long kiss and fueling the fire for the cowboys surrounding them. They started to whoop and holler, and then music burst forth for dancing.

After the first kiss, Catherine hardly saw Wade again for the rest of the evening. Every man there wanted to dance with her, stealing kisses and offering Wade congratulatory thumps on the back. Each time she came close to him, laughing friends pulled them apart, and every matron was as eager to dance with Wade as their menfolk were to dance with Catherine.

But no party lasts forever, and finally John came up to her, pulling her from her latest partner and walking her over to Wade. They left together in a wave of hooting and catcalls, climbing up into the buckboard and driving toward town. Some of the rowdier cowboys ran alongside them, while others went to get their horses and wagons. When she heard the first round of congratulatory gunshots, Catherine started to get nervous.

"Where are we going?" she asked Wade, raising her voice to be heard over their carousing escorts.

"George Reynolds is letting us borrow his house tonight," Wade called back, shooting her a grin. "Figured we'd never survive the chivaree if we didn't have four solid walls around us."

"We might not make it anyway," she said, looking around with wide eyes. There had to be thirty or forty men pacing them, and she could hear others on horses coming up behind. At this rate, half the town would be after them. "They won't damage anything, will they?"

"I hope not," Wade said. "I'd hate to have to rebuild Reynolds' house for him. He's a brave man to lend his place out for a wedding like this one. Especially since he just lost his teacher."

The crowd followed them all the way to the house, where a concerned-looking Mr. Reynolds met them at the door, flanked by his birdlike little wife, Martha. Wade helped Catherine out of the wagon, tossing the reins to José, who'd followed with the crowd. The men settled down as he lifted Catherine, carrying her over the threshold, then let up a mighty yell as they quickly pulled the doors shut.

The Reynolds house was one of the finest in town, two stories tall with a tiny balcony above the front porch. Martha Reynolds showed them to the master bedroom, looking more than a little nervous as the crowd outside grew larger and louder. Her husband followed, muttering to himself. Catherine heard women's voices now, and realized wagonloads of revelers had arrived from the barn.

"I hope you have a plan for dealing with them," George Reynolds said as he stood at the door. "Otherwise they'll break in and take you to the creek for a dousing, Wade. Mrs. Masters, you might want to get ready for a wheelbarrow ride."

A new volley of gunshots fired outside, and Catherine gave a little shriek. She and Ryan had eloped—now she wished she and Wade had been smart enough to do the same thing.

"I'll talk to them," Wade said. "Don't worry."

Mr. Reynolds nodded his head, and shut the door on them. Catherine stood by the bed, listening to the ruckus outside. Wade gave her a reassuring smile, then stepped to the French doors that opened onto the balcony. The drunken cowboys gave a great roar when they saw him, but they quieted down as soon as Wade held up his hands.

"Why are all of you here?" he asked, his tone light and easy. "I know you like a good chivaree, but I've got work to do in the bedroom. Can't you give a man some peace?"

The crowd roared again, and Wade gave a sharp laugh.

"I suppose you want something more to make you leave us alone?" he asked. "Well, I'll give it to you!"

He pulled a heavy bag from his pocket, one she hadn't noticed before, and opened it. Then he reached in and drew out a handful of coins, throwing them to the crowd below. He kept it up for several minutes, laughing and calling down to the people below, and Catherine wondered just how much he had in there. The rowdy group hollered and stomped their approval, scrambling in the rain of cash. Catherine moved cautiously toward the French doors, awed by the way Wade so easily managed their



pursuers. Then a man called out her name, and she realized she'd made a fatal error. She'd stepped close enough that they could see her, and now they wanted more.

"Catherine! Cat!" voices called to her, and Wade turned to her with a look of rueful pride.

"You'd better come out here," he said. "They won't leave until they see you, and if we don't settle them down they might decide to break in. Then you really will get your wheelbarrow ride, and I'll get worse. You remember Chester Miller? He didn't make it back from his chivaree for two days."

She took his hand and stepped out on the balcony, leaning over and waving hesitantly at the people gathered below. They shouted their approval, and at Wade's urging she flung a handful of coins to them. Then Wade pulled her back, turning her to face him.

"I think they'll be happy if we give them a kiss," he said. "You all right with that?"

She nodded her head, giddy. He reached around her, pulling her body into his as he took her mouth. The kiss was hard and fast, but it went long enough for him to drop one hand down to her ass and give it a squeeze. The men below went crazy, cheering and hooting in drunken delight. The women weren't much better, clapping and calling out for Wade to show them more. Then Wade ended the embrace, pushing her back into the room before he turned to the crowd once more.

"Now my father has a barrel of whiskey waiting for the men back at the barn," he called out. "But if you don't get there soon, it may all be gone. And as for the rest of you, I'm sure there's more dancing to be done. Have a good time tonight and don't forget to toast my new bride!"

The group gave another cheer, and there was a general commotion as the mob turned to head back to the party. Wade reentered the room, and Catherine stepped into his arms, realizing with a start that they hadn't been alone since their discovery that morning under the wagon.

"That was smart, throwing the money and giving your father the whiskey," she whispered. "When did you have time to make all those arrangements?"

Wade laughed, the sound rumbling through his chest.

"I've seen how these things go," he said. "I wanted to spend my wedding night with my bride, not being chased around by a mob of drunken cowboys. While you were getting prettied up, Dad and I rode all over the county, searching for cash and booze. He was more than willing to help—he wants grandchildren."

"Let's not worry about that just yet," Catherine said, blushing. "I need to get used to the idea of being married, first. I really was going to take that teaching job, Wade. I had it all planned out."

"Well, for a woman hell-bent on becoming a respectable teacher, you sure crawled into my bed fast enough last night."

She didn't respond, pulling free of him and walking over toward a small vanity table. She reached up, pulling her hair free of pins. Wade came up behind her, combing her long, soft hair with his fingers as she started unbuttoning her gown.

"I suppose I could blame the cider," she said finally. She finished the buttons, and pulled the dress over her head and shoulders, Wade helping. Her petticoats followed, and when she finally turned to face him she wore only her chemise, pantalets and corset. She put one hand on her hip and cocked it at him playfully.

"But I'm not entirely sure that would be the whole truth," she admitted. "I think that maybe a little part of me wanted to get caught."

"Well, a big part of me wanted you to get caught," Wade laughed, grabbing her hand and pressing it against the front of his trousers. "I'll be happy to introduce you to it."

"We've met," she smirked. "Several times."

Wade kissed her again, reaching around to pull at the strings of her corset.

"I thought you liked it on," she said, giving him a sultry look. He nodded, and laughed.

"Yes, I have to say it does great things for your figure," he said. "But I'd like to see all of you."

"Well, I haven't seen all of you yet," she said. "And you've seen lots of me. I don't think that's quite fair, do you?"

He shook his head, smiling at her, and she sashayed around him over to the bed, dropping down with a bounce.

"Strip," she ordered.

Wade stopped short. She knew he wasn't used to a woman giving him orders, but it was about time he learned what it felt like. He'd been ordering Catherine around for years. Her new husband stood, just looking at her, and she lost patience.

"I said *strip*."

He nodded his head at her, and then reached down to the vest, unbuttoning it slowly. Then he pulled the fine fabric off.

"Oh, I think you can do better than that," Catherine said, smirking. "I've been giving you peep shows for months now, at least that's what you told me in the kitchen. I think you owe me a little more enthusiasm."

He offered her a challenging stare, and then dropped his hands to his stomach, rubbing it through the thin fabric of his soft cotton shirt. He rubbed up and down several times, pulling the fabric free, taunting her with little glimpses of the muscular flesh beneath. Then he started pulling the buttons apart from the bottom up, revealing his sculpted muscles and the light sprinkling of dark hair that covered his chest. Finally the shirt hung loose, and he pulled it off his shoulders, tossing it to the ground.

"Is that better?" he asked. She smiled and nodded, licking her lips absently. His nipples were round and tight, and she wondered how they tasted.

"Now the trousers," she said, leaning back on her elbows, thrusting her breasts up and out toward him. She watched his eyes follow her body hungrily, and gave a husky chuckle.

"Trousers, Wade," she repeated.

He nodded his head, dropping his hands down to his fly. One by one the buttons slipped open, revealing smooth, warm skin. She gave a little gasp when she realized he wasn't wearing anything beneath, the proud tip of his erection peeking at her through the open fabric. Then he turned away from her slowly and deliberately, leaning over as he pulled one boot and then the next free from his feet, followed by his socks. The fabric of his pants hung loose on his ass, almost but not quite slipping down to show off his tight rear. Catherine shivered. She couldn't wait to see all of him. He pulled his socks free, and then stood back up, still facing away from her.

The moment seemed endless.

When he finally pushed his pants down her breath caught. Everything about Wade was handsome, but his rear was something to be truly admired. Tight and hard from years of riding and working on the range, each cheek curved slightly concave at the edges, crafted like a fine sculpture. Catherine wanted to reach over and cup them in her hands, squeeze him like a piece of ripe fruit. Instead she decided to give him a taste of his own medicine. When he turned back toward her, she was fondling herself between her legs with one hand, the other sliding down into the tight fabric of her corset to rub against her nipple. Wade's eyes flared, then he strode powerfully across the room toward her.

His mouth took hers with all the force of the desire pent up between them. It wasn't a kind, gentle kiss. No, this was the kiss of a man long deprived, a man who wanted to brand his woman for all to see. He reached down beneath her body, cupping the gently swelling mound of her ass and pulling her up and into his embrace. There could be no doubting how much he wanted her—the evidence prodding against her stomach was unmistakable. He pulled his mouth from hers, gasping.

"I need to be inside you right now," he said, and she nodded her head against him, agreeing wholeheartedly.

He pulled back, ripping her pantalets off and pushing up her chemise before shoving himself into her body with one smooth, hard stroke. She shrieked, her legs coming up to clutch his waist, pulling him down into her body as far as he could go. Again and again he pounded into her opening until they both gasped for air, desperate to complete the act that would make them a married couple. Each stroke brought them closer—the tension in Catherine's body pulled as tight as she could bear. Then it drew tighter still, and she exploded into a thousand pieces. She felt his seed shooting deep into her womb, heard him grunt as he climaxed, and then he collapsed on top of her, kissing her and murmuring soft words of love. Finally he rolled to one side, pulling her into the crook of his arm and nestling her down against his body.

Catherine wanted to say something to him, explain her complex feelings, but she couldn't put the words together. She hadn't wanted this marriage. Yet when she searched within her heart, she couldn't be upset with the way things had turned out. Having her own house would have been nice, but how lonely would her bed have been? No, that wouldn't have been nice at all. And the thought of him with another woman made her vision blacken with dark jealousy. Catherine had to be honest with herself—she would never have left him alone with Maria out on the ranch. No way. Just the idea made her want to brand him, mark him as her own. She leaned up, kissed Wade's chest and licked her way over to this nipple, drawing the tight little bud into her mouth. Then she gave him a sharp nip. Wade groaned.

"Are you trying to kill me?" he muttered. She laughed and nodded her head, licking at the tiny hurt she'd made.

"Yes, I think so," she replied. "After all, I can't just let you win. I've got to find some way to show you that just because we're married doesn't mean you own me."

"I'm too scared of you for that," Wade replied, smirking. "Although I won't apologize for letting everyone discover us. I told you I wasn't going to play fair."

She bit his nipple again and he squawked, sitting up suddenly and knocking her back onto the bed. Rather than retaliate, she sprawled her legs open and took a deep breath, almost pushing her breasts up and out of the corset. Wade groaned, reaching out to run a finger along the gentle swell of her mound.

"All right, Cat," he said. "You win. Just as long as I get to see you like this whenever I want."

She smiled up at him.

"So long as *you* keep your place," Catherine whispered. "Right here, serving me. Don't you dare forget it."

"I won't," Wade replied fervently. "Trust me, I've never wanted to serve anyone more."

"One more thing. The name is Catherine."

"Cat," he whispered, tugging her hair. She hit him playfully and he gave a mock whimper before leaning over and claiming her lips once more.

## **About the Author**

Joanna Wylde is a freelance writer who worked as both a journalist and a fundraiser before finding her niche in erotic romance. In April 2002, *The Price of Pleasure* was released as an e-book and quickly found a receptive audience. Jo is married and lives in north Idaho with her husband, David.

Joanna welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and email address on her author bio page at [www.ellorascave.com](http://www.ellorascave.com).

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