

LEATHHER & LACE

*The Seduction of  
Widow McEwan*  
MELISSA SCHROEDER

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# The Seduction of Widow McEwan

*Melissa Schroeder*

## Dedication

To Lou Jean Baker for taking my children and caring for them as if they were your own, and Beth Peters for racing me to the ER and even offering me a Nora Roberts book to pass the time. You both proved once again how supportive and special the Air Force family truly is. Thank you both for coming to my aid in my hour of need.

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## Chapter One

Texas, 1883

It was a damn fine day.

Seth Conner watched the first fingers of light dance across the yard as he took a sip of coffee and smiled. Life was pretty wonderful at the moment. It had been a bitch of a night, but they had a brand spanking new filly in their barn now. His muscles ached, his head felt like it was filled with cotton, but he just didn't care. The Double C horse ranch had their very first birth, and it had been successful as all get out.

Jackson Calder, his partner of the last five years and best friend since they were sixteen, stomped down the stairs. He glared at Seth as he headed for the stove. Seth just smiled and settled in one of the kitchen chairs.

"Hey, I sent word to your sister's ranch as soon as I realized Sand Dollar was foaling early. Not my fault it took you forever to get here."

If possible, Jack's frown turned darker as he sipped his coffee. "Jamie and I got in a fight last night."

"What's new? You two are always squabbling."

"Naw. This time it's different. She threw me out of the house."

That gave Seth pause. The siblings did fight constantly, but unlike his own family, Jack and Jamie used it as a way to communicate. Seth's family spoke in measured tones.

"What was the argument about?"

"Tucker Portman." Jack spat out the name as if it were poison. And with good reason. Portman was known for his shady deals and his expensive tastes in women, not to mention his two dead wives. Seth couldn't think of one reason for Jameson McEwan to be dealing with Portman other than business.

"Why?"

This time Jack sighed. "Bastard asked her to marry him."

Seth laughed and choked on the sip of coffee he had just taken. Jamie had turned down every man who had come sniffing around her for the last few years, and she surely wouldn't even consider someone like Portman. Not when he had been Sid McEwan's partner in all his whoring. "Right. And I'm sure she said yes."

Jack's eyebrows drew down as he scowled. "She didn't say no."

Seth's heart stopped for just a moment. "Are you telling me she said yes to that degenerate?"

Jack shook his head, his eyes, so like his sister's, dead serious. "But she's considering it."

Swift anger shifted through Seth. "Why the hell is she even thinking of doing it?"

Jack plopped down in the chair opposite of Seth's and sighed again. "He suggested it would be a good way to combine the ranches. Their properties butt up against each other. That fence comes down, that would be one big ranch. Probably the biggest in South Texas, if not the whole danged state."

"Tell her she can't."

This time Jack snorted. "Yeah, and she's going to listen to me."

Panic quickly replaced the anger speeding through his blood and chilling his body. Jamie had never seriously considered any proposal before now. With the spread that was left to her when Sid died, she was considered one of the most eligible women in the area. For years she had ignored all overtures, not even attempting to hide the fact she was just plain not interested in any man in particular. The idea that she was considering Portman's offer scared the hell out of Seth. To hide his feelings, he set his face with a sneer and decided to try and get under his best friend's skin.

"Jesus, Jack. You're her brother—"

"*Younger* brother. That doesn't mean anything to Jamie. She's been on her own for four years."

"But with your father gone, you're the man of the family." Seth was grasping at straws but the idea of Jamie marrying anyone else was not something he could face like a man.

“Again, I’m her younger brother and she practically raised me.” Jack slouched in his chair and anyone who didn’t know him would think that he was half-asleep. Being his friend for more than ten years, Seth knew better. “She says she’s going to San Antonio without me later this week.”

“She can’t do that.”

“She can, and she will. You know how stubborn my sister is. The only time she didn’t dig in her heels was when Pa told her she was marrying Sid.”

He ignored that little fact and pushed on. The idea of Jamie riding all the way into San Antonio by herself sent a chill into his gut. He knew she had some business to do there from time to time, but she’d never attempted the trip alone. “Figure out a way to have someone go with her.”

“I thought you’d never ask.”

“What?”

“I figure if you show up and just say you’re doing me a favor, she won’t be able to say no. You know how she is with you. You’re the one she likes.”

“That’s because I don’t try and tell her what to do.” He would sure like to. Jamie was an independent widow, one used to ordering men around. He’d love to see how she’d react to being under his control. But just as Jack said, she saw Seth as a family member. She patted him on the head like he was a sibling when all he could think about was stripping her naked, slipping into her and capturing her cries of completion in his mouth.

*Bad direction there, Seth.* Clearing his throat and hopefully the image of his fantasy, he said, “That may be, but do you really think she’ll fall for it? If she’s still mad at you, I’m damn sure she’d not be in the mood to put up with me.”

Jack waved Seth’s comment away. “She may view you as a sort of adopted brother, but she still talks to you when she’s mad at you.”

He winced inwardly, knowing there was no way Jack understood why he wouldn’t want that type of relationship. He’d never told his best friend about his fascination with Jamie. For good reason. Jack would probably not be that friendly if Seth told him he wanted to take his sister to bed and keep her there until she couldn’t see straight.

“I don’t want her going by herself, and with Walt laid up after he got hurt from that fall, she’s shorthanded. There’s been a few problems around her ranch—”

“Problems?”

Jack gave him a strange look. Probably because his voice had been sharp. It was hard not to be a little alarmed. Jamie was talking about marrying, going to San Antonio by herself and now there had been problems at her ranch he didn’t know about.

“She had a few cattle go missing and apparently there’s been some incidents she didn’t tell me about.” He shrugged. “Some sabotage, Walt told me. He didn’t seem that worried about, says it’s regular shit that goes on, but Jamie still shouldn’t be out by herself riding to San Antonio.”

Sabotage was common, especially on a spread as big as Jamie’s, but riding to San Antonio by herself, that was plain stupid. The pleading look in his best friend’s eyes told Seth he lost the argument before it even started.

With an aggravated sigh, Seth said, “I’ll try, but you know the way she is. There’s a good chance I won’t convince her to let me tag along.”

Jack took a healthy swallow of coffee and smiled. “I have a feeling you’ll have no problem.”



Jameson McEwan looked out over the cattle grazing in the pasture and drew in a deep breath of fresh air. The lingering scent of hay filled her senses and calmed her guilt. No one got under her skin like her brother and this time he’d gone a step too far. She hadn’t meant to lose her temper with Jack three nights earlier, but she could no longer let a man tell her what to do. Especially her *younger* brother.

It wasn’t as if she had been serious about marrying Portman. She’d told him no when he asked and she meant it. Sid, her late husband, hadn’t trusted Portman, even though they’d spent their childhood together. Lord knew they had spent more than one night whoring, before and after her marriage. In fact, they’d been on one of their whorehouse



visits when Sid had suffered his heart seizure four years earlier. But when it came to money, Sid was smart, and he said never to trust Portman.

She shifted in her saddle and turned Sadie toward the house. As they slowly made their way home, she thought about her argument, thought about how to apologize, but a tiny part of her was rejoicing. This was the first time she had told her brother to butt out of her business and stood her ground. With a ranch that spread out over fifty thousand acres, Jamie was comfortable with being in charge, except with the men in her family.

First her father had bullied her for years, and into a marriage that had been far from satisfying. Now her brother, whom she helped raise, had the nerve to tell her what to do with her life...it was too much. She had been a little mean, and completely out of control, but she refused to let Jack tell her what to do. He must still be madder than an angry hornet about it because he had yet to come back to her ranch. It had been three days and she hadn't heard anything from him. After her trip to San Antonio she would have to go see him and smooth things over. It irritated her, but she was the older sibling and Jack had not fully grown up yet. She guessed she was to blame for that, as much as her father. After their mother's death, she did baby Jack a bit, but her father had made it worse with his *boys will be boys* mentality. Jack had never had to live up to anything in his entire life.

She'd been worried over their loss of cattle. With five thousand head, it wasn't much to have fewer than thirty go missing but it still bothered her. Hank had asked around, as had Jack, and no one else seemed to be missing any. With that worry, not to mention the upcoming negotiations with Johnson to buy his cattle, she really didn't need the added pressure she got from Jack. She loved him, but if he told her what to do again, she might just have to shoot his big toe.

As she rode into the barnyard, Jamie smiled at the activity. Even with all his failings, Sid McEwan had built something real, something solid here. It never failed to give her satisfaction to watch the workings of the ranch. Things were winding down for the day, and most of the hands were washing up for their evening meal. She had never intruded in their private time, left them to their own in the evenings. Sid hadn't believed in that. He'd

thought he owned the men. Although they had feared Sid, they had more respect for her. Knowing her late husband, he was probably turning over in his grave. That notion made her smile wider.

“Boss!” Hank Goings flagged her down as she dismounted. By the time he reached her, he was wheezing and breathing heavily. A portly man some twenty years her senior, he’d been there when Sid had bought the ranch. His hair had gone white, his skin resembled leather from the years spent in the sun, and she loved him like a father. Making him foreman when Sid died was the smartest thing she’d ever done.

“Take it easy, Hank. What has you in such a rush?”

“You have a visitor.”

She cringed and tightened her hold on Sadie’s reins, all the while hoping it was her brother and not Portman. One thing she didn’t want was to deal with her neighbor. She’d rather have another argument with her brother than have Portman slobber on her.

“Is that a fact?” she asked as she removed the harness.

“Yes’m. Seth Conner rode in a few minutes ago.”

She whirled around to face Hank, her heart jumping into her throat. “What for?”

He grimaced. “Beg your pardon. I didn’t mean to worry ya none. Seth said something about the trip to San Antonio tomorrow.”

Laying her hand against her chest, she took a deep breath and allowed her heart to stop jumping. “Well, thank goodness for that. Can you see to Sadie for me?”

He nodded. “Yes’m.”

When she entered the house, she stripped off her hat and tossed it on the hat rack in the foyer. The sounds from the kitchen told her where Seth was. He was pouring himself a cup of coffee, acting as if he owned the place. He’d always been like that. From the first time her brother brought him home, Seth seemed to be part of their family. But not. He came from different stock. With Jack and Jamie, you could see their Spanish ancestry stamped on their faces. No one would mistake Seth, with his sandy blond hair and gray green eyes, as a sibling.

Of course, Seth fit in just about anywhere. Whether he was in the company of rough and tumble cowboys, or spending time with his parents at the capitol, Seth succeeded in easing his way through the crowd and making lasting friendships. Her brother was the same way, although Seth preferred simple folk more than the state legislators his parents frequently socialized with.

She took her time studying him, watching the way his hair curled over his collar and thinking that once again, the boy needed a haircut. Her gaze traveled down his strong back, to his narrow waist, to his rear. Sighing even as her blood heated, she reminded herself that a young man like Seth was just that. *Young*. If she couldn't satisfy an old bastard like Sid, there was no way she'd gain the interest of Seth, who hadn't yet reached the age of thirty.

At that moment, he turned. A wave of guilt and embarrassment flooded her face. From the cocky curve of his lips, she knew he suspected where she had been looking. Seth Conner was accustomed to women falling all over themselves when he was around. He was considered quite the catch thanks to being a state legislator's son. Add in the fact that he had a body that would make a Greek god jealous, well that was just a cherry on top of all that cream. And wouldn't it be wonderful to lick it off.

Good night! She needed to quit thinking of Seth that way. More than once in the past year she'd drifted off into lustful thoughts about him. She'd also had several rather naughty dreams of the man, his hands coursing over her skin, his mouth on hers. The fantasies were becoming more lewd and more frequent. Just thinking about them had her face heating, her body reacting. Fighting the urge to fidget, she crossed her arms over her chest and leaned against the doorjamb.

"Did Jack come whining to you about our fight?"

"No. Although he was mighty upset to miss the birth of Sand Dollar's foal."

"Oh." Remorse filled her. If Jack had not spent so much time arguing with her, he'd have been home in time. "I'm sorry for that. But you know my brother, he would argue with a fence post."

“I can’t say I disagree with his position.” His smile slid into a frown. “I can’t believe you’re thinking of marrying that jackass.”

She raised an eyebrow. “And you felt the need to offer this opinion because...”

He took a sip of his coffee, never moving his attention from her face. “I know Portman. He’s not a good man.”

Jamie swallowed back the aggravated scream threatening to escape. Jack had made the same argument. All the men in her life danced a jig around the real reason they didn’t want her to marry Portman. All of them—her brother, Seth and Hank—refused to tell her about Portman’s perverted cravings. She was sick of being protected like some idiot with only air in her brain. Before he died, Sid had told her exactly what Portman was like in colorful detail. Jamie assumed that Sid had worried that Portman might have tried this move earlier and wanted to warn her. Instead, the years had passed without an overture from her neighbor. It struck her as decidedly odd that he now paid attention to her. After Sid’s funeral Portman had waited over six months before he’d paid a call to the Circle M.

In his sixties, Portman appeared older mainly due to his balding hair and excess weight. She was sure the amount of booze and food he took in had a lot to do with it. Married twice, he had done a lot of hard living, and it added age and meanness to his features. The idea of having him touch her turned her stomach. He might have been handsome some time ago, but his love of liquor and cheap women truly did not help his appearance. She shuddered thinking of just what sharing a bed with him would be like.

She shook her head, trying to bring her mind back from that horrendous vision, and asked, “That may be, but don’t you think it’s for me to decide? It isn’t like I don’t have a mind of my own.”

His features softened at her question. “I’d normally say that you have every right to your decisions. You’ve done just fine by this ranch since Sid died. You know I’ve backed almost every one of your decisions.”

That much was true, and Seth had been the one man in her life who hadn’t tried to tell her what to do. Well, until now. When her father and brother had ganged up on her

and told her she couldn't go on the cattle drive, Seth had stood up for her. He'd agreed with her argument that she had to establish herself as the owner of Circle M Ranch.

"So, you disagree with my choice in men?"

Now it was his turn to sigh. "I didn't know you even paid attention to men before Jack told me about this."

"Really? So you see me as the sort of woman who isn't interested in men? Who do you think I'm interested in? Other women?"

For a second, he looked confused. Then the implication of what she meant hit him. His brows drew down over narrowed eyes. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"If I'm not interested in men, then I'd guess I'd have a hankering for women."

Shock rounded his eyes and she laughed. Pushing away from the door, she walked over to help herself to some much-needed coffee. Although she should act more proper, it tickled her to shock Seth.

"How in hell do you know about things like that?"

Before answering, she poured the thick brew into her cup and took a sip. She chuckled at his tone. Seth Conner sounded like an outraged virgin. If that didn't beat all.

"Why do all men assume women don't know about such things?" She shrugged off the irritation—mostly. "Besides, I was a married woman, Seth."

"Sid told you about things like that?"

Unfortunately, he had. He'd accused her several times of preferring women when he couldn't perform in bed. As usual, he'd blamed her for his shortcomings and she'd fallen for it. Not knowing anything about those matters, she'd asked Hank. He'd turned bright red and muttered something about not worrying her pretty little head about it. Then he'd stomped off.

Moving away from memories that should be left buried, she decided to confront the irritated male she had in front of her.

"You hear about things, Seth. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is why in the hell you're here."

## Chapter Two

Seth took another sip of coffee and tried to gather his thoughts. From the moment Jamie had walked through the door, his brain had refused to function. The last rays of sunlight sliced through her hair, bringing out the golden highlights within the dark curls. They spilled over her shoulders. Windblown from her ride, she looked wonderfully tangled. Even dressed in her usual work clothes—a plain shirt tucked into a split skirt, a layer of dust coating her boots—she sparked something inside of him. He couldn't help it. She looked so damn delicious he wanted to eat her up in one bite.

When he'd arrived to find Sadie and Jamie both missing, his worst fear had been that she had left a day early. It would be just like Jamie to allow her temper to get the best of her. He could understand her anger. Jack more than likely talked to her as if she was a ninny. That was something she was definitely not.

At a young age, for a man *or* a woman, she'd taken over one of the biggest ranches in the area and made it more profitable. Even with that proof, Jack and their father treated her like a bit of fluff.

Seth waited until she sat down then took the chair opposite her across the table. He watched her drink her coffee and wondered just how long he'd been in love with her.

He knew the exact moment he began lusting for her. It started the day he'd first seen her. He had only been sixteen to her twenty-one. She'd already been married for four years, but that hadn't mattered. Any man with a mind and blood left in his veins would have been attracted to her. Tall, in a willowy kind of way, with long black hair that curled over her shoulders, and the biggest golden brown eyes Seth had ever seen, she'd been a pretty little thing. Being as randy as a stallion scenting a mare, he'd barely been able to talk to her without embarrassing himself. His usual quick tongue seemed to stop working, and when she smiled at him, he'd almost come right there and then.

Over the years, she'd matured, filled out, and his feelings for her had followed the same path. He'd watched her hold on to her dignity against the gossip of her husband's death and took on a ranch most men couldn't handle. Sometime during all of that, he'd realized he was no longer lusting, but was knee-deep in a rising creek. He'd never thought of doing anything about it. It'd been enough to admire her from afar, out of touch, with just his fantasies to keep him warm. The idea another man might have the right to touch her, though, had changed his mind.

"Seth?"

He blinked and tried to remember her last question. Ahh, the trip.

"Jack wanted me to go with you to San Antonio."

She frowned. "I don't need you to go with me, Seth. I'm a grown woman—"

"Who knows better than to ride off by herself. Admit it. You're doing this to get back at Jack."

The fire lighting her eyes was enough to tell him she was ready to argue the point. He'd been through it more than once with Jack. She opened her mouth, but he pressed ahead. "Listen, I understand why you're mad at him. But you can't go off on some half-cocked idea of traveling alone. Not with the reports of rustlers and a few lingering Indian problems."

"I know." She frowned and threaded her fingers through her hair. The familiar action never failed to capture his attention. "I thought by now he'd quit his sulking and come back over."

"And I need to pick up the supplies Jack was going to get when he went with you." He smiled. "Besides, it makes you the lucky one."

"Lucky one?"

"You get the privilege of my company for the trip."

She snorted. "That's a fine way of describing it. As long as you behave yourself, we should be just fine."

"Behave myself?"

“Seems I took both you and Jack into San Antone about three years ago, and there was that incident with a rather...busty working woman.”

“Oh.” Damn, he’d forgotten about that whore who’d tried to steal Seth’s money. Jack had come to his rescue, but the ruckus had landed them and the whore’s accomplice in jail for the night. The tips of Seth’s ears burned in embarrassment as he remembered having to explain it to Jamie when she showed up for them the next morning. “I promise to act like a proper gentleman.”

She smiled. That’s all it took for his heart to turn over. One true smile that lit up her face, her joy shining through, easy for anyone to see. “I didn’t say you had to be proper. I’m sure that’s damn near impossible for you. Just stay away from women who try to steal your money.”

She finished off her coffee and left to clean up from her ride. Inwardly he snorted at her last comment. Seth didn’t lose sleep over women stealing his money. What kept him tossing and turning all night was the woman who’d stolen his heart.



As Jamie handled the reins, Seth rode beside her on his gelding. The growth of the city amazed her as they made their way down Crockett Street in San Antonio. Since the arrival of the railroad just a few years ago, it seemed the city had doubled in size. Talk of a new line in from the Northeast had been all the buzz a few months earlier, but there was doubt it would be soon. Contracts and negotiations had held up the first train into San Antonio for years, and no one thought this one would be different.

The ride itself had been uneventful. She’d been pretty sure there wouldn’t be any trouble, but she had to admit she felt better having Seth along for companionship. It would have been a long, boring ride without him to talk to.

“You have a room at the Menger, right?”

She turned to look at him and tried again to ignore the way her heart fluttered beneath her breast. It was embarrassing to be affected by him this way. Men rarely got a second glance from her and they definitely didn’t cause this reaction—or hadn’t in a long



time. Sid had done his best to stomp out any romantic daydreams she'd had as a young girl. She couldn't understand why she was acting like a debutante out on her first date—with a man she thought of as a brother.

It had started when he'd said good night to her. The way he had looked at her, his gaze slipping down her body and then back up to her face had been intimate. As if he knew what she looked like naked. She'd gotten very little sleep, waking with gritty eyes and in a bad mood. During the trip, it seemed he spent more time touching her, holding her hand, offering to help her up on her horse than he ever had in the past. This was odd behavior for Seth, who rarely came within ten feet of her. With each glance he gave her, each touch, her body throbbed. She felt the need to scratch an itch, and for the first time in years, she thought a man, one in particular to be exact, might be the only thing to satisfy it.

"Yes. I had planned on sharing the room with Jack, so we'll have to get another room."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

There was a good chance Seth could find lodgings with the benefit of a woman. He and Jack usually did that when they came to town without her. A spike of pain hit her in the chest at the thought of his going to another woman. Silly, really, because it hadn't mattered to her before today. It wasn't like she expected anything from him, and she had no right to feel as if he was abandoning her. Jealousy whipped through her with such an amazing force, it stunned her. She yearned to be that woman he would take for the evening. The reaction not only shamed her but it saddened her as well. In all the years Sid had frequented the whorehouses, she'd never felt envy. The only thing she could remember was feeling relieved he was gone.

She cleared her throat. "I was thinking after we got settled we could head on down to Military Plaza for chili."

He glanced over at her and smiled. Not his usual friendly grin, but a sensuous tilting of his lips. Her blood heated. Her breath tangled in her throat. Seth held her gaze for just a moment, then broke away.

“That sounds like a fine idea. We should get there for the first servings from the Chili Queens,” he suggested, referring to the Mexican women who gathered in the Plaza every day to offer up a frugal and much-loved treat.

She nodded as she took a deep breath. Sneaking a peek at Seth, she grimaced. There was no reason for her reaction. It made no sense whatsoever. Since Seth and Jack had become friends, Jamie had spent time in his company on a regular basis, and it wasn’t as if he was different than one of her hands from the ranch. Every day, she worked side by side with men, spending more time with them than she did with women. Since Sid’s death, several of the younger men had tried to get fresh with her. Not once had she been tempted and it hadn’t caused any problems with work. With her life dedicated to the ranch, she found comfort in working alongside the men and would never jeopardize those relationships with an affair.

Seth’s reputation with women was legendary. True, most of the women he spent time with weren’t the socialites his parents kept throwing at him. Even though her obsession with him was new, there had always been something that drew her to him. Where her brother worked well with horses, Seth had shown a gentleness with the creatures you didn’t see in most men. All of their stock responded to him immediately, and there hadn’t been one he couldn’t train yet. Every now and then, she found herself looking at him, wondering how gentle he would be in bed.

They turned onto Alamo Plaza where the Menger was located. Jamie hoped Seth hadn’t noticed her odd behavior. He seemed comfortable with her as always, so it had to be her imagination. She brushed away her strange feelings.

As they stopped in front of the hotel, Seth said, “Why don’t I get the horses and carriage stabled for the night and you check in. Then we can clean up and get some food in our stomachs.”

Pleasantly surprised, she agreed and moved to step down. She didn’t make it off the wagon. Seth reached up and grabbed her by the waist. The heat of his palms burned through the fabric of her shirt, warming her flesh. Her pulse tripped like a newborn colt

the moment he lifted her to the ground. She looked up, way up, and found Seth smiling at her.

“Gotcha.”

His voice seemed deeper, his Texas accent more pronounced. The sound of it shivered down her spine. Her skin tingled where he touched her. She licked her suddenly dry lips, and Seth followed the action with his gaze. Every thought slipped away but for one. Just how good it would feel to have his mouth against hers. The taste of him, the wildness she sensed beneath the surface, was as tempting as a fresh peach pie.

Leaning closer, she considered acting on that desire. The masculine scent of him, leather and man, filled her senses, making her mind whirl. What would it feel like to have him pull her into his arms, feel his breath upon her face the moment before he kissed her?

What in tarnation was she doing? She was five years his senior and standing in the middle of one of the most crowded areas of the city. Her marriage had taught her that some women were not equipped for relations. Knowing she was ready to mortify both of them and possibly cause a scandal, she dragged herself away.

“Thanks.” Without looking at him, she asked, “Do you need me to get you a room?”

There was nothing but silence from behind her so she turned on the first step and glanced at him. Jamie couldn’t read his expression as he cocked his head to one side and watched her. After several moments passed, he shook his head.

“No. I can take care of that myself.”

She knew what that meant. He planned on staying at one of the saloons and getting a tart for the night. Again, the green-eyed monster of jealousy reared its ugly head, and she didn’t like that one bit.

“Of course.” Her voice had grown cold and ugly. It shamed her but she didn’t care. Without another word, she whirled around and walked up the steps and into the lobby of the Menger. It was best to concentrate on her business and not flirtatious rogues who preferred the company of saloon women.



Seth drank the last of his beer and set the glass down on the bar. He'd arrived at the hotel earlier than he'd planned but his anticipation was high. To be this close to fulfilling his fantasy was driving him crazy, his usual patience nonexistent. The woman he'd loved for years was within his reach and Seth was going to make damn sure he didn't miss grabbing her.

The plan to catch her off guard had come to him before they'd both gone to bed the night before at her house. Since then, he had been doing small things to throw her off. Just a touch or a look seemed to fluster her. It surprised him how innocent she appeared, more so than most of the virginal debutantes his mother threw at him. It was as if she wasn't accustomed to men paying attention to her.

It took every ounce of his self-control not to head up the stairs to her room. He knew she was in 205, knew exactly where that room was located, but he refused to ruin her reputation deliberately. He left the bar and headed to the lobby to wait a few moments and gather his resolve.

A few people milled around. He recognized a couple of the businessmen from his dealings in town. A few women eyed him with interest, but he ignored them. All of them faded away when he heard Jamie's voice.

She was beautiful. She'd pulled her hair up into one of those loose arrangements that made a man's fingers itch to muss it and watch it fall. She'd put something on her lips to make them glossy, and for once she was wearing a dress. It wasn't fancy, plain really since she'd forgone the bustle that most women preferred these days. The unfussy design draped her curves and hugged her breasts, and the shade of yellow brought out the golden tone of her skin.

His mouth suddenly went dry. For years he'd been dreaming of this, lusting after Jamie and loving her, thinking that he would never get the honor of touching her. The sweet torture caused by spending time in her presence had been worth it, but now that he was determined to have her, his body was raring to go.

Damn, he was acting like a greenhorn. She'd always been able to do this to him, and the sad thing was the woman had no idea of the affect she had on him. It was worse than before. Now, he would do everything in his power to get her beneath him.

After taking a couple deep breaths and ordering his cock to take a rest, he smiled and moved toward her.

"Why, you cleaned up nicely, Mr. Conner." Her voice had a breathless quality to it that made his cock twitch. It took every bit of his willpower to not throw her over his shoulder, march up those stairs and show her just how he felt about her. That was not exactly the way he had it planned, but at the moment it sounded like a damn good idea. She'd be madder than a hornet, but he could use that passion in another way. He imagined pulling the fabric of her dress away from her golden skin, watching her eyes go blurry as he brushed his fingers over her nipples.

"Seth."

Brought out of his daydream by the sound of her voice, he cleared his throat as he felt the tips of his ears burn in embarrassment.

Damn if that sharp tone didn't turn him on more. He loved feisty women. Jack always went for women who twittered. They drove Seth crazy. He didn't want a woman who couldn't stand on her own.

He smiled. "Sorry."

She rolled her eyes in response. "Just where did you go there?"

He winked and felt a surge of satisfaction when she drew a deep breath in reaction. "Just off gathering wool."

She frowned. "Was today too much for you? It was pretty hot coming in."

He chuckled and offered her his arm. "Naw, I'm fine. Shouldn't have had a beer on an empty stomach."

She hesitated, then slipped her arm through his. The simple touch sent a blaze through his blood that would rival any wildfire. His groin tightened and he felt lightheaded.

"Seth."

He looked down at the woman he loved, the one he knew he always would love.

“I think you need a good long rest in bed,” she said.

“I think you might be right.”

As he led her through the front doors of the hotel, he ordered himself to be patient. He’d have plenty of time later to show her how wonderful a good long time in bed could be.

## Chapter Three

The scent of chili peppers and other spices filled the air in Military Plaza as Jamie scooped up the last of her chili. The activity still hummed even though the sun had almost set. Tables were scattered amongst the wagons and people. A strange combination of patrons milled around the square. Military officers, workers and tourists, along with the occasional cowboy, had gathered to enjoy the nightly offerings from the Chili Queens. The lowliest worker rubbed elbows with some of the wealthiest members of San Antonio society here in the square. It was one of the many reasons Jamie loved this area. It didn't matter who you were, you came for the food and enjoyed the atmosphere.

"Did you need anything else?" Seth asked her, breaking into her thoughts.

She had attempted to ignore the jumble of feelings he'd brought to life, but he had made it dang near impossible. From walking down the street arm in arm, to insisting he buy their dinner, he'd taken control. She suspected he had brushed up against her several times on purpose, but she couldn't be sure.

"Jamie?" He touched her arm, and like a silly woman, her skin tingled. She turned in his direction and tried not to sigh. The setting sun caressed his facial features. Jamie had observed things about him in the last few hours that she hadn't before. Little things she was sure other women had noticed, but she never let herself.

"No, I've had enough to eat. If I keep eating beans and tortillas there's a good chance Sadie won't be able to carry me home."

He chuckled. "I doubt that." Finishing off his tortilla, he continued to watch her, his gaze intent on her face. "You definitely aren't as skinny as you used to be."

She smiled, remembering what she'd looked like at fifteen. "That's for sure. You didn't even know me when I was still in school. All the boys called me slim."

"I doubt very much that any of them would call you that today."

She snorted and almost apologized, but apparently Seth had no problem with the rude sound. He laughed. Snorting was one of her worst habits and Sid had constantly chastised her for it.

“How about we take a walk by the river before heading in for the night?” Seth suggested.

She nodded. Once they returned their plates, they strolled to the river. It’d been years since she had taken the time to enjoy San Antonio. The only trips she made here were for business, and that was a shame. Each time she visited, she fell more in love with the city. There was something in the air, romance maybe, that seemed to cast a spell over the visitors. The mix of cultures intrigued and fascinated her.

“What are you looking so serious for?”

She glanced up at him and smiled. “I was just thinking I never do things like this.”

He cocked his head and studied her. “That is a right shame. Didn’t Sid bring you here after y’all married?”

Shaking her head, she slipped her hand away from his arm and stood at the riverbank. “No. He usually came here with Portman. Sid said San Antonio wasn’t truly a place for a gentlewoman.”

Seth scoffed, “That’s just stupid.”

She bent to pick a wildflower and twirled it between her fingers. “I have to agree with you on that. Especially since the railroad got here.” Looking out over the river, she watched the fireflies dance above water. “I just haven’t had time for pleasure trips.”

“You should, Jamie. You’re the type of woman who should be pampered.” The seriousness of his tone had her turning back to look at him. His somber expression made her skin itch. Seth was rarely serious.

“What do you mean by that?”

“A woman like you should have time for pleasure.”

The way he said the word pleasure sent a wave of heat over her flesh. Just that one word, the syllables stretched out in his Southern drawl, sounded so wicked. Her clothing suddenly felt too restrictive. She wanted nothing more than to be rid of them, and the fact



that she craved having Seth around for that was a little upsetting. Afraid of the feelings his words had stirred, she backed up a few paces and almost fell into the river. He grabbed her arm and pulled her out of danger, but she wrenched away from him.

“What are you talking about, Seth?”

“You’re a gentlewoman; you should have someone to take care of you.”

She needed steady ground because she was too close to giving in to him. Anger would be the only thing that saved her, that kept her safely away from begging him to come back to her room with her. His misconception that she was weak provided the catalyst she needed. “Really? So you think the little woman needs someone to take care of her? That I’m too stupid to keep myself out of trouble?”

“That isn’t what I meant.”

“What did you mean?” Her voice was sharp. She sounded like a harpy but she required some distance between them.

“I meant that you should have a man to make you happy.”

She laughed at that but there was no happiness in it. “Make me happy, a man? I had the benefit of being married, and let me assure you, there is no advantage that I could see.” He opened his mouth to argue but she was in no mood. Tired and wanting to be alone, away from his unsettling presence, she held up her hand. “I don’t want to talk about my marriage or what I need in a man. Men are good to have as employees and that’s it.”

Although he didn’t look happy, he nodded and offered his arm to her again.

She shook her head. “I think it’s better that I go back by myself.”

Without giving him a chance to argue, she turned and walked away, hoping once and for all to rid herself of her strange urges.



Seth stole down the hall to Jamie’s room. With his plans not proceeding as quickly as he’d thought they would, he’d had to change course. One night was all he had and he refused to allow it to slip through his hands. He thought for sure, given just another thirty

minutes, he would've at least gained the right to escort her back to the hotel. He'd hoped for an invite up to her room. He'd failed at both. The woman wasn't making his plans of seduction easy.

From the moment he met her, he'd misstepped. Hell, the first time in her presence, he'd been so tongue-tied he couldn't do anything but stare at her. It had taken years for him to build the friendship between them. Plenty of times he had taken her side when her brother and father had tried to tell her how to run the ranch. Many people, if they knew his true feelings, might have said he did it because he was in love with her. But it wasn't that. No, if he were honest with himself, it started out that way. But watching her gain her ground and come into her own had astounded him and made him love her even more.

Seth had been ready to admire from a distance, until the ugly thoughts of Portman touching Jamie had entered his mind. From that point on, he had only two things on his mind—seduction, and eventually marriage.

The truth was, after that little talk with her earlier, he had done a lot of thinking. He started off by cursing Sid McEwan for being a jackass. How could a man be married to a woman like Jamie and see the need to frequent whores? There was no doubt the man had treated her badly. Seth knew now that Jamie would be suspicious of any declarations from him. She didn't trust men, and with good reason.

Not that he was giving up. He just had to change his plan a bit. That was the reason he was sneaking down the hall, with a set of instruments he'd borrowed from a friend on the Texas Rangers, to pick her lock. It was illegal, it was childish, but he didn't give a damn.

Pulling out the long metal object, he set to work on stealing into the room of Jameson McEwan.



Delicious heat crawled through Jamie's body as magical hands swept over her flesh. She moved restlessly against the bed, the linens wrapping around her ankles. Wet kisses,

then warm hands skimmed up her legs, drifting over her body, until a lean hard body covered hers.

“Jamie,” a familiar voice whispered. “Wake up, sweetheart.”

Breath feathered against her skin, followed by another wet, openmouthed kiss. She shivered as she felt the scrape of teeth against her flesh. She didn’t want to wake up, ever. Of all her dreams, she had never had one so vivid, so mesmerizing. The temptation to give in, to indulge in her reverie was just too much. Opening her eyes, even acknowledging there was a world outside her dream, would cause it to crash.

She pressed her legs together as the pressure built between her thighs. Sparks of heat flowed through her blood.

“Jamie.” Low, seductive, the voice called out to her again. She wanted to respond to the request, to the desire she heard, but she didn’t want to leave the delectable fantasy.

Jamie shifted her weight, her body brushing up against something solid, something altogether too real. She paused, first in confusion, then in fear. This was no dream. Afraid of what she would find, she slowly opened her eyes. Her heart stuttered when she found Seth above her.

“What are you doing here?” She meant it as a reprimand, but her voice was husky with desire.

His lips curved into a tempting smile filled with sensual promise. For a second, she couldn’t think, couldn’t separate the reality from the fantasy, until her mind finally merged the two together. Every bit of moisture dried up in her mouth, while her palms grew damp.

“I thought I’d show what I meant by pleasure.”

Again, the way he said the word had her curling her toes. She knew he would be more than knowledgeable about the subject. No matter how much she tried, she couldn’t repress the shiver of delight at the thought of having those talented hands—not to mention that mouth—skimming over her body.

Traitorous hope stirred to life in her heart. If there was one man who knew about passion—who could teach her—it had to be Seth. His reputation with women was enough

to make a soiled dove blush. For one brief moment, she thought maybe, just maybe, she could find satisfaction with him.

As fast as it came to life the hope slipped away. Sid had no problems with whores, as he as he told her on more than one occasion. Swallowing her regret, her despair, she shook her head.

“It would be a waste of time, Seth.”

He frowned. “Now, don’t let my age fool ya none. I know more—”

“I’m sure you do, Seth. It has nothing to do with you, and everything to do with me.”

He didn’t say anything for a second or two, just stared down at her. Her eyes had adjusted to the minimal light, and she could read the expressions darting over his face. Aggravation, then confusion, melted into comprehension and finally determination.

“Jamie.” His tone was a strange mixture of irritation and tenderness. He bent his head to brush his mouth over hers once, twice, then pressed his lips to hers. She wanted to tell him to stop, that there was no use in this nonsense because she could find no satisfaction in the marital act. When his tongue traced the seam of her lips, she lost a bit more of her resistance.

Closing her eyes, she opened her mouth for him. He stole inside as he cupped her face. He rubbed his fingers over her cheeks, his calluses rough against her skin. He murmured something she couldn’t make out. The words didn’t matter. It was the rough tone, the arousal in his voice that spoke to her. Something stirred deep within her soul, something she thought dead, long-ago damaged by her marriage.

The thought of that horrible mistake poured a barrel of cold water on her. She dragged her mouth from his. Both of them were breathing heavily. He heaved himself up, balancing his weight on his hands.

“What’s the matter?”

“This isn’t going to work.” Although she wanted it to, craved it in a way that left her dizzy.

With a sigh filled with irritation, he rolled away and sat up. Leaning over, he lit the gas lamp on the bedside table. She winced at the sudden light, then pulled herself into a

sitting position. When Seth's gaze focused on her bosom, she remembered her state of undress and tugged up the covers.

He raised his attention to her face and smiled. There was no hint of the boy she knew in that expression. She needed to quit thinking of him that way. He was a man full grown with desires he had never hidden from the world. When he focused them on her, a rush of goose bumps pebbled her skin.

When he spoke, his voice was calm. "So, explain to me why you can't do this."

"I'd really rather not talk about it."

He frowned. "I'm not leaving until you tell me."

Seth could be like a dog with a bone. If she didn't divert his attention, she would be stuck explaining her married life to him. That was not something she wanted to repeat out loud to anyone. Arguing was the only thing that would stop his questions.

"Speaking of which, just how in the blazes did you get in here?"

He shrugged. "I picked the lock."

"Picked the..." Shock held her tongue, but only for a moment. "Seth Allen Conner, you should be ashamed of yourself. Why, if your mamma knew you were breaking into hotel rooms, I'm sure she'd give you a good tanning."

He gestured impatiently. "Jamie, that isn't going to work. You can come up with all kinds of arguments, but I meant what I said. I'm not leaving until we discuss this. Is it because of the difference in our ages?"

She shook her head. "I told you it wasn't you. Can't we leave it at that?"

His frown developed into a nasty scowl. "No."

"No?"

He popped up from the bed to pace. "I've waited too long. I want some kind of explanation."

The unusual nervous energy he displayed gave her pause. Patience was one thing Seth possessed in great quantity. He didn't hurry unless it was important and his nervousness never showed.

"I don't believe I owe you any kind of explanation."

He stopped his pacing and moved back to the bed. Leaning closer, he braced his hands on the mattress, bringing his face within inches of her. In any other man she would have seen it as intimidation. With Seth, she knew he just wanted her attention.

“There’s no way I’m leaving without a reason. I know you want this.”

She did. Maybe she’d known all along that she wanted him. In a dark corner of her mind, Jamie understood she was attracted to him and the forbidden pleasures he could give her. She couldn’t deny the attraction...the need still simmering within her. From the look on his face, he was ready to argue it to death. What did it matter? She’d learned to live with the humiliation for years. But she would not tell her embarrassing secrets with him hovering over her.

“Back off.”

“I’m not leaving—”

“I didn’t say leave, I said move away. That’s it.”

From the way his eyes narrowed, he didn’t like it, but he did as she asked. Once he moved, she reached for her wrapper. Sliding off the bed, keeping her back to him, she slipped it on, tying the sash and making sure she was well covered before facing him.

When she did, she found him watching her with an unreadable expression. That was odd. Seth might not be the easiest man to read, but he rarely looked so blank.

“So, why don’t you tell me your reasons?” A twinge of sarcasm colored his voice.

Knowing there was no way to get out of it, she drew in a deep breath and said, “I’m a miserable failure at lovemaking, and I refuse to suffer through it ever again.”

## Chapter Four

Seth didn't say anything, didn't seem to move a muscle or even take a breath. Jamie chewed on her lip, her nerves stretching thin, a chill passing over her skin. Shame filled her and sent a wave of fire to her face. She shouldn't have blurted it out like that, but there was nothing she could do about it now. His stillness, and the silence that seemed to extend, had her clearing her throat. She could tell he was shocked. Women were not to speak of such things, but he had been on top of her kissing her like there was no tomorrow. So if he was embarrassed by her outburst, it was his own fault.

She couldn't figure out his reaction as he continued to stare at her. Jamie would have understood if he pitied her, or left her in disgust, but the laughter was the last thing she expected. And not a snicker or chuckle, but a full-bodied cackle. As he continued to hoot, mortification quickly vanished and was replaced by anger.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd leave." Her tone was as cold as a blue norther sweeping across the plains.

He calmed himself enough to offer her an indulgent smile. "You're going to have to come up with a better reason because I'm not buying that."

Needing some protection from him, she crossed her arms over her chest. It didn't help much, but she figured unless she was in full armor, she would still feel vulnerable. "It's the truth."

He tilted his head to the side as he watched her. "As told to you by Sid McEwan?"

Not able to say anything, she nodded. He rounded the bed. As he slowly walked toward her, he never broke eye contact. Heat flared and danced along her nerve endings.

He took her hand, his fingers sliding over her skin. "I have a feeling your husband, God rest his soul, was a jackass."

For a moment she goggled then chuckled. No one ever said anything critical of Sid McEwan. Even years after his death people were afraid to utter a word against him. To hear him called a jackass was not only funny, but too true.

“That may be, but Sid wasn’t the virgin in the marriage. He had more than enough experience.”

Even as she said it, humiliation crawled through her again. It was really stupid to get embarrassed considering the situation. Sid never hesitated to let her know what a failure she was at pleasing him, but if she would’ve said anything about their failed attempts at lovemaking, he’d have been appalled.

Seth had no such problems, since he still held her hand in his, caressing the back of it with his fingers. She shuddered as goose bumps appeared in a path down her arm. Deciding they had talked long enough, she tried to tug her hand free. But, being the stubborn man he was, he didn’t loosen his grip.

She stopped her struggles and said, in her most matronly tone, “*Seth.*”

His smile deepened, warmed, as he used her hand to draw her closer to him. “Why don’t we just try this and see where it goes?”

She shook her head to deny him, but more to fight the need growing within her. It bubbled just below the surface, her control slowly slipping bit by bit out of her grasp. As he stepped behind her, she felt the warmth of his body. The muscles in her stomach tightened when he splayed his hand over them. He gently urged her back against him.

She tried to hold herself rigid and straightened her spine. It didn’t help. His body heat seeped through her nightwear. When she drew in a deep breath, the strong masculine scent of him made her head spin. It was a combination of man, leather and night air. Longing like she had never felt, bigger than the whole damn state of Texas, swelled and expanded inside of her.

How would it feel to just let go? To lean back, enjoy the tenderness of the embrace, forget the world for just a few minutes? It tempted her more than anything else in the world ever had. She had been strong for so long, ignoring her desires. She’d thought they



had dissolved with her first night with Sid. Seth had proved that misconception wrong. Now, her body clamored for his touch, her thoughts of denying him slowly dissolving.

What would it hurt to dive headlong into lust, bend a little and take what Seth was offering?

Because nothing would come of it, nothing could. She knew she would end up with regrets. Enough of those haunted her on a daily basis, she didn't need more. She tried to straighten away from him, away from the wonderfully delicious comfort of his arms, but he held her steady.

"Seth, this can't go anywhere. I already told you—"

All of her thoughts halted and her hormones danced when he nuzzled the side of her neck just below her ear. "I heard ya." He nipped at her lobe. "I just decided to ignore ya."

She huffed in annoyance and he chuckled. His chest vibrated against her back. Her nerves jumped before a burst of energy slipped over her skin, causing her to shiver. As he kept one hand splayed across her stomach, he skimmed his other up to her breast. She should pull away from him and order him from her room. Seth would go if she were serious, if she really wanted him to leave. That was the problem. Propriety insisted that he leave, but she couldn't seem to get the words out through her lips. Not with his teeth grazing her earlobe, his hand caressing her breast.

"Ahh," he whispered as his thumb grazed her nipple. It tightened under his attention. "Now, I would say that was more than a good sign." With one last little nip, he pulled away, the action so fast she almost lost her balance. She bit back the irritated sigh that rose in her throat.

He turned her to face him, then backed her up against the post of the canopy bed. When Jamie looked up at him, she drew in a quick, loud breath. She had known him for years and had probably seen just about every human emotion from him except this one. Desire etched his facial features. The arrested look in his eyes deepened their color as he drew her near. Slipping one hand around her waist, he stepped closer. Gently, almost reverently, he brushed the backs of his fingers over her cheek, then allowed his fingers to play along her jaw.

“Seth.” Her tone no longer held the stern reprimand it had earlier. Even she could hear the change in her pitch and the way her voice caught on his name.

But he said nothing. He trailed his hand down to cup her untouched breast. Her breathing hitched when he rubbed his fingers over her nipple. Everything seemed to slip away. As he held her gaze, it was as if they were the only two people in the world.

Jamie wanted to close her eyes, wanted to slip into a blissful daze. But he would not allow it. Instead, he leaned in and brushed his mouth over hers. The sweetness of the gesture, the simple touch, had her mind whirling. Jamie sighed, shutting her eyes and losing herself in the pleasure of it. He groaned in reaction, wrapping both his arms around her waist. She lifted her hands to his shoulders as he pressed his lips against hers. This was no longer the gentle caress but a kiss full of desire and passion. His tongue thrust into her mouth and she welcomed it with a moan. The taste of him was beyond anything she had ever experienced. Before she was ready to stop, he pulled away. Their harsh breathing was the only sound in the dark room.

“Tell me now.”

He was talking. She saw his mouth move but she didn’t work through what he said. Her brain was melting, and he wanted to have a conversation?

“Wh—what are you talking about?”

When he spoke, his voice was harsh and abrupt. “Tell me now you don’t want me. If you don’t stop this now, there will be no going back.”

She should tell him to go. Doing this, taking him as her lover even if for one night, would not be a good idea. The ghost of her marriage would never disappear. It wouldn’t solve her problems. But none of those things truly mattered to her at the moment. What did matter was the heat blazing through her blood, the way her body responded to his every touch, and she never wanted that feeling to go away. It would in the morning because this would never be anything but a one-night affair, but she needed this. She craved to experience one little taste of heaven.

“Jamie?”

“God help me, I know I shouldn’t want it, or even think about doing it.” She took a deep breath, gathering her courage. “But I can’t seem to refuse you.”

He rested his forehead against hers and released a sigh of relief. She thought she heard him say, “About time.”

After he gave her a kiss, Seth tugged her away from the bedpost and pushed her back on the bed. With a laugh, she bounced on the mattress. Before she could adjust to her new position, he was slipping his body over hers and stealing her breath again. This time there was no sweet interlude, no wooing.

Possessively, Seth settled his mouth on hers. Spearing her fingers through his thick hair, she held him closer, wanting nothing more than for this feeling to continue. He pushed himself up to his hands and looked down at her. The smile he gave her made her curl her toes into the bed linens.

“I knew you had passion in you, Jameson.” He gave her a quick, forceful kiss. “And I intend on enjoying it.”

A rough edge deepened his voice, the tone, a strange mixture of tenderness wrapped with lust. He pressed his groin against hers, his hardened cock rubbing against her sex. Tension curled in her belly, tightening further.

He bent his head and nipped at her chin. He moved on, lowering himself to cover her body and kissing his way down her neck. She felt the scrape of teeth, the raspy lick of his tongue against the hollow of her throat. She moaned, closing her eyes. He lifted himself away to untie the bow at the top of her nightdress. The soft fabric slid away, the night air cooling her flesh. She opened her eyes and watched as he lowered his head to her nipple, first licking it and then drawing it into his mouth.

She bowed up, her hands clenching the sheets beneath her. As he continued to torture first one then the other nipple, her mind blanked of anything but him. He drew away. With rough movements, he tugged on the sash of her wrapper, then eased it from her shoulders and down her arms. He pulled her nightgown up and over her head, leaving her breathless, not to mention frightened.

He settled between her thighs, pushing them apart to accommodate his body.

“Seth.” At once, she was horribly embarrassed and wonderfully excited.

He didn’t look up, just laid his hand against her curls. Excitement pulsed from that point outward through her body. He drew in a deep breath.

“Beautiful.” That one word, and the deep, throaty sound of his voice, had her forgetting her embarrassment and surrendering to the pleasure he was offering with his hands and his mouth. He moved against her and slipped a finger between her slick folds. The tension that had centered in her belly shifted down to her groin. With each stroke, the pressure grew. She placed both of her feet on the mattress and joined in his rhythm. Mindless now to everything but achieving the goal her body craved, she followed his lead, not even flinching when she felt his mouth touch her core. His tongue replacing his finger, she raced to the edge. As he ravaged her, his finger slipped up and over her pressure point. Once, twice...

The unfamiliar tension wrapped around her emotions. Panic and confusion surfaced first, then she exploded, her body convulsing with her orgasm as he continued to move his lips over her sex. Before she had fully recovered, he was tearing at his dungarees and joining her on the bed. She looked up at him as he stared down at her. It struck her that this was the position they had been in when he’d awakened her earlier. He’d left his shirt buttoned, but she wanted to touch his skin. Lifting her hands, she swiftly slipped the buttons free, then brushed the fabric aside. She skimmed her hands over his chest. Delight stole through when he shuddered at her touch. He bent to give her a quick kiss and she tasted herself on his lips. He took her hips in his hands, positioning her, and entered her with one swift stroke.

Holding himself still, he said, “Oh, baby, you feel good.”

When he pulled out of her, then thrust back in, he closed his eyes and groaned. The sound of it ripped through her, spurring another rush of excitement. This time, though, it was more visceral than before. She lifted her hips, joining in the mating ritual, and he moved his hands to change his position. Liquid fire poured through her, her body no longer under her control but possessed by the need to reach the pinnacle again.

Seth opened his eyes. His gaze locked on hers as he bent for a kiss. She was racing closer to the end, her body bowing as another orgasm ripped through her.

“*Seth.*”

“Jameson, that’s it, honey. Come for me.”

He continued to move deeper, more forcefully, pushing her over the edge a third time before he followed her into bliss.

Collapsing on top of her, he sighed. Their bodies were damp from their exertion, both of them breathing heavily. A few moments later, he pushed away, rid himself of his clothes and crawled back into bed with her. When he got them both settled, he wrapped his arms around her waist as she rested her head on his shoulder.

Jamie waited for regrets, waited for her self doubts to resurface. Nothing but sheer contentment filled her. With the musky scent of their lovemaking surrounding them and her body satisfied physically, she couldn’t—wouldn’t—worry about the consequences until the morning.

Seth brushed his lips against her hair. He murmured something she could not make out as he drifted deeper into sleep. Thinking that a fine idea, she followed his lead and joined him in slumber.

## Chapter Five

Jamie stirred some time later, rolling to her side. She froze the moment she came into contact with a solid wall of skin. Opening her eyes, she sighed when she saw Seth sleeping peacefully beside her. The night's events slipped over her. Delight and satisfaction settled within her chest.

Seth shifted and reached for her, his arms sliding around her waist and rolling her on top of him. She found herself straddled over his hips. Seth looked up at her through half-lidded eyes. He stretched his arms then folded them behind head. She knew he was attractive, but laying there beneath her, he was the picture of perfectly satisfied male.

When she realized she was sitting there staring at him, Jamie cleared her throat. "I'm sorry I woke you."

He smiled. "You can wake me anytime you want, Jamie."

His voice deepened when he said her name. She blushed in response to the sensuality she heard there. It was odd that she would blush, even odder still that she was sitting on top of her brother's best friend. If anyone had told her that during this trip she'd be perched on top of him while neither of them wore a thread of clothing, she would've told that person they had to be crazy.

"I can hear the wheels turning in that pretty head of yours."

She frowned down at him. "What do you mean?"

He brushed his fingers over her nipple, which hardened before she had a chance to bat his hand away.

"What I mean is you're trying to figure out just what the hell you're doing here with me."

Her face grew hotter. "I was not thinking that."

One eyebrow rose. "Really?"

Thinking it best to change the subject, she skimmed her hands over his chest and asked, “So, how long have you been planning this?”

His lips twitched. “This in particular or getting you in bed in general?”

She loved the way the crisp, dark blond chest hair crinkled against her fingers. “Either.” When he didn’t answer her, she looked up to find him staring intently at her. Her stomach muscles clenched. “What?”

“You have no idea what that simple touch does to me.”

She moved her hands away, but he stopped her, placing his hand on top of hers and urging her to touch him again. “No. Don’t ever be ashamed to touch me, or afraid of what we have.”

Shame wasn’t what came to mind, but rather fear. It lanced through her body, a chill following quickly in its path. The sincerity in his voice scared the hell out of her. It made her want something she couldn’t have. Even as the rational side of her brain told her it could never happen, the irrational side, the one that had yearned for a true marriage based on love, was starting to take over. She didn’t want just one night of this, one night to touch, to taste, to feel.

Seth wasn’t looking at the long term. His past relationships had been short. He’d ignored his mother’s attempts to marry him off. Jamie knew it would happen one day. Seth was too good a son not to do as his mother bid. Coveting having him in her life this way, then not attaining it, would be painful. She’d lived through one man humiliating her and she refused to have regrets. But, they had the rest of the night.

Wanting to share her feelings with him through actions, she slipped her hand over one of his nipples and bent to kiss his chest. His skin was warm beneath her lips. Seth sucked in a breath when she swiped her tongue over his other nipple.

She kissed her way up his chest to his throat. Seth took her by her hips and scooted her down his body. He situated her over his cock. The long, hard length of him rested against her sex. A shiver of anticipation passed through her.

When she closed her eyes and pressed her mouth on his, he cupped her face and brushed his calloused thumbs over her cheeks. He relinquished control of the kiss to her.

It allowed her to explore the feelings welling up inside of her. She grew bold and slipped her tongue past his lips and into the warm, wet crevice of his mouth. Jamie had never tasted something so sweet and so hot at the same time. Before she knew what was happening, though, Seth was taking control. His mouth hungrily feasted on hers. It was as if he hadn't eaten in a month of Sundays and she was a five-course meal. She greedily returned the kiss, reveling in the passion she stirred within him.

Seth shifted from her mouth to feast on her earlobe. Taking her by the hips, he moved beneath her. Jamie gasped when his hardened cock pressed harder against her slit. With every twist of her hips, the head of his shaft rubbed her clitoris.

“Take me inside you, honey.”

His gruff whisper heated the sensitive skin below her ear. She opened her eyes but hesitated, unsure of herself. She'd never been on top to make love. Her experience in the bedroom had been neglected, at least until tonight. A look of understanding lit Seth's eyes. Gently, he eased her back into a sitting position then urged her onto her knees. She took hold of his cock and, with a little maneuvering, situated herself above the head. Slowly, she sank down on him.

Like before, he filled her to almost bursting. She rose to her knees again before dropping back down. Although she had not been steady in her movements, Seth groaned in appreciation. That was all the assurance she needed as she started to move with more confidence. He joined in her deliberate tempo, keeping up with her, but not pushing her to go any faster. Sitting up, he took a nipple into his mouth, his tongue swirling around then his teeth grazing the tip.

She rode him unhurriedly, enjoying the slow slide down his cock, the feel of pulling off him. She knew she was driving him crazy because as he focused on her other breast, his own actions became more frantic, more out of control. Still she moved, her excitement growing, her body heating. Jamie wanted to rush, to push herself and Seth to the pinnacle, but she kept her pace the same, wanting to enjoy the joining of their bodies.

Seth flexed his hips, trying to increase the speed, but she refused to heed his direction. Soon, though, her body was clamoring for release. He'd moved his hands from



her hips and used his fingers to stroke over the hidden bud within her folds. With each brush against the small bundle of nerves, she shuddered. Before she knew what was happening, Seth grabbed her hips and rolled on top of her.

Her head was still spinning from the reverse in positions when, with a quick, hard thrust, he entered her. Jamie rose to meet his measured thrusts, but instead of increasing their pace, he kept it slow, intense and devastating. Wanting—needing—to push him faster, she placed her feet on the bed. That small gesture seemed to shove him over the edge.

Rising to his knees, Seth arranged her so that he could move deeper. The force of his thrusts shook the bed, slamming it against the wall. Each time he plunged within her, her body clamored for release. She arched up. He pulled out, then pushed back in one last time before she shattered. She was still trembling, her heart pounding, when he groaned her name and poured himself into her.



The first rays of the morning sun peeked through curtains, dappling Jamie's golden skin. Seth traced his fingers over her bare back, enjoying the silken feel of her flesh. It was all he could do not to take her again. He really didn't have time if he wanted to ensure he didn't get caught by the staff. But his body was paying no attention to his good sense. Even after having her twice the night before, he could feel his cock hardening at the thought of slipping into her pussy, feeling those little muscles grip him like a vise.

Jesus, he was driving himself crazy. He threw himself back onto the pillows and turned his head to look at her. She snuggled deeper under the covers, then moved closer to him, seeking his warmth. Seth brushed a stray strand of her ebony hair from her face. There was no doubt the woman was beautiful. The bastard McEwan had married her for more than the debt. She'd been barely a woman, and Sid hadn't been blind to her potential. High slashing cheekbones, the delightful full mouth—usually curved in a welcoming smile—not to mention the gorgeous golden eyes framed by the blacker-than-night eyelashes. Those things were only part of her beauty.

Sid had seen the potential, but he hadn't gotten to see the woman she'd become. Jamie's true loveliness lay beneath the polished exterior. Not many young women would take up running the ranch and do it so well. The dedication to her men, to her family and to that ranch was astounding. There was a strength in her Sid McEwan would have squashed under his boot like a bug, if he had lived. Not for the first time, Seth thanked McEwan's bad heart and propensity for whores. Now Seth knew he was the only man to have tasted the passion lurking inside of her.

His shaft twitched again. Reaching down, he gave it one long stroke and silently berated himself. It was useless, because when it came to Jamie, he was always a hairsbreadth away from losing control. It didn't matter how long Seth lived, he would never forget what it was like to watch her as she gave herself in to the desire, or how it felt to slip between her thighs.

He brushed the back of his fingers lightly over her cheek. Jamie might not realize it, but this was not a one-night-only thing. She probably assumed he was just out for kicks. Seth intended to make sure she understood it was much more than that. He needed to stamp the memory of this night on her brain. Every time she thought of San Antonio, every time she lay in bed, he wanted her thinking of him and what they shared.

She moved closer to him, cuddling her face against his palm. A moment later, she opened her eyes. The satiated look within their depths made his chest grow tight. He would never get tired of watching her wake up in his bed.

"Hmm." She kissed his hand. "I can't think of a better way of waking up."

Sleep clouded her voice. She pulled herself up onto the pillows. The sheets didn't quite cover her breasts. One nipple peeked above the edge of the cloth. Seth brushed his fingers over it. He had expected her to play coy or be embarrassed. She surprised him with a chuckle.

He glanced up. The smile she offered him stole the rest of his good sense—not that he had much to begin with. "I was wrong about that. *This* is the best way to wake up."

She leaned forward and brushed her mouth over his. The simple touch had what little blood left in his brain heading south. He had told himself to keep the love play light but he couldn't. Not when the sweetness of the kiss squeezed his heart.

He cupped the back of her head, deepening the kiss, opening his mouth and invading hers. When her tongue slipped against his, it was his turn to groan. Quickly, the kiss turned openly carnal. The control he'd always bragged about slid out of his grasp as he kissed down the column of her throat.

She was driving him crazy with her little moans and mewls. He pulled away, and she complained with an incoherent mutter, which brought about a small smile.

Jamie opened her eyes. The desire shimmering in them made him shake, but he wanted to take it slow, show her how much fun she could have in bed.

He eased back off the mattress, searching for a stocking, a sash, just anything.

"Seth?" Jamie's voice was filled with a strange mixture of irritation and worry.

When he spied her wrapper, he grabbed it, freeing the sash from the loops. He turned to find her sitting up, the bed linens pooled around her waist. Damn, but he was lucky. For a second, okay, two, he stared at her. He wasn't able to move as he wondered just how the hell he'd gotten so lucky. The weak morning sun gave him enough light to see her breasts. Not overly large, just big enough for his palms, they were bottom heavy, with the most succulent coral nipples he'd ever seen. He remembered the taste of them, the way Jamie moaned when he scraped his teeth across the tip...

"Seth."

He returned to the bed with a chuckle. "I need you to lay back and put your hands above your head, baby."

She glanced down at the sash he held in his hands, then back up to his face. He fought a laugh at the dubious look she afforded him. But he wanted her to understand, wanted her to experience the freedom of losing control to pleasure.

With a scowl, she obeyed. He kneeled beside her. Avoiding making eye contact, he tied her hands to the headboard, then finally looked at her. The frown she gave him didn't speak of anger or irritation, but of confusion.

“I want you to enjoy.”

She opened her mouth but he wouldn't let her speak.

He placed a finger on her lips. “No. Don't speak and try not to move. Let yourself just feel.”

Not waiting to see her reaction, he settled on top of her. With a light touch, he skimmed his hands over her flesh, enjoying the way she reacted. When she moaned, he stopped.

“I said no talking *and* no moving.”

A huff of irritation was the only sound in the room, and he had to bite back the laugh that threatened. Even as he ached with need, he held back. He moved his mouth over her, tasting her nipples. When he reached her belly, he slipped his tongue over her bellybutton, then inside. Her indrawn breath delighted him, the sound shooting straight to his heart. Knowing he was the one to introduce her to desire wasn't only damned sexy, but it touched him beyond that. It brushed against his soul.

The scent of her desire called to him, and he set his mouth against her pussy. Sweet, tangy, she tasted of heaven. His balls tightened, and a drop of precome escaped. He pulled back and ordered himself to settle down. He'd embarrass himself if he didn't watch it. That would definitely wreak havoc in his show of control.

When he pressed his mouth against her sex, she moaned again. He stopped. She huffed, but said nothing. He smiled since he knew she couldn't see him.

Gliding his tongue between her folds, he sighed with contentment. Over and over, he tasted her. Her legs moved beside him restlessly, and he heard her mews, but he was too caught up in the wonder of her essence. He skimmed his tongue over the tight bundle of nerves. Three swipes and she came apart, shivering with her orgasm.

He untied her hands and flipped her over, pulling one of the pillows from the top of the bed and sliding it beneath her hips. He drew her to her knees and placed his hand between her legs. Slipping his finger over her slit, he smiled when she moaned his name.

When she tried to push herself up, Seth raised his hand and brought it down on her rounded ass. She paused, and he waited. He worried he'd gone too far. Then she shivered,

as if delighted by the feel of his hand slapping hard against her flesh. He positioned her where he wanted her and pushed into her in one thrust. The heat of her cunt surrounded his cock and he held himself still, enjoying the pleasure of being deep inside Jamie. Slowly, he pulled himself out then slid back in.

Her moans grew each time he drove himself into her. Soon, she had gained his rhythm, moving in tandem with him. The force of their mating had the bed shaking.

With one last scream of his name, she came apart. Even as she shivered from her first orgasm, he pushed her harder, further, driving her up and over into another one, as he shouted her name and followed her into pleasure.

## Chapter Six

Jamie watched Seth button his trousers and sighed. He looked up at the sound and smiled, and not for the first time, her heart tightened. It was a shame their night had to come to an end, but she knew it had to. Seth had to leave before any of the staff saw him. Any kind of detection could ruin her reputation and that of the ranch. She cared nothing of the former but would give her life to protect the latter.

Still, she yearned to drag him back to bed, slowly strip him out of his clothes and devour him in one huge bite. As he slid his belt through the loops, she thought of those quick, capable hands on her body and shivered.

“What time did you want me to meet you downstairs?”

His question brought her back to the present and she blushed. She’d never been particularly lustful before but it seemed Seth brought out the harlot in her.

“I wanted to get to the mercantile right after breakfast. Then I have a meeting with Johnson about that three hundred head he was looking to get rid of.”

“I still can’t believe he’s pulling up stakes and moving back east.” Seth shook his head, and Jamie could understand his confusion. The idea of leaving Texas was as foreign to her as lying in bed naked while talking to her first paramour. If she were honest with herself, he was going to be her only lover. Ever. There was a good chance no one would be able to compete, Sid sure couldn’t have. But also, she had to worry about getting caught. Widows were allowed some discreet affairs, but a woman in her position couldn’t afford any hint of tawdriness.

“I guess if we head out of here by noon we should be able to make it back to your ranch before sundown,” Seth said. She nodded and smiled when he slid onto the bed beside her. “We’ll have to wait until tomorrow to talk to Jack.”

The first tremors of worry curled into her stomach. “Talk to Jack?” Oh Lord, her voice sounded high and strained. She ordered herself to relax. There was no reason for her to jump to conclusions. “Why would we need to talk to Jack?”

He picked up her hand and played with her fingers. “We need to tell him about us.”

He leaned forward to kiss her but she stopped him by raising her hand to his chest. Even through his clothing, the warmth of his skin heated her palm. The memory of feeling his naked flesh under her hands tripped through her mind before she could stop it. She pushed the recollection aside.

“Why would we tell him about us? Jack doesn’t tell me about his *women* and I definitely don’t tell him about my lovers.”

“I’ve been your only lover since your marriage—will be your only lover from here on out.”

His propriety tone didn’t sit well with her. “The first part is true. I’m not sure about the second part.” She felt a twinge of guilt, but ignored it. She knew very well there would be no one after him, but she didn’t want to bolster his out-of-control ego. “I definitely won’t be discussing any of that with my brother.”

His smile faded. “You mean to deny me?”

Deny him? She worried that if he requested she live in sin with him, she’d do it. She’d throw caution to the wind. “It isn’t as if I would tell him about this.”

“Why is that?”

“Seth, this is one night. I don’t want to ruin your friendship or partnership with my brother. Telling him we shared a bed isn’t smart. You know he’d get upset.”

He stared at her for moment but didn’t say a word. Something close to panic darkened his eyes, but it disappeared so fast she was sure she’d been mistaken.

“You have to marry me.”

Her worry exploded into full-blown alarm at his tone. It turned her voice cold when she spoke. “And why is that?”

“You’re ruined.”

“Ruined? After one night?” She shook her head. “Why is it that one night in bed with a man ruins me, but my husband could spend the better part of our marriage in whorehouses and no one cared. Besides, I am a widow.”

She tugged her hand free, which was difficult because for a second he tightened his hold. When he finally let go, she slipped from bed and donned her wrapper. Once she was clothed, she felt more confident to face him. He was now sitting up with a frown darkening his usually light features. The urge to rub her fingers over his brow to rid him of the scowl was so strong, she curled her fingers into her palm.

“I don’t know why you think we should marry. You’re much younger—”

“I’m not that much younger than you. And another thing. If you think I’m giving you up after one night, you’re crazy.”

Even as fear churned in her gut, hope sprang to life in the depths of her soul. *He still wants me.* She shouldn’t yearn for that, even think of anything beyond this night they’d shared. But the temptation was there, the desire to explore more of what she’d discovered with him. Propriety didn’t allow for that, not outside the bounds of marriage, but the lure enticed her. It was a gamble, playing with the very reputation that she’d built, but the idea he still craved this as much as she did was too much to dismiss. “What are you saying?”

“Marriage is the only option.”

“No, it isn’t. If you still want me—”

He snorted.

“—then I propose an affair.”

He crossed his arms over his chest. “An affair?”

“I see no reason why we couldn’t be discreet.”

“I don’t want an affair.”

“You just said you still wanted me. That one night—”

He waved that away. “No, I do still want you. But only after you wear my name. After you’re mine by law.”

Anger surged ahead, dissolving her fear. “I think I made it perfectly clear my views on marriage. I will not get married again.”



“Your reputation would suffer if people find out about us. You have no choice.”

“No choice? I do have a choice and I choose an affair.”

He captured her gaze as he rose from the bed and walked slowly toward her. “I don’t want an affair. I want marriage. It’s the only reasonable thing to do. It’s the right thing to do.”

She shook her head and resisted the urge to take a step back. If she did, he would know how he was affecting her and would press his advantage. “I know you aren’t thinking straight. Consider what your parents will say. How it will look that you married—not only a widow—but someone much older than you.”

“I have never given a damn about appearances and you know that.”

“Do you think your parents would accept me?”

He grunted. “Mamma likes you and she would be happy that I was getting married.”

“Liking someone and having her for a daughter-in-law are two different things.”

“You can’t be serious about having an affair.”

She hadn’t really planned on throwing that option out to him, but it was hard to refuse. Resisting just one more chance at the pleasures he offered was too much for her.

“I don’t see that there is anything wrong with what I proposed.”

His nostrils flared. “It isn’t proper.”

She laughed, thinking he was joking. Seth had never worried about other people’s opinions, something she knew bothered his mother. When he didn’t join in, just stood there and stared at her with a stone face, she tried to stifle it. “You? You don’t think it’s proper?”

He nodded.

“Again, I have to remind you of a rather busty soiled dove and the money I had to pay to get you out of jail.” Anger added a flush to his skin that she found appealing, almost arousing. She would have never felt like this with Sid since his temper had scared the hell out of her.

“First of all, it was your brother’s fault.” He bit out each word from behind clenched teeth. “Secondly, it’s a bit different for a woman with your stature in the community.”

Irritated with the situation and the role she had to play, Jamie had to fight the urge to scream in frustration. Especially since she still wanted him in her bed even now when she was angry with him. “You make it sound like I’m a pillar of the community.”

“You are. It wouldn’t be right to carry on this way.”

“You didn’t seem to have a problem with *carrying on* last night.”

“That’s why we have to get married. It’s the right thing to do.”

The anger that had been heating her blood now chilled, icing over any of her emotions. Jamie had spent her life doing what was right. She married once out of family loyalty, thinking there was a chance for love to grow for a man she respected. The reward was a barren existence with a husband who never loved her. Not like she deserved. That had almost broken her and she had made a decision the day she’d laid him in the ground. She would never marry again unless it was for love. And she knew without a doubt there was only passion between her and Seth.

“There is no reason to marry just because of last night.”

“You’re comfortable with walking away, forgetting everything?”

Anger deepened his voice, irritation vibrated beneath the calm façade. His male pride had been bruised. Seth was used to getting whatever he wanted, but marriage was too serious a matter to allow him to force her into it. Not only would she lose her way of life, but she would lose a man she considered a good friend.

“Seth, I know you feel you have to do this. You feel obligated.” She held up her hand when he started to object. “No. I know you do. You’re too young to understand and I don’t want to ruin the rest of your life just because we spent one night in bed. All that we can have is passion. That fades. I’ve watched it happen all around me. My own parents were said to have married because of some grand passion. By the time she died my folks were barely speaking to each other. And they aren’t the only ones. There is no reason to make a lifetime commitment and ruin our lives.”

He grabbed her hand and jerked her forward. Before she could think, he crushed his mouth down on hers. The kiss was hot, possessive. What little thought she had drained as he slanted his lips over hers again and again. He released her hand, sliding his arms

around her. His hands moved to her bottom, urging her closer. The long, hard length of him pressed against her sex. Heat flared, her bones melted, her blood surged through her like molten steel.

As abruptly as the kiss started it stopped, with him pushing her away. Both of them were breathing deeply, almost gasping for breath.

*“That will not fade in time.”*

He said nothing else before opening the door. With one last heated look, he slipped out the door and closed it quietly behind him. The action was so at odds with the emotions he’d evoked, her head was whirling. Slowly, she made her way over to the bed and collapsed on it. Her body was still shaking with a need so powerful, she thought she might faint from it.

She lifted her hand to her swollen lips, rubbing her fingers over them. Fear and lust twisted through her and she couldn’t stop the sob that escaped or the tears that followed. All these years she had been strong. She had not cried once after she realized the only reason Sid married her was for money and to have a young wife on his arm. Even when people laughed at her behind her back, mocked her because her husband spent more time in whores’ bedrooms than their marriage bed, she didn’t crack. The news of his death was fitting, one final embarrassment she couldn’t help thinking Sid would have found fitting.

She’d seized her tattered pride, held her head high, ignored the insult to her and forged ahead.

But now, the pride she’d coveted was no longer as important. Here in the silence of her room, she could admit, if just to herself, that she’d been tempted. Tempted to accept that proposal, to pretend they had more than the passion they’d shared in this bed. It would have led to disaster because the truth was staring her in the face.

For the love of God, she had gone and fallen for Seth. A tiny part of her had been in love with him all along. Each time he’d stood behind her decisions, she’d felt something warm grow within her. No other man had supported her the way he did. Good Lord, how long had she been falling in love with him?

She sighed and wiped her face dry with her hands. Time didn't allow for self-pity. At least she had one night of memories, ones that would keep her warm until the day she died.



Jamie's booted footfalls sounded on the walkway in front of the mercantile as Seth watched her approach. Just seeing her hurt. Deep in his gut, in his heart, the pain twisted. He'd avoided her since their confrontation this morning. He knew he'd messed up. Shit, there was no way around the fact he had assumed she'd just go along with his plan. But this morning, all warm from his loving, as she talked of having a blasted affair, he'd realized he'd made a huge mistake in assuming her compliance.

Damn, the woman was beautiful. She always dressed for work. A dark blue split skirt with an ivory shirt and her black hat wasn't what anyone would call stylish. It didn't matter because he didn't care what she wore. Either way, he wanted her. She didn't need fancy clothes or sparkling baubles to be attractive.

Her dark curls swayed against her shirt, bringing the memory of how they felt sliding over his skin, how they looked tangled and lying on the pillows...

His body reacted, just as always. But this time it was worse. Now that he knew what it was like to have her, to wake up next to her, feel her muscles grip his cock as she came apart beneath him, his anticipation intensified. Sweat popped out on his forehead as he ordered his body to settle down. She stepped next to the wagon, giving one of the horses a pat as she walked by.

He cleared his throat. "How'd it go with Johnson?"

She squinted against the sun and studied him for a moment before answering him.

"Good. Had to do a little haggling with him on the price, but in the end it was a good deal. It'll make up for the loss we've had the last few weeks."

She stopped short just a few feet from him. The uncomfortable silence stretched, but he refused to make it easy for her. It might make him a jackass, but he wasn't going to play nice.

Sighing, she said, “Seth—”

“Mrs. McEwan!”

The shout drew their attention and cut off whatever she’d planned on saying. Both of them turned in the direction of the voice and Seth inwardly cursed when he saw the owner. Tucker Portman came striding down the boardwalk.

Portman wasn’t an attractive man. He never had been. The years of drinking and whoring had left him with soft jowls and a nasty reputation for a predilection of violence in the bedroom. Not to mention the rumors about the death of his two wives.

The sigh from Jamie, along with an irritated mutter he couldn’t make out, told Seth him she wasn’t any happier about Portman showing up than Seth was.

By the time the older man reached them, he was clearly out of breath. His face was flushed from exertion and sweat beaded on his bald head. “I heard you were in town.”

Jamie paused, then said, “Mr. Portman. You know my brother’s business partner, Seth Conner? Seth, I’m sure you remember Tucker Portman.”

Seth played along and nodded. “Of course.”

Jamie shot him a look of warning for the cool tone of his voice but it didn’t matter. Portman didn’t even acknowledge Seth.

“I wanted to talk to you about the matter we discussed several days ago.”

Jamie’s back stiffened. “I gave you my answer.” She looked at Seth again. “I’m not going to change my mind.”

Portman stepped closer, crowding Jamie. She didn’t budge an inch. Seth had to bite back the growl and the urge to push the man away from Jamie.

“I don’t think you understand what it could mean for our ranches.”

“I understand. Still, the answer is no.”

“You’re a woman, so you don’t understand—”

Jamie took matters into her own hands. “I know you think combining them would be good, and it would be, for you. Amazing that my ranch, run by a woman who doesn’t understand anything, is making more money, isn’t it? I don’t think it would be financially beneficial for me to combine them.”

"I know Hank has been running things since Sid died. You would have an easier life if you allowed me to take care of everything."

"Is that what you told your wives?"

The color drained out of Portman's fleshy face then flushed back in anger.

Jamie shook her head. "I don't want to know. What I want is for you to leave me alone. I will not marry you. End of story." She bit off each word.

He didn't say anything else, but with slumped shoulders turned to walk in the direction of the saloon. Seth moved closer to Jamie, who watched Portman leave.

"What was that about?"

"I told him I wouldn't marry him the day he asked. Does everyone think I'm an idiot? He's so bad even Sid said to avoid being alone with him."

"Why did you tell Jack you were considering it?"

She closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. "Because he didn't give me a chance. Just started telling me what to do. He's worse than Pa sometimes."

"You were never considering it?"

She dropped her hand, opened her eyes and looked back over her shoulder. "No."

Seth stared at her, thinking of everything she set in motion by being stubborn. That one little lie to her brother had led to things that could never be undone and would change the rest of her life. The fact she had done it just to needle Jack was damn funny. The amusement of the situation bubbled up and he couldn't stop the bark of laughter. Even with how horrible the day had started out, he allowed the humor to take hold.

"What's so funny?"

He wanted to tell her, but he wasn't ready. Seth was sure she would get a kick out of it someday but today wasn't the day. He shook his head. "Nothing. Nothing a'tall."

## Chapter Seven

The ride back from San Antonio was uneventful and tense. Granted, Jamie had tried to talk to him. It hadn't been about anything important, just casual conversation. But Seth had refused to cooperate. He wouldn't pretend that nothing happened. The ache in his chest expanded and twisted.

When he left her at her ranch, Jamie had tossed him a mean look over her shoulder and headed into the barn without another word. He'd had to fight the urge to jump down off Comet and storm after her. But deep down he'd known he didn't have the right. That had made him angrier.

Damn her for worrying about what was proper. The way she'd responded the night before, Seth had never thought she'd deny what they had together. She'd been so free with her affection, but apparently that was just for behind closed doors. Marriage was the only option, but she acted as if it wasn't even worth considering.

As the Double C came into view, Seth waited for the familiar surge of completeness that usually filled him whenever he returned home. It didn't come. Emptiness ate into his gut. Every day since they had opened their horse ranch, Seth had felt the rightness of being there, that he finally belonged to something. He'd always been the odd man out in his family. His brothers thrived in the life his parents had in Austin, loved the political world in which they moved. Seth hadn't. He couldn't give his parents a reason, but the idea of being a politician made his skin crawl. He'd been on the verge of giving into their demands to work in the government when Jack came up with the idea of their ranch. Now the one thing he'd found no longer filled the void. He needed something else.

He needed Jamie.

After settling Comet in, he headed into the house.

As soon as he entered, Jack called out to him. "Hey, Seth, how'd it go?"

Knowing it would be impossible to avoid his best friend, and even though Seth wasn't in the mood for company, he turned in the direction of Jack's voice. He was sitting at the kitchen table, a book in front of him and a coffee cup in his hand.

"How's everything going?"

Jack smiled, his eyes lit with humor. "The ranch didn't fall apart because you were gone for two days."

Seth grunted and headed to the stove for coffee.

"I hired a new man. Boy, really."

Seth poured his coffee, then took the chair opposite Jack. "Where'd ya find him?"

"Hewitt came over to talk about Comet covering that mare of his. Brought along JP and introduced us. Hewitt just doesn't need him right now, mainly because harvest is over. Word was out we needed a new hand. Hewitt said the boy was eager to work, pulls his weight, so I figured we ought to hire him."

Seth nodded and took a sip of coffee.

"So, how was my sister?"

Seth choked, dropping the cup down on the table with a thump. Liquid spilled over the edge, but he ignored it as his eyes started to water and he continued to cough.

When he made eye contact with his friend, he noticed Jack had cocked his head to the side and was studying him. Seth cleared his throat.

"Your sister is doing just fine. Better than fine. The whole idea of her accepting Portman's proposal was horseshit."

"Really?" For some reason, Jack didn't sound so surprised.

Seth paused for a moment before answering, trying to figure out just what the hell was up. "Yes. We ran into him in San Antonio. Seems she already told him no."

Jack smiled. "I'll be damned. Ain't it just like her to pull something like that? The woman has always been headstrong. She's gotten worse since Sid died."

"I didn't think she had much choice in the matter. If she wanted to keep that ranch going, she had to take a lot."



“Pa wanted to take it over. He would have done it too if you hadn’t talked him out of it.”

Anger swift and brilliant roared to life within Seth. “Your father had no right to that ranch. He wasn’t the one who paid for it with his body.”

The look of amusement faded from Jack’s face. “Just what the hell do you mean by that?”

Mentally, Seth kicked himself in the ass, then sighed, knowing Jack wouldn’t let the comment go. “Do you really think your sister wanted to marry an old man, one who couldn’t stay faithful for a month after their marriage? Jesus, Jack, get your head out of your ass.”

“She wouldn’t have done it if she didn’t want to.”

Seth recognized the stubborn set of Jack’s jaw. He’d seen it more than once during their friendship and it was the exact same look Jamie gave him when they argued.

“Wake up. Your father owed Sid money.”

All expression drained from Jack’s face. “What the hell do you mean?”

Seth hated to do it, but it was about time Jack faced the facts and grew up. He’d been sheltered long enough.

“Your father lost a lot of money to him in a card game. Not to mention the amount of money he’d borrowed from him. Your father was already in debt up to his eyeballs, and the one thing he could use to get out of it was your sister. Did you really think she married Sid because she loved him?”

“That isn’t the truth.”

Seth knew from his friend’s tone he was coming to the realization that it was. “Your father might have been a good father to you, but he wasn’t to Jamie. She’s not dumb. She understood she was being bought thanks to your father’s debts, but she vowed to make the most of it.”

“She seemed like she wanted to.”

“You were too young at the time to know better.”

Now he frowned. “Why the hell didn’t she say anything if that’s true?”

“You were twelve, why would she tell you? And knowing your father, he didn’t tell her to begin with. They probably let her believe it was a legitimate courtship.” For a while.

“Why did she tell you?” The accusation in his friend’s tone didn’t sit well with Seth but he let it slide. His best friend was a smart man, knew the ins and outs of the horse business, but when it came to women in general, he didn’t know a damned thing. He was especially dense when it came to his sister.

“She didn’t tell me. People talk.” One in particular had been Jerry Olbermeister, a hand at the Circle M Ranch. Seth had busted his nose and split the jackass’ lip to let him know he didn’t appreciate talk about Jamie. “They’ll say things in front of me that they may not say in front of her brother.”

“I can’t believe she didn’t say anything.” Jack shook his head. “There was a time when we shared everything.”

“No woman wants to admit to her brother that her marriage isn’t working.”

Jack slumped back in his chair. His brow furrowed and his mouth turned down in a mean frown. “You must think I’m stupid for not noticing.” Jack sighed, tilted his head back and closed his eyes. “Hell, I knew it was bad. The bastard was at the whorehouse more than we were. Dying there was just icing on the cake, I suppose.”

“There wasn’t anything you could do. Once the deed was done, there was no undoing it. Besides, I have a feeling Jamie would’ve been appalled if you tried to help. Her pride wouldn’t have allowed it.”

“You understand her better than anyone.” When Seth didn’t respond, Jack raised his head and his gaze zeroed in on Seth. The sharp look his friend gave him should’ve warned him. “And I might be an idiot about things of that nature, but I’m not completely blind. It’s one of the reasons I sent you with her to San Antonio.”

Heat crept up Seth’s neck and he fought the urge to tug at his collar. “What do you mean?” His attempt to sound nonchalant failed miserably.

“I figured since you’ve been in love with her for years, this would give you the opening you needed.”

For a second, he couldn't speak. His brain seemed to have frozen over. He'd been so careful all these years, never revealing the depth of his feelings. He opened his mouth but Jack stopped him with a laugh.

"Don't even try to lie to me. You never could lie worth a damn."

"Really?" Oh great. Now he sounded like an outraged virgin whose honor had been besmirched.

Jack let loose with a belly laugh. "I think that's the reason you couldn't get into politics. Everyone in your family is good at telling those little white lies. Now, you can bluff with the best of them, but having to say a lie, you turn all red like a little girl caught stealing candy from the store."

Seth opened his mouth again but no sound came out. The knowing look on his friend's face had Seth snapping his mouth shut.

"I thought so. Did you think I hadn't noticed that when you have a choice, the whores you buy resemble Jamie?"

"They do not."

Jack's snort was not only loud, but annoying. "Hmm, so the whore you got in Austin last time we were there didn't have long black hair and light brown eyes? Then there was the one last time we were in Hell's Acre in Fort Worth. That one not only looked like her, but had the same imperious *I am the queen of the manor* voice my sister has."

Christ Almighty. Is that what he had been doing all along? As Seth tried to remember the women he'd paid for over the years, nothing really came to mind but their long black hair...

Seth's face grew hotter by the second as he shifted his attention away from Jack's shrewd study. It wasn't that he'd knowingly chosen them, and even though he could admit it to himself now, he didn't want to discuss it with her brother. Granted, it'd be impossible to go back to pretending now that he'd experienced the real thing.

"I don't want to discuss—"

"Don't tell me you didn't succeed. I mean, you had a room, no pesky relatives in the way."

Seth looked at his friend, trying to decide if he should be amused or horrified. “How can you talk about your sister that way?”

“I’m the only family she has left, and while I didn’t know my father paid for his debts with her marriage, I did know she wasn’t happy. She needs someone and that someone is you.” Jack leaned forward, placing his forearms on the table. “So, tell me, do I need to get the shotgun?”

A hint of humor colored his tone but the underlying threat was still there and real. Seth truly didn’t want to admit what happened to Jack but he didn’t see a way out of it.

“She refused.”

“What?”

Seth cleared his throat. “I asked. She refused.”

“Just what the hell did you do wrong?”

Tired, irritated and feeling more than a little harassed, Seth clenched his teeth together. “I didn’t do anything wrong. Leave it up to your pigheaded sister. She can never do a damn thing like any other woman.” He shot up out of his chair and started pacing. “Truth is, I rushed it this morning when I proposed. I planned on waiting awhile, but she started talking about it was a one-time thing, and I just lost it. She is more stubborn than a mule, seriously. Just what the hell did you and your father do to her to make her that way?”

“She isn’t always that way. Just with me and you. Well, and about the ranch.”

Seth didn’t want to listen to any kind of rational comments. “She tells me that I don’t know what I’m doing. That I’m too *young* to know. Christ, I’m older than she was when she married. And, get this. She says she’s trying to save me from making a mistake because of my good honor.”

“Seth.” Jack’s shout finally stopped Seth’s tirade. “Are you even listening to what you are saying?”

“Hell, no. Your sister has me wound up tighter than a sixty-year-old spinster.”

“Seth.” Jack’s calm, steady voice caught his attention. “There are only three things Jamie has ever truly been stubborn about. The ranch, me and you.”

“Yeah, and she mentioned that too. How she didn’t need a man to help her who would come in and tell her what to do. Did I say I wanted to tell her what to do? Lord knows I have enough to keep me busy around here—”

“Will you shut up? Lord, you are as bad as Jamie when she gets on a roll.” With a huff, Jack sat back in his chair. “Tell me how you proposed.”

“I...ah...well this morning.”

Jack crossed his arms over his chest. “I already know what went on. Not in detail, thank God, but I know you. Tell me.”

“I did it this morning. In bed.”

“Seth, what did you say?”

“I panicked, okay?” He shoved his hand through his hair as the unfamiliar nervous energy gripped him, and he resumed pacing again. “She started going on about one night. So I told her that her we had to get married to save her reputation. She said no, but she did offer the benefit of an affair.”

Silence greeted his confession, lying heavily in the air between them. Seth stopped once more and glanced over at Jack.

He pursed his lips, then asked, “You told her you loved her, right?”

“Yes. No... Wait.” He thought back to his proposal, of the blank look that passed over her features. “Shit, no, I didn’t.”

Jack was pursing his lips again. “Let me get this straight.”

“Jack—”

Jack held up his hand. “No, give me a moment to take this in. I’ve known you for over ten years now. I’ve watched you talk your way out of just about anything. You started early when all you were trying to do was get us free sweets from the mercantile. Then, you moved onto girls for a kiss or two. Lord knows you’re a favorite at Miss Bessie’s—”

“Now, just wait a minute—”

But Jack kept on talking like Seth hadn't said a word. "But this woman, the one I know you love, have loved since you met her ten years ago even though she was already taken, is in your bed, and you tell her you have to get married because of her reputation."

"This isn't funny."

"No, son, it isn't funny. What you did was get her back up. I know my sister, and one thing she could care less about is her reputation, unless it would hurt the ranch. Granted, she'd be mortified if someone questioned her word as a rancher. She got a lot of flack from some of the women around here when she refused to relinquish it to my father. So you know that isn't important to her. I'm sure by now she's dug in her heels and it's going to take some fancy footwork to get her to change her mind."

"Tell me something I don't know." Seth dropped down in the chair, his shoulders slumped. "It'll take me forever to get her back in that particular position again."

"Please, I said I didn't want to know about that."

"I'm being serious here."

"All right, settle down. You don't have to wait. That was always your problem. You sit around, thinking a problem to death."

"Yeah, like the last time we were in San Antonio. Remember me saying, 'Hey, Jack, let's not start a fight with that big mean son of a bitch just because his whore stole my money. We'll end up in jail or laid up in bed.' Remember that? Well, your sister did, and she reminded me on the trip. Twice."

Jack waved that away. "Are you going to accept my help or keep making smart aleck comments?"

"I'll take your help."

"In my mind, the worst thing you can do is wait. She's not immune to you and if you hadn't messed up the proposal, you might be here with her to tell me of your upcoming wedding."

"What do you mean?"

"We have JP, the new hand. I can handle things."

"What?"

“Go with my plan. If you’re in her face every day, there’s no way she can keep ignoring you. I figure one way or another, you’ll get her to admit she loves you.”

When he didn’t respond, Jack cocked his head to one side. “You do know she loves you, don’t you? Hell, she wouldn’t fight with you the way she does if she didn’t love ya, and she definitely wouldn’t have given herself to you.”

Seth’s brain refused to function. But slowly, everything Jack was saying slid into place, like a bright light flickering on. “She loves me.”

“Of course she does.”

Hope sluiced through him, breaking some of the fear that had held him by the balls. “You sure?” He looked at his best friend, who was smiling at him.

“Now, what are you going to do about it?”

## Chapter Eight

Jamie slowly made her way downstairs just before dawn the next morning. She'd given up on sleep a couple of hours earlier, but couldn't face the day until now. Scenes from the last two days played through her mind, teasing her with the memories. Until the day she died she would never forget how it felt to have Seth's hands on her skin. She could still remember the warmth of his body next to hers, and how hard it had been to turn down his offer of marriage.

She stopped her descent and closed her eyes. It would have been weak to accept it. Marriage based on lust would prove disastrous. Passion didn't last. It would fade in time. Before long, Seth would wander to another woman. That was something she couldn't accept. With Sid, she'd ignored it because she'd rather he went to a whore than bother her. But with Seth...

She opened her eyes and started walking down the stairs again. On top of everything else, the ranch had lost some more cattle and one of the line cabins had been set on fire. Hank didn't understand it, especially since they seemed to be the only ranch with missing cattle. They'd had a few problems in the past, but nothing that went on for several weeks. When they'd had rustling, so had everyone else in the area. Hank was positive they'd been targeted. Jamie thought it a ridiculous notion, mainly because she had no enemies, and most of the ranchers in the area had voiced true concern. All of that was enough to cause her to lose sleep. Pile on the dilemma of Seth Conner, and she ended up with bags under her eyes and a pounding head.

She wished he had taken her up on her offer. Granted, it wasn't proper and there was always a chance they'd be discovered. She had more freedom as a widow, but she didn't want to think of how people would act if she carried on like that. If Jack found out, he'd demand Seth do the right thing and there was a good chance it would ruin their



friendship. No matter how much she wanted to have Seth in her bed, Jamie refused to come between the two men.

When she stepped off the bottom stair, she rubbed her eyes. She'd not had a good sleep since before leaving for San Antonio. It would take a month of Sundays to catch up on her rest. The aroma of coffee reached her and got her moving again. It wouldn't be as good as a day spent sleeping, but it would hit the spot, that was for sure. It was odd that Marlene would be here this early. She usually showed up right about dawn and started cooking. Not that Jamie was thinking of complaining. Truthfully, she'd give her soul for a decent cup of coffee this morning.

When she turned the corner and walked into the kitchen, she stopped cold at the sight before her. Seth sat in one of her chairs, his booted feet resting on her kitchen table. He was sipping coffee, looking again like he owned the place.

He was paying attention to something outside the window and hadn't noticed her yet, so she felt free to study him. The shadows cast by the lamp on the table caressed his face, highlighting his strong jaw and proud, crooked nose. It still stunned her that he had been her lover.

She must have made some kind of sound because he turned his attention toward her.

The moment their gazes met, he smiled. Her body warmed and her pulse raced. It took a monumental amount of control not to lick her lips. His smile deepened the longer they stared at each other, and—damn him—he knew how he was affecting her.

She wasn't ready for this. One night of little sleep and a yearning that wouldn't fade didn't allow her to be prepared. No, she wasn't ready. Not now, and Jamie doubted she ever would be.

"Good morning, Jamie." His voice was like aged whiskey, smooth and wicked and not helpful to her self-control.

She needed space. She needed him to go away and not ever come back. But as soon as that thought came into mind, she pushed it away. As much as it hurt to be in the same room as him, it would kill her never to see him again.

Her stomach knotted. She didn't want to deal with this, or the multitude of emotions he was bringing to the surface. To protect herself, she straightened her spine and frowned at him.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Seth had to admit he'd had his doubts about Jack's advice. More than once last night, and on the ride over this morning, Seth had worried he was going to make a jackass out of himself. Being that he'd already done that in front of her, he didn't want to repeat it. If he were truthful with himself, he didn't know if he could handle her rejection again.

"Are you going to answer me?"

"What am I doing here?" he asked.

She nodded, her irritation easy to see. Her nerves were jumping just below the surface. Seth could sense them and felt a spurt of satisfaction. It was nice to know he wasn't the only one out of his depth. "I decided to take you up on your offer."

Her expression blanked and Seth had to fight a smile.

"My offer?"

"Yeah, I offered marriage—"

"Which I refused."

He kept his expression passive. Seth had a feeling that if Jamie knew what his plan was, she'd become even more stubborn on the subject.

"You're right. And if memory serves...you made an alternative offer."

She lifted her chin slightly. "I did. If I remember correctly, you said you wouldn't lower yourself to play my paramour."

Oh, she didn't like that. He could tell by the barely restrained anger in her tone.

"I've had time to think about it."

She didn't say anything, but raised one eyebrow and crossed her arms over her breasts. Knowing he had to keep her unbalanced, he stood and slowly walked over to her. The superior look in her eyes faded to confusion then to panic. Seth stopped several inches from her and drew in a deep breath. Lord, he'd remember the exquisite scent of

her until the day he died. She didn't perfume herself like most women. Her bouquet was natural, something completely unique to Jamie.

"Jack said you were short a hand, and since he just hired a new man, he sent me over to fill in for a couple of days. I figured that would allow us to ease into our...arrangement."

She pursed her lips as if she'd just sucked a lemon. "I'm confused. Yesterday—" She stopped talking when he brushed a lock of hair over her shoulder. Her eyes narrowed and he smiled as innocently as he could. "As I was saying, you refused."

"That I did. But after thinking about what you said, I decided you might be right."

He cupped her face with one hand. Leaning closer, he took pleasure in the catch of breath he heard. Without closing his eyes, he brushed his lips over hers. He meant to keep the kiss light, but the moment she closed her eyes and moaned, he forgot that plan and jumped in.

He pulled her closer, closing his own eyes and falling into the kiss. Nothing had ever been as beautiful and tempting as a kiss from Jamie. As she opened her mouth, he slipped inside, allowing the sweet sassy taste of her to sink into him. He would have taken her right there up against the wall, but the sound of the front door opening stopped him.

Both of them stared at each other for a moment, then he shifted away before Marlene came bursting into the kitchen. She didn't even give them a look or acknowledge that Seth was there.

"Sorry, I'm late. Overslept. I'll get to work on breakfast right away."

As she started to putter around the kitchen, he said, "I'll talk to Hank about getting a bed in the bunkhouse."

She shook her head. "You know I have plenty of room here."

He smiled. "Now, that wouldn't be proper."

With that he nodded to her, then to Marlene, and left feeling decidedly better. He might have made a muck of things, but there was no denying her response to him. That was a damn fine start.



Three weeks later, Jamie stepped out onto the porch and sighed. The heat of the sun was already powerful by midmorning and summer was definitely looking to be a hot one. The idea that she was going after Seth to seduce him in the barn was stupid in this heat but she couldn't refuse. Not him, or the chance to be alone with him.

Almost every night he visited her. Each time was more intense, more threatening to her peace of mind. She was falling further in love with him, but was helpless to resist. No matter how much time they spent loving each other, the tension didn't ease. All they had to do was be in the same room and her skin started to feel itchy, her clothing restricting, and she had to fight the urge to jump him.

He'd turned her into some kind of sex maniac.

She headed across the yard. Hank had sent more hands out to patrol today. They hadn't had any more cows disappear, but he was worried about it. That left her with time alone for Seth, and for once she was going to ignore her duties and take time for her pleasure.

As she approached the barn, an odd voice sounded from one of the outer work sheds. She paused, listening, trying to decide what was making the sound. When it stopped, she stepped in the direction of the barn once more, but she heard it again. Looking at the open barn doors, she sighed and started on the path that led to the shed. Turning the corner, she gasped. One of her cows lay on its side.

Jamie rushed forward, then stopped when she saw the blood. Someone had gutted the cow, its entrails strewn over the ground. She lifted her hand to her mouth and nose, trying to fight off the scent of fresh blood. Knowing the culprit had to be close, she spun around to run back toward the house. A sharp blow to the back of her head had her losing her balance and stumbling forward. Her hands took the brunt of the fall, but her cheek hit the ground hard. She tried to lift her head, but her vision blurred then faded to black.



Seth was brushing down a frisky little mare that Hank preferred to ride as he talked to the older man. He was trying his best to keep up his part of the conversation, but his mind was on Jamie. Hell, what was new? It was always on Jamie.

Something simmered within her, deep below the calm exterior she showed everyone. He felt it each night he laid with her. Whenever she gave herself to him, she allowed him to take control and never held back. But during the day...that was a different matter. Playing friend to her, not being able to touch her as should be his right, was driving him out of his ever-loving mind.

He shook his head at his weakness that seemed to be growing by the minute and tried to focus on the conversation.

“So nothing was missing today, but I still think there’s someone targeting the ranch.”

“Jamie and Jack said something about that. Neither of them seemed very worried over it.”

Hank shrugged. “No one else is having problems. Usually something like this, a few cows here and there, we all get hit. Takes longer for us to find what’s missing. But with it just being us, it’s not like they’re doing it for money, if you get my meanin’?”

Seth paused. “You told Jamie all of this?”

Hank nodded. “Told her and she waved it off. She didn’t think she had any enemies, and I would agree. Still, it’s really strange.”

The thought of Portman’s face when she turned him down in San Antonio floated through Seth’s mind. “Tucker Portman might.”

“Portman? What kind of complaint would he have with Jamie?”

“He asked her to marry him.” When Hank poked up, Seth held out his hands. “She turned him down, but he showed up in San Antonio and pressed the point. She wasn’t gentle with him.”

“I can’t believe that bastard tried to get her to marry him.”

“I heard she said yes,” said Gerald Jefferson, one of the hands, as he led his horse into her stall.

Seth set down the brush and walked around the mare and over to Gerald.

“I was there when she said no. Where did you hear she said yes?”

Gerald shrugged. “I heard Portman bragging last night at the poker game. Some of his hands run a game on Monday nights. He said Mrs. McEwan agreed and they were getting married in a few weeks.”

“That’s hogwash.” Hank offered up that comment.

“I have to agree.” Seth’s voice was cool, but he felt anything but. Anger bubbled beneath his skin, but he forced it back. He would wait until he got a hold of Portman.

“Has anyone seen Jamie?” Marlene broke into his thoughts with that question.

“No, isn’t she in the house?” Seth asked.

“No. When was the last time you saw her?”

“Right after breakfast.”

Her brow furrowed. “She never came in for lunch, and I assumed she rode out to check on the patrols.”

Worry niggled at the base of his spine. Before he could tell Marlene that Sadie was in her stall and Jamie hadn’t taken her out, a shout sounded from outside the barn. Seth dropped his brushes and hurried outside, all of the others right behind him. They ran into Frederick, another of the hands. His face was pale, his eyes filled with terror.

Seth reached him first. “What the hell’s wrong?”

He shook his head, as if trying to clear his mind, and closed his eyes. “A heifer, gutted.”

Hank was already moving to check on it, and Seth was hard on his heels. The moment they broke free of the yard, they both smelled it. The stench was unmistakable. The closer they got to the shed, the stronger it became.

“Holy Mother of God,” Hank’s horrified whisper reached him right before Seth saw the cow. The blood had soaked the ground and was now dried. The stench was so strong, Seth had to swallow to keep from gagging. How the hell had everyone missed this?

His next thought was simple.

Jamie.

Cold, sick dread settled in his belly as he turned and ran back to the barn. His only thought was finding her, making sure she was all right.

“Everyone spread out and look for Jamie. She’s missing.”

They turned to do his bidding, but Gerald approached him. “Mr. Conner. I hate to say this but...well, I saw Mr. Portman riding over by the ridge today. He had something big laying across his lap. I didn’t think anything about it, but it was odd.”

“Son of a bitch.” Nerves already stretched to the limit pulled tighter. He looked at Gerald and Hank. “Take a few men and have a look around the grounds, just in case.”

He waited for their nods, then, without another word, strode into the barn. The sound of a horse riding hell bent for leather into the yard gave him hope, but it was dashed when he saw Jack. His best friend jumped off the horse before it came to a complete stop.

“I thought you said Jamie turned down Portman.”

Not wanting to waste time, Seth started to saddle Comet. “She did. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Apparently he called on the preacher in Smythville. Portman’s booked the church for next Saturday.”

Seth looked at Jack, trying his best to fight the panic crawling through him. “I think he has Jamie.”

## Chapter Nine

Jamie winced as she touched the back of her head where her hair was matted with dried blood. Sharp, nauseating pain spiked through her and her senses swam. The blow Portman had given her still had her mind mixed up.

“I hope you feel okay. Being out in the sun like that isn’t good for a woman. Too delicate.”

When Jamie turned in the direction of her abductor’s voice, an explosion of stars had her closing her eyes. She swallowed the bile rising in her throat with sheer will.

Opening her eyes, she licked her lips and forced herself to look at Portman. The ass had dressed in formal wear for dinner. She was still in her bloodied and dirty clothes, but he acted as if she were dressed for the ball. It wasn’t a formal dinner party, but there were candles lit, and the best china graced the table. She wished he had held to true fashion and seated her at the opposite end of the long dining table.

She wasn’t sure how many hours it had been since he’d hit her, but light still filtered into the room, telling her the sun hadn’t set. He studied her with his bulging eyes, reminding her of a dog that had gone crazy with rabies. He wasn’t a likable man, but she’d had no idea just how insane he was. Understanding that, she realized there was a good chance she’d never see Seth again. A man as insane as Portman wasn’t going to let her go. Just the idea of what he did to that cow was enough to make her retch. She accepted that she might not get away. The only thing she regretted was failing to tell Seth she loved him.

“Jameson!”

She blinked when Portman yelled and brought her back to his comment about her delicacy.

“It wasn’t the sun.”



He chuckled, picked up a decanter of wine and poured it into her glass. “I know women think they can handle things men can, but you just don’t have the stamina.” After filling her glass to the very top, he set the decanter down and looked at her. “I thought we might discuss our wedding.”

“We aren’t marrying. I told you no.”

Without warning, his hand lashed out, striking her across the face. The force of the slap toppled her chair. Her head hit the floor, causing another jolt of pain to shoot through her. Before she could gather her wits, Portman reached down and grabbed her by the arm. With a jerk, he pulled her eye level with him. Her head was throbbing and her face smarting from the slap he had given her.

“I told Sid you were too smart mouthed. He’d just laugh at me, told me I was jealous. I was right, too. Look at you thinking you know how to run a ranch.” With each word Portman uttered, the scent of onions drifted over her. Again her stomach roiled and her head spun. “It’s about time a man teaches you how to behave like a proper lady.”

With a shove, he sent her flying. She slammed against the wall and slid to the ground. She was sure every bone in her body was bruised. Jamie knew she should get up and run, do anything to get away from the man. But she couldn’t get her mind to work, and her vision was blurred.

“Women these days don’t understand that they have to obey. Sid could have cared less about you, which made him an ass.”

He squatted in front of her and leaned down in her face. His rancid breath wafted toward her and it was all she could do to keep herself from throwing up. He brushed the back of his fingers over her cheek.

“If you’re denying me because of Conner, think twice.”

The pain he’d caused faded as alarm flashed through her. He must have recognized it because he smiled.

“I see you understand.” He rose and walked back to the table and poured himself a shot of whiskey. “I was surprised to say the least that you were carrying on with a man,

let alone someone so much younger. Can you imagine how that would look to others? How it looked to me?”

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “My first wife was a slut. Thought she could marry me and keep a man on the side.” The grin he offered her held no warmth, only cold, cruel satisfaction. “She came to regret that decision.

“Her lover, he regretted it even more. I can tell you he didn’t go quietly. I’m sure since you’ve been around a ranch, you’re familiar with castration.” He paused and licked his lips. “You’ve never heard true agony until you listen to a man cry as he pleads to be killed. Is that something you want for Conner? I can’t imagine him begging me, but it would be a joy to take the bastard down a few pegs, especially with you as an audience.”

Jamie couldn’t wrap her mind around the horrific picture he painted. It wasn’t the idea of his actions, but the pleasure he took in the act. She could see the memory was fond just by the delight shining in his eyes.

As Portman approached her, he began unbuckling his belt, which sent a fresh wave of panic through her. She could survive a beating, but the thought of the man touching her, forcing her, had her gagging. She tried to scramble away, and he laughed.

He pulled the belt free of its loops, but instead of moving on to his pants, he folded the belt in half and swung it in her direction. The lash of it bit into the skin of her arm. Tears sprung from her eyes.

As he pulled back to give her another lash, the door to the dining room crashed open.

Seth filled the doorway. Angry, solemn and holding a pistol in his hand, he stepped into the room.

“What the hell are you doing here?” Portman yelled.

“I’ve come for Jamie.”

Portman dropped the belt and moved to the table. Fresh fear slammed through her when she saw the gun lying next to his plate. “Why? She’s mine.”

“The hell she is.” Seth cocked his gun. “I’d think twice about that, Portman.”

Portman paused, but then quickly reached for the pistol. Seth didn’t hesitate. The moment Portman had the gun in hand, Seth fired. The bullet hit Portman in the chest. He

dropped his own gun as blood blossomed over his white linen shirt. He stumbled back, falling to the floor.

Jack drew closer to keep his own gun on him as Seth made his way over to her. He kneeled beside her.

“Oh, baby.” It wasn’t until he said those words that she noticed how cold she was. He gathered her in his arms, holding her close. Every part of her body ached, but she didn’t care. Being held in Seth’s arms, knowing everything was all right, made the pain of his embrace worthwhile. His body heat wrapped around her, but the reassurance he offered was lost among the chills vibrating through her. Memories of Portman’s threats colored her mind. She knew in that instant that losing Seth would have cost her sanity, her very will to live. That’s something she couldn’t—wouldn’t—accept. As her teeth started to chatter, she broke down.

She didn’t even fight the sob that escaped. Needing his warmth and comfort, she slipped her arms up and clung to Seth. He tightened his arms around her, but it didn’t seem to be enough. She tried to burrow herself into his chest. The emotions she’d held at bay seemed to gush out of her. All the fear, the horror of what she’d been through bubbled up. The physical pain didn’t compare to the anguish coursing through her veins, piercing her heart.

Seth cursed under his breath. Even in her state of mind, she heard the tremble in his voice when he spoke. “I should have beaten him before I shot him.”

“You’ll have to be satisfied with the shot,” Jack said, his voice raw with anguish and anger. “Right through the heart, he’s gone.”

Jamie tried to look, wanting to see if the bastard really was dead. But Seth stood and gathered her back into his arms. Her will to see Portman faded as she gave into the need to be anywhere but in that room. “I want to go home.”

Seth stepped out of the dining room and walked through the parlor and out onto the porch. “I know, baby. So do I.”

His lips brushed her temple. The gesture comforted her. Knowing she was safe, that nothing could hurt her now, she allowed herself to drift away from the pain and into oblivion.



Seth climbed the steps to Jamie's room with determination. It had been a long few weeks while Jamie made her recovery. When the swelling and bruising had been in full force, she'd been confined to bed. Marlene had tried to get him to leave, but for the first two days, he'd refused, sleeping in the chair beside her as she fought through the terror in her dreams. When Jamie became more coherent, she'd tried to get him to leave, but again, he refused.

It was apparent to anyone with half a brain there was something between them, and except for Jamie, everyone else had left him alone. Jamie, though, was a different story. After ranting and raving at him to leave, she closed in on herself, barely speaking to anyone, even Jack. She had horrible memories. More than once he had rushed to her room after hearing her screams of fear. And even though she clung to him while she sobbed, she said little to him about it. She wouldn't discuss anything. Not Portman, not her abduction, not even their relationship.

It was as if the Jamie he loved was wasting away to nothing and he was damn tired of it.

He opened the door without knocking. It was rude, but he didn't care. Jamie was standing by the window, dressed in her wrapper. Most of the bruising was gone. The split in her lip had healed as had the gash in the back of her head. Still, the memory of seeing her laying there battered by that bastard made Seth want to go kill Portman all over again.

"What are you doing here?" Her voice held no emotion. She didn't look at him when she asked the question, just kept staring out the window as if he didn't matter.

He fought the usual panic that came when he heard her speak. Instead of calming his fears, it fed them. The lack of feeling in her tone scared the hell out of him.

"I've come to talk to you."

She didn't say anything.

Irritated, he calmed himself with a deep breath and plowed ahead. "Don't you want to know what I want to talk to you about?"

She shrugged. That action was starting to get on his nerves. Every time someone tried to get her to talk, to ask her if she needed anything, she just lifted her shoulders. She wouldn't even choose what to eat or wear.

"I want to talk to you about us."

"There's no us." Her voice was devoid of any emotion, so flat, so distant that it scared the hell out of him.

He walked over to her, stepping behind her. The panic was now growing into full-blown terror. It took every amount of control he had not to grab her and shake her, then beg her to take him back. "I think you're wrong, Jamie."

She shivered, the first reaction she'd had to him in weeks. A tiny spark of hope warmed his heart, but he had to be careful. Seth knew she wasn't willing to accept him, but it was about time she changed her mind.

"I don't want to discuss it."

She turned away from the window and stepped around him.

Irritated with her dismissal, he seized her arm. "What the hell is going on?"

Looking down at his hand then up at him, she said, "It's nothing. The sooner you learn that, the better." She pulled away and walked to her bed. "If that's all, I would prefer to go to bed now."

He couldn't lose her, refused to lose her. Three weeks of worry, fear and guilt exploded. With purpose, he strode over to stand behind her. He took a deep breath and admitted the truth that had been scaring him almost to death. "I can't lose you."

"You never had me."

That one comment had his anger surging, mixing with the shock of her actions. "Yes, I did. I had you more than once, but that isn't exactly what I'm talking about." When she still said nothing, he grabbed her arm again and spun her around to face him. "Do you know how long I waited? How many years I tried to ignore the feelings I have for you?"

She still didn't say anything, just stared through him as if he weren't even there. He thought loving her from afar, never having her, had been hell. That was nothing compared to the fear slicing through his gut...his heart.

"I've loved you for years. Good Lord it was embarrassing to be that infatuated with a married woman. I thought I was just in lust, but when it didn't fade, when this powerful feeling I had for you grew, I knew I loved you."

"It doesn't matter because I never loved you."

The words pierced his heart. He could've handled her rage, even her pain. If she had done that, if she had showed him some temper or cried like the night Portman had taken her, he'd know she was fighting her feelings. But the indifference she showed, he realized she had never loved him. He'd been nothing but a diversion, a way to pass the time.

He swallowed the hurt and the anger and met her gaze. "And just like that, you decide you want me gone. You want to live your life in this lonely, empty house, then die alone. Never knowing love, never having children."

She nodded and turned away. If he hadn't seen the sheen of tears glittering in her eyes, he would've believed her.

"To hell with that." He pulled her around to face him and crushed his mouth down on hers. At first, she did nothing, just stood there like a doll. The pain that had cut through his heart tore at his soul, ripping his hope to shreds. He was ready to move away, admit defeat. No man should put himself through something like this, not even for love. But then Jamie shuddered and opened her mouth. He slipped his hands around her waist. It wasn't until he heard her sob that he realized she was still crying.

"Oh, baby, I'm sorry." He tilted her head back and looked down into her eyes. "I didn't want to bring back any bad memories."

She shook her head, and another sob escaped. "No. There was..." She closed her eyes. "There was nothing like that. He didn't touch me that way."

Relief filled him. Jamie had refused to talk about what had happened, even with Marlene. It wouldn't have changed the way he thought about her, but he didn't want to even to contemplate her suffering that. He pulled her close.

"I was worried."

"It wasn't that. It was...you could have been hurt. Portman knew about us and planned to kill you. He was completely crazy."

He rubbed his chin over the top of her head. "I wouldn't have let him kill me. Not after everything we shared."

"How do you know that?"

"I just do."

She tried to pull free of him, but he wouldn't allow it. After a few moments of struggling, she stopped and looked up at him with fire lighting her eyes.

"You don't. You don't have any idea just how evil that man was. He took joy in pain, in making others suffer."

"And you couldn't allow me to be hurt." He smiled at her, joy filling him. "I knew you loved me."

Jamie placed her hands on his chest and shoved. Caught off guard, he stumbled back, releasing her.

"I don't love you. I don't want that."

Her appalled whisper shouldn't have made him so happy but it did. He might have to fight her, but he knew without a doubt she loved him now.

"Yes, you do." Seth couldn't keep the satisfaction from coloring his voice.

"Do you think I want to love, to risk that. If something were to happen to you..."

His breath tangled in his throat as he waited for her to continue. When she didn't, he stepped closer. "What?"

"Nothing."

"No, it's not nothing." She looked away from him, but he grabbed her by the arm and forced her to meet his gaze. "What?"

“If Portman would’ve gotten a hold of you, he would have made you suffer. I couldn’t take that.”

“Because you love me.”

“Stop saying that.” She shot him a glare before trying to turn away again. He tightened his hold.

“I don’t want to love you. When you love, you get hurt. I don’t want to take that chance.” Her shoulders slumped and she bowed her head, but he didn’t let it discourage him. Instead, he tugged her back into his arms.

“That’s what happens, honey. You fall in love, you risk your heart.” He settled his cheek on top of her head and drew in the clean, unique scent of her. “I know what you’re talking about. Riding to Portman’s, I aged a thousand years thinking about what you might be going through. Even if we hadn’t gotten there in time, if we hadn’t saved you from the bastard, I wouldn’t have changed a thing about our time together. No matter what the cost to my sanity—to my soul—I’d do it all the same.”

She drew back but didn’t move out of his arms. That fact pleased him to no end.

“Why?”

He raised one hand to gently wipe away the tears dampening her cheeks. “I’d risk everything just to have what we had, even if for just one moment in time.”

“Oh, Seth.” Another wave of tears flooded her eyes and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth. She swallowed and took a deep breath as they stared at each other. “What did you mean about loving me all those years?”

“Well, I...” He took a deep breath and met her gaze head on. “I’ve loved you since the moment I saw you.”

“You were only sixteen. And I was married to Sid.”

He nodded. “Okay, so it was lust to begin with, but it didn’t fade. I thought you would never take me seriously, so I kept my distance. When Jack told me about you and Portman, I figured I couldn’t wait.”

She stepped away from him, out of his arms. “Let me get this straight. You decided to seduce me to try and force me into marriage.”



He couldn't read her expression. "No. What I had planned was seducing you so that you would marry me."

Cocking her head, she said, "That sounds like the same thing."

"What I meant was that I would convince you because you couldn't..."

"What? That I would be so lustful for your body, you would lure me into marriage?"

He frowned. "No, not really." He sighed. "Okay, sort of."

"And during that whole thing of telling me it was for the best that we get married to save my reputation you never once told me you loved me."

"I messed up. I admit it. It wasn't like you said anything other than no. Oh, and you would prefer an affair with me than marriage. And another thing—"

"Seth."

The amusement in her voice caught his attention. He stopped his rant and looked at her. Warmth and love filled her expression. It struck him dumb. She smiled, the joy in it capturing his heart.

"I love you."

The moment she said it, a whoosh of air he didn't know he'd been holding escaped. He'd hoped, dreamed that she loved him, but he'd been so worried he'd lost her. The need to pull her into his arms, to hold her close to him, overwhelmed him. He stepped forward, anticipation humming in his blood. Something of what he felt must have showed in his expression because she held up her hand.

"No. Let me speak." She licked her lips and drew in a shaky breath. "After the way I've been acting the last few weeks, I really don't deserve you, but I do want you. I never dreamed I'd have a man in my life again. Sid, well, that was a big mistake. I didn't trust myself, didn't believe in myself. You changed that."

He knew he should hold onto his anger for making him wait for so long, for almost ruining everything they had. The woman had him wrapped around her finger, and she knew it.

"I love you, Jamie."

She opened her arms, and he went to her. He kissed her slow, sweet, staring into her eyes. Passion and love melded together, heating his body and warming his soul.

By the time he pulled back from the kiss, they were both breathing heavily.

“I do insist on marriage.”

She smiled again. “Only if you promise to always love me.”

“That, I can promise without a doubt.”

With a laugh, he tumbled them both back onto the bed and went about proving his promise true.

## About the Author

Born to an Air Force family at an Army hospital Melissa has always been a little bit screwy. She was further warped by her years of watching Monty Python and her strange family. Her love of romance novels developed after accidentally picking up a Linda Howard book. After becoming hooked, she read close to 300 novels in one year, deciding that romance was her true calling instead of the literary short stories and suspense she had been writing. After many attempts, she realized that romantic comedy, or at least romance with a comic edge was where she was destined to be. Influences in her writing come from Nora Roberts, Jenny Crusie, Susan Andersen, Amanda Quick, Jayne Anne Krentz, Julia Quinn, Christina Dodd, and Lori Foster. Since her first release in 2004, Melissa has had close to 20 short stories, novellas and novels released with six different publishers in a variety of genres and time periods.

Since she was a military brat, she vowed never to marry military. Alas, fate always has her way with mortals. Her husband is an Air Force major, and together they have their own military brats, two girls, and they live wherever the military sticks them. Which she is sure will always involve heat and bugs only seen on the Animal Discovery Channel. In her spare time, she reads, complains about bugs, travels, cooks, reads some more, watches her DVD collections of *Arrested Development* and *Seinfeld*, and tries to convince her family that she truly is a *delicate genius*. She has yet to achieve her last goal.

She has always believed that romance and humor go hand in hand. Love can conquer all and as Mark Twain said, "Against the assault of laughter, nothing can stand." Combining the two, she hopes she gives her readers a thrilling love story, filled with chuckles along the way, and a happily ever after finish.

She can be reached at her website, [www.melissaschroeder.net](http://www.melissaschroeder.net), her myspace page, [www.myspace.com/melissaschroeder](http://www.myspace.com/melissaschroeder), and you can keep up with her activities at her yahoo groups: [groups.yahoo.com/group/melissaschroederchat](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/melissaschroederchat), [groups.yahoo.com/group/melissaschroedernews](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/melissaschroedernews).

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The Last Detail

*A marriage of convenience shows a determined rancher and a stubborn woman what it means to be branded.*

## Branded

© 2007 Beth Williamson

*Part of the Leather and Lace series.*

When a clause in his grandfather's will forces Rafe Sinclair to marry or else lose his ranch, he sets his sights on what he thinks is a safe choice—his neighbor Emma Radcliff.

Emma has never wanted anything other than to work her family's horse ranch. But when her father forces her to marry Rafe, she does everything in her power to make the handsome rancher regret his choice of brides.

They say oil and water don't mix, but in Emma's and Rafe's case, it does—and the result is fire. When Emma refuses to consummate the marriage, Rafe sets out to prove that marriage him is the best thing that's ever happened to her.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Branded:*

Rafe's mind could not grasp the fact that the woman beside him was Emma Radcliff. She didn't bear even the slightest resemblance to herself at fifteen. Okay, well the face was the same only slimmer, but that ass and those tits...well, they didn't used to look like that. Perhaps being married to her wouldn't be too bad.

It would help if she didn't carry guns though. He didn't know one other woman who wore Colts on her hips. Most, if any, carried a little derringer in their reticule or pulled out a shotgun for protection if necessary.

His bride-to-be wore two six-shooters like she was a man. She was a conundrum of mismatched pieces.

They rode in silence back to the Circle S. The closer they got, the more he worried about all the women waiting for him. Strange thing was, he was glad Emma had come back with him. It didn't make him feel safe, just better. He never thought he'd be hiding

from any woman, much less a herd of them, but damned if they hadn't all looked hungry enough to eat him alive. Normally having two or three women inviting him to play might excite him, however this situation wasn't normal, and neither were the sheer number of females.

He glanced around the yard from their vantage point on the hill, noting the white figures that were either large stray sheep or women poking around the ranch.

"They're still here." He sighed. "Nosing around like a pack of coyotes."

Emma glanced at him sideways. "No need for name-calling, Rafe. You can't blame them for trying. Way I hear it, gals have been trying to land you for years." She shook her head. "Can't say as I understand it."

Rafe frowned. "I'm not all that bad, Emma. Once upon a time, you didn't think I was."

She huffed out an impatient-sounding breath. "Well I guess I grew up and got smart. Let's get this over with." Emma spurred her horse down the hill, leaving Rafe behind.

He caught up with her just as she reached the barn and dismounted in a smooth movement that made his eyebrows shoot up. Emma wasn't fooling when she said she knew horses well. Not many men could move like that, much less a woman.

Emma cupped her hands around her mouth. "Ladies, this is Emma Radcliff. I'm here with Rafe Sinclair. Come on out."

A tiny bit of trepidation wiggled around in Rafe's stomach. She made it sound like he was up for auction, for Pete's sake. As he dismounted, the herd of ladies appeared like hungry hands called for chow. With a weak smile, he stepped up next to Emma. He was *not* hiding behind her.

Emma addressed them. "I'm sure you've all heard that Rafe needs to get hitched. I'm here to tell you that's true."

She glanced up at Rafe, and he saw her plan laid out like a map in her eyes right before she opened her mouth. Nothing doing. He wasn't about to let the coyotes loose on him regardless of Emma's reasons for wanting that to happen.

Rafe clamped his hand over her mouth and yanked her under his arm. "I'm officially engaged to Emma here so y'all can go home."

Emma took the opportunity to bite his hand. Instead of looking like a fool in front of the crestfallen ladies, he did what he did best—he kissed his intended bride.

It started as a lesson to her to behave as well as a show for the prospective brides buzzing around. Emma's breasts pushed up against his chest nicely while her stiff lips barely moved beneath his. He thought she even might be growling at him.

Rafe's kiss softened by degrees until he was barely touching her, just a gentle swipe of his lips against hers. Their essences mingled as they swallowed each other's breaths. Before he knew it, Rafe forgot who he was kissing, where he was or what the hell he had intended on doing.

Kissing Emma consumed him.

She was firm yet curvy with a tremendous amount of strength in her body. Her hand crept up and tangled in his hair, knocking his hat off. The haze of arousal thrummed through him as his body reacted to the sensuous woman in his arms. Until she yanked his hair so hard his eyes crossed.

Rafe let her go so fast she almost fell on her ass. He grabbed her hand at the last second and pulled her back to her feet. As he rubbed the back of his head, he noticed how red and plump her lips were, that they were wet from his kisses, and she had a hint of whisker burn on her chin.

He'd not only kissed Emma Radcliff, he'd *enjoyed* it. More than enjoyed it by the reaction of his dick.

Hot damn.

He should have expected the fist, but damn, it hurt like hell when she walloped him with a right hook. When Rafe uncrossed his eyes, he was pleased to discover the other women had disappeared. He didn't know how long he'd been kissing Emma, but it was long enough that they were alone.

"Don't ever take anything from me again," she hissed. "I might marry you, Rafe Sinclair, but I ain't willing to do more than that."

Rafe had to physically force himself not to stare at her chest. Those round, soft tits of hers heaved with each outraged breath she took. He felt topsy-turvy as if his entire world had just shifted under his feet.

Emma pushed at his chest. “Do you understand me?”

He nodded, swallowing at the tightness in his throat. Rafe had no idea what just happened, but he expected it was the beginning of something else, something bigger between them. It should have scared the hell out of him, which in turn would make him do all he could to stop it. However, he had no choice but to forge ahead with the marriage to Emma, come hell or high water.

“Let’s get this over with then.” Emma tied her horse off at the hitching post and stomped toward the house, little puffs of dirt following her progress with each boot print.

After a long, deep sigh, Rafe followed.



*When a full-blooded Comanche risks everything for the honor of the woman he loves, it's a safe bet there'll be a showdown at high noon.*

## High Noon

© 2007 Rebecca Goings

*Part of the Leather and Lace series*

*Banning, TX 1872*

Alison Williams has loved Talon Holt most of her life, but he broke her heart when he suddenly left town five years ago. Then Alison's father loses a round of poker to the notorious blackguard Garrett Sumrall, and she's shocked to learn he's lost much more than his life savings. He'd bet Alison's hand in marriage!

A full-blooded Comanche raised by a white man, Talon has never fit in to either world. Despite his feelings for his childhood friend, he's sure he did her a favor by leaving so she would be free to marry someone of her own race. But when he hears the news of her father's gambling debt, he returns to rescue Alison from her cruel fate.

A few stolen kisses, and their passion rekindles with fiery intensity. However, Sumrall is not about to give up his winnings without a fight—because he has a much darker reason for making sure Alison makes good on her father's bet.

It's a showdown at high noon, and winner takes all!

Warning: Wild West Justice and Wild West Sex.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for High Noon:*

Often she came down to the creek, where she and Talon had spent many days together in their youth. The sound of the babbling water calmed her raging emotions, and she took refuge in the fond memories she had of spending time with the man she adored.

He'd taught her how to skip a rock on the water and how to fish. He'd also been the only one to ever see her without her shoes, daring her to dip her bare feet into the cool water one hot summer's day. She and Talon used to be inseparable. What had happened to them?

“Thought I might find you here.”

Alison gasped at the sound of Talon’s deep voice a split second before he sat on the blanket next to her. He didn’t spare her a glance, but instead gazed at the stars. “Beautiful night.”

“How did you...how did you sneak up on me?” She sat up in a huff, desperately trying to straighten her hair, even though it was likely he couldn’t see her too well anyhow.

“Didn’t do much sneaking, honey, I just walked up and sat down. You must have been lost in thought.”

Alison’s heart leapt at his casual use of the word “honey”. Hearing it from him sounded both foreign and completely wonderful at the same time. He’d never called her that when they were younger.

“I’m surprised to see you’re still here,” she said.

“Told you I was back in Banning to stay.”

“Well forgive me for not exactly believing you.”

Talon sighed and turned to her. “I was a fool all those years ago, Allie. I left because...because...”

“What?” she prompted.

“I left because I was afraid. Afraid of my feelings for you. When you told me you felt more for me than friendship, I panicked. The only thing that had been keeping me at arm’s length from you was the knowledge that you only looked at me as a friend. But Christ, Allie, you were *fifteen*. I was twenty-two. Quite the age gap, don’t you think?”

Her heart raced. Talon had actually cared for her? Alison’s head spun. “We’re still seven years apart now.”

He nodded. “True. But now, you’re twenty. I’m twenty-seven. I’m thinking that’s a much better stretch.”

It was hard for her to take a breath. Something changed in Talon’s tone of voice, and Alison’s stomach flopped. The night air was cool, but her skin burned, and she desperately wished she wasn’t encumbered by her heavy skirts.

“What are you saying, Talon?” Her voice sounded breathless, even to her own ears.

“Remember that kiss I gave you before I left?”

How could she forget? It was seared onto her brain like a brand. “Yes,” she said, panting.

He leaned closer to her, planting his fists on either side of her thighs. Rising up on his knees, Talon commanded every ounce of her attention. “I stopped it short. Do you know why?”

Alison shook her head so fast, he chuckled. Ever so slowly, he leaned in just a bit more, his eyes boring into hers.

“I wanted to kiss you like a man kisses a woman, but you were too young. You weren’t ready for it then.”

Blood rushed in her ears and she could barely hear his words. She resisted the urge to circle his neck with her arms. His body warmed her, and despite her own heated skin, she shivered.

“Talon—”

“Shh.” He placed one finger on her lips. “I want to kiss you proper, honey. Will you let me?”

He was so close now, their breath mingled. She didn’t know where hers ended and his began. She could smell his clean scent, purely male, like dust and leather. He must have found time to freshen up some. His stubble had been shaved and his hair combed.

As her silence stretched on, Talon’s hands roamed up her arms and neck, one palm cupping her cheek while the other held the back of her head. He was urging her slightly closer to him and she couldn’t fight him. Her resolve to shield her heart was crumbling. She wanted him to kiss her too badly.

His eyes pleaded with her and Alison knew she couldn’t deny him. She nodded right before he closed the gap between them, pressing his lips to hers.

The contact sent tremors throughout her body, and she whimpered loudly. Talon responded with a low growl, leaning her back onto the blanket, following her without breaking the kiss. She knew she should be scandalized that he’d settled on top of her, but his weight felt so good, she wouldn’t have moved him for all riches in the world.

He angled her head, giving him better access to her mouth. Without warning, his tongue snaked out, parting her lips almost forcefully. The bold move shocked her, but she'd often wondered what it would be like to kiss him like this. She surrendered without a fight.

In and out his tongue plunged, playing with hers. It was silky soft and so dominating, she could hardly keep up with him. She responded by thrusting her own tongue into his mouth with ardor. He surged against her, fisting his hands in her hair.

Alison broke the kiss just to get a mouthful of air, but that didn't deter Talon. He merely kissed and suckled his way down the skin of her neck, leaving trails of wet fire behind. Every nerve-ending in her body prickled at his touch, and an unfamiliar yearning lit within her.

"Christ, Allie, I missed you so damn much."

His voice sounded tortured as his mouth latched on to the side of her throat. She gasped, but did nothing to stop him, threading her fingers through his long, soft hair. "Not as much as I missed you," she managed to say, her voice barely a whisper.

Before she knew his intent, his mouth was on hers again, tasting deeply, demanding her full and total submission. Talon's hand wandered between them, grazing her breast and tightening her nipple. She moaned into his mouth at the sensation, arching her back to feel it again. He became bolder at her response and caressed her fully, puckering her nipple through the thick layers of her dress.

He panted as he stroked her, a fire alight in his eyes. "I want to kiss you all over, Allie. I want to know what every inch of you tastes like."

*When a man sets out to tame a strong-willed woman, he'd best hang on to his hat.*

## Taming Eliza Jane

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Will Martinson, the town doctor, already has a heap of troubles on his plate, what with a pregnant whore, an ailing friend and a sheriff with a bad habit of shooting people. The last thing he needs is a strong hankering for a woman who thinks it's her duty to turn a man's life upside-down.

Eliza Jane Carter is a woman on a mission. She's going to improve the lives of the women in Gardiner, Texas before moving on to the next town. But when her finances take a turn for the worse and her chaperone heads for the hills, Eliza Jane is stranded in a town full of riled up menfolk, a gun-happy sheriff and one handsome doctor who makes her question everything she ever believed about the love between a man and a woman.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Taming Eliza Jane*:

Women, in general, were more of a pain in the ass than a lumpy saddle. And whores, in particular, could drive a sober man to go looking for the bottom of a bottle.

The one between whose thighs Will Martinson currently knelt—a particular favorite of his by the name of Sadie—giggled again, causing her ample breasts to shake. It was more of a distraction than any man could withstand. But Sadie liked baring them, even though he'd told her time and time again he had no need to see them.

"It ain't supposed to tickle, Sadie."

"I ain't laughin' at no tickle. Was laughin' at your face—so serious and businesslike."

Will pushed to his feet and flipped Sadie's skirt down over her splayed thighs. "When were your last courses?"

The amusement drained from the pretty whore's face. "Do I gotta baby in me, Doc?"

Will sighed and closed up his bag. His monthly health checks at the Chicken Coop were usually uneventful. Miss Adele took good care of her girls, and taught them to care for themselves. But he was especially fond of Sadie—a dirt-poor Southern farm girl

who'd probably never make it to California no matter how much time she spent on her back—and her expression damn near broke his heart.

"I think you do, Sadie." And not the first inkling of which of her numerous customers may have fathered it. Not that it mattered. A whore's bastard was a child only the mother would love.

"How long can I work?"

His fingers tightened on the straps of his medical bag. "You should get on the next stage and go home, sweetheart. I'll pay your passage if you don't have enough money tucked away. Tell your folks you had a husband but he got killed."

A look of revulsion passed over her face. He saw that look a lot if he mentioned *home* during his visits to the Coop. What horrors these girls had been born into that made it preferable to spread their legs for an endless stream of strange men, he couldn't even begin to guess.

"I asked you," Sadie insisted, some of the sweetness gone from her voice, "how long can I work?"

Looking down into her pretty hazel eyes, framed by a mass of golden curls, he almost offered to marry her. She'd make a right sweet wife and she could be a proper mother to her baby. And if the people of Gardiner took issue with their doctor marrying a whore, why they could deliver their own babies and set their own goddamn broken bones.

He took a deep breath and settled his hat on his head. But, *hellfire*, he couldn't save them all.

"I guess until the men ain't willing to pay for you anymore," he replied in a voice heavy with regret.

Will walked out of the Chicken Coop with an aching heart and a gut churning with frustration. The last person he expected to see waiting for him was the sheriff, who usually gave the only whorehouse in town a wide berth.

Adam Caldwell was damn near the best friend Will had ever had, but he could be as much a pain in the ass as the whores at times. He wasn't sure he had the patience for him right now.

The sheriff fell into step beside him on the plank sidewalk. Will knew they made a noticeable pair. Adam was dark and forbidding. Over six feet of sun-darkened muscle, black shirt and a black hat covering long black hair, with unforgiving eyes almost as dark. They all figured there was some Indian in him somewhere, but no man had yet had the balls to ask him outright.

Will himself was as tall, but he was leaner, with an open, friendly air about him. White shirt with cuffs rolled to the elbows tucked into denim pants. His battered, brown Stetson covered sandy hair he kept trimmed off his ears and neck. And the ladies sure did tend to go on about his blue eyes.

The only other things they had in common were the tin stars—Will liked to pin his on his doctoring kit—and the holsters low on their hips. Will Martinson had sworn to preserve life, but he was also the only man Adam trusted to back him up. The sheriff's reputation went a long way toward keeping the peace, but when there was need for a deputy, Will just told himself there was more than one way to preserve a life.

"Trouble?" Adam finally asked when Will didn't talk just to fill the silence as he was wont to do.

"Sadie's with child."

Adam shrugged. "Can't help those who don't wanna be helped, Doc."

Hell, he knew that. But he wasn't in the mood to hear it just yet. "Heard at the Coop some woman got off the stage and stayed off."

It was a rare event for a woman to stay in town, unless her intention was a room at the Chicken Coop. Word of her had spread through Gardiner like wildfire.

"Yup. Ain't good."

Will waited for his friend to go on with a growing sense of aggravation. *Hellfire*, he'd had easier conversations with mules. "Why ain't it good? She somebody you've heard of?"

"Yup. Eliza Jane Carter. Likes to ride into town, get the women all riled up about demanding their rights and shit, then she skedaddles."

"She stayin' a while?"

"Looks like."

Will knew his friend was mulling over the woman's unwelcome presence in his town and her potential for troublemaking, but all he could think about was how the woman could maybe talk some sense into Sadie. Tell her there were better ways for her and her child to make it in the world.

Adam sighed and pushed his hat back on his head. "If the women gettin' riled up gets the men riled up, we could have us some trouble."

*Damnation.* He didn't need spectacles to see where Adam was heading with this. "Dammit, Adam, I'm a doctor, not a nanny."

"Better job for you than me. I ain't so good with diplomacy."

"Diplomacy? You? Shit, they say you shot a man for calling your horse ugly."

The sheriff shrugged. "He lived. And my horse ain't ugly."

Fact was, Sheriff Caldwell's gelding was the ugliest son of a bitch to ever stand on four legs. A sane man would have shot the creature just to save his own eyesight. But that horse had speed and stamina the likes of which Will had never seen, and he would run until his heart exploded for Adam. He was loyal in a way Will hadn't come across even in a good dog, and certainly never in another person. Didn't change the fact the beast was damn ugly, though. Folks had just gotten real quiet about it.

"I ain't asking you to marry the woman, Doc. Just keep an eye on her." When Will hesitated, Adam shrugged again. Hell, he hated that—made Will want to shove the sheriff's head so far down his neck he could never shrug his shoulders again. "I'd hate for her to cause trouble. Seems a mighty shame to shoot a woman."

Will laughed at the blatant attempt at blackmail, some of the tension easing from his body. "Even you wouldn't shoot a woman, you ornery son of a bitch."

He looked up in time to see a damn fine looking woman step out of the hotel. She was tall and thin, but not so thin she didn't have rounded breasts and hips that like to make a man's mouth water. "Is that her?"

"Must be."

Will smiled and pushed his own hat back a little further on his head. "It *would* be a damn shame to have to shoot her."

"Yup."



She liked to get women all riled up about their rights, did she? “Could be she starts causing too much trouble I’ll have to put her over my knee and spank some sense into her.”

And damned if he didn’t get so riled up himself he had to walk down the sidewalk with his bag held in front of his crotch like a schoolboy.

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