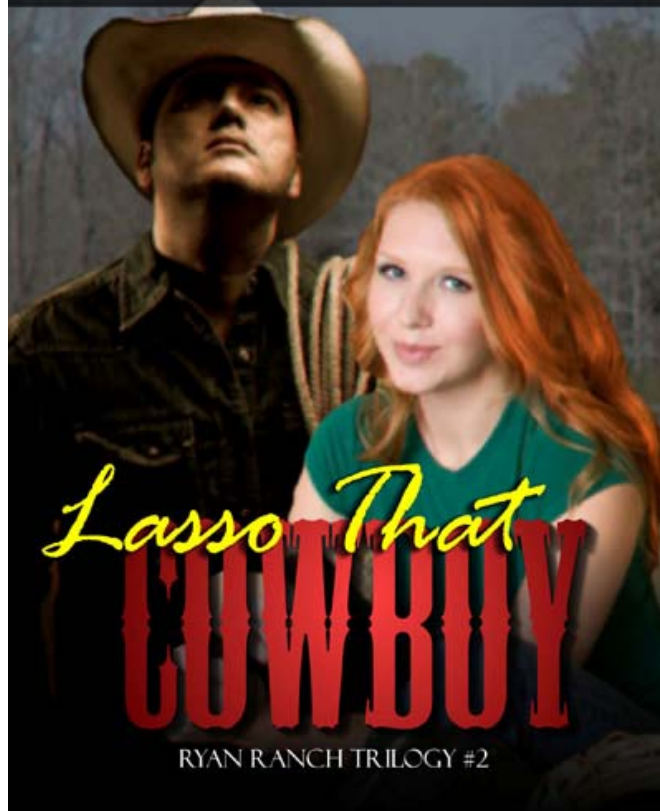


LYNDE LAKES



Lasso That Cowboy

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Dedication

I dedicate my heart and this book to my husband John.

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Chapter One

Amber rubbed her throbbing head and fought a wave of dizziness. Running away felt like a bad choice to start a new life. But waking up next to a lifeless, bloody body told her that if she'd stayed in San Antonio, sooner or later, she'd be jailed, or worse yet . . . dead.

Elmer, the trucker she'd hitched a ride with, pulled his flatbed semi into the center of a complex of ranch buildings. "This is as far as Betsy can go to make an easy wide turn," he said in his thick Texas drawl.

He had the fierce look of an albino gorilla, but Amber had learned in their hours riding together that he had the heart of a teddy bear. Elmer hauled lumber and fencing supplies into the Bar R cattle ranch, and she'd lucked out getting a ride with him from San Antonio to this nowhere land about a hundred miles north of the Mexico border. She had ignored the "No Riders" sign painted on his door and had told him she was broke and needed a lift to get a job. Elmer sized her up and gestured for her to get into the cab. She'd felt comfortable with him from the moment she settled into the passenger seat. The pictures of his wife and two teenage daughters tucked into the visor over his head suggested that he was a family man, and the gentleness in his voice when he talked about them warmed her heart.

"You gonna be all right?"

Amber nodded. The dizziness had passed. Now she felt empty, lost. The activity behind the roar of ranch machinery and grange trucks should've made her feel not quite so alone. But she was alone. Totally alone. She had no ID in her wallet, no pictures of loved ones. A woman with no past. She'd better get used to it.

She sighed, grabbed her suitcase, and slid from the cab. Elmer moved his truck ahead. He circled slowly until the driver's side of his polished, black cab came parallel with her.

"If this job falls through," he said, shouting over the idling engine, "be out by the dirt road in front of the bunk house at five a.m. sharp. I won't wait!"

The June sky was light blue, cloudless. Amber shaded her aching eyes from the blinding morning sun and looked up at him. The upward tilt of her head sent pain up the column of her neck into the base of her skull. "You know something about this place that I don't?" They were both yelling over the head-splitting engine noise now.

"It's just that . . . if Luke Ryan's gonna be your boss, you maybe oughta ask for your pay up front."

Oh great, she thought. Her prospective employer might be a deadbeat. "Thanks for the tip, Elmer."

Too bad she hadn't heard that discouraging news before coming all this way with a mere three bucks in her wallet. Since she didn't have all that many options, she wouldn't count Bossman Ryan out completely. She would make her own evaluation of the man.

To the right, an impressive Spanish villa stood off by itself on a small knoll. They had passed other large homes on the property along the long, dusty lane from the main road. Elmer said they housed top ranch people. This classy piece of real estate must belong to the big kingpin. "Is that Luke Ryan's place?" she asked. "I hope, I hope."

"Naw. He has a place up that dirt road out beyond the big house. Never seen it, but I don't think it's much."

Please, let it have indoor plumbing at the very least. "I thought Luke was the owner of this ranch."

"May have an interest. Spread used to belong to Gavin Ryan, but for the last five years, I've been dealin' with his son, Matt."

The job sounded worse by the minute. Amber fanned herself with her straw hat. The temperature was inching up fast. The brightness of the day gilded the surrounding barns and sheds with a golden hue. A job at the Bar R might not be a golden opportunity, but it was better than losing her life.

"Well, good luck, Amber," Elmer said. "Gotta git my load delivered."

He'd already told her his plan. He'd unload his truck at a warehouse about a mile down the road; visit his cousin Arnie, also a trucker on an intersecting route; and then rest overnight in the bunk house and get an early start in the morning. She'd hate to be forced to leave with him. *Please, Lord, let me ace this interview, and let Elmer be wrong about Luke Ryan.*

She blew up at a wayward wisp of hair. "Thanks for the info, Elmer, and the ride."

Elmer took a long drag from his cigarette, then flicked the butt out the window with stubby, nicotine-stained fingers. He rested his hairy, muscled arm on the window frame. "If you miss my pull out in the mornin', I won't be back for two weeks."

She laughed. "You're not the only ride heading out of here, friend."

"Maybe the only one you can trust. Be careful, Amber girl. Knowin' most of the other road jockeys comin' in and out of this ranch like I do, I'd say you best wait for me to git yourself outta here."

Amber thought of the loaded .38 in the purse hanging from a thin strap over her shoulder. Elmer had a point. She'd hate to shoot a guy for a little knee grabbing. "Where do you think I should look for this Luke Ryan fellow?"

"Try the office in the barn. Someone there should be able to find him for you."

Elmer saluted and pulled away. A cloud of black diesel smoke curled from the exhaust pipe behind the cab. She sighed. Even after the truck turned down the side road and disappeared, Amber continued to stare. For miles there was only low, rolling land sowed with scrub oak, mesquite, and cactus and, in the far distance, a haze of rocky, purple mountains. The land was more severe than she'd expected—barren, even hostile. She had wanted a job in a remote place, and this location was about as remote as any she could've imagined.

Amber fought her fight-or-flight feeling, and the paranoia that came from running. She shivered as the sense of isolation registered in a crushing blow. Taking a deep breath, she picked up her suitcase. She had to make this work.

Two dogs, a black mongrel and an Australian shepherd with tan and white markings, came running toward her, barking. “Big bark, no bite, I hope?” she asked, crossing her fingers. They wagged their tails and trailed behind her. After a couple of dozen steps, a whistle sounded, and they took off to answer the call. “Fickle,” she said.

A smiling ranch hand came toward her. He was wiry, bowlegged, and although as brown as tanned leather, he wasn’t Latino like most of the vaqueros who worked on South Texas ranches. “Lost, little lady?” he asked.

If only he knew how lost. She fought her instinctive fear of strangers. “I was told I might find Luke Ryan in the barn office.”

“You might,” he drawled. “Good a place as any. Follow me. I’m Pete.”

“Amber.”

When they reached the barn, Amber saw that most of the thirty or more stalls stood empty. Sunshine streamed through the high windows. The snort of a horse echoed through the wood structure. Somewhere at the other end of the barn, a radio was tuned to a Mexican station playing a Texas-Mexican quickstep.

Pete led her to an office in the middle of the barn. “Here we are.”

A nameplate on the desk read Matt Ryan in bold letters. “I’m looking for Luke Ryan.”

Pete poured the dregs of coffee from a glass decanter into a mug and handed it to her. “I’ll git Luke for you.” He pointed to a chair. “Take a load off your feet.”

Amber sat down and took a sip of the coffee. She frowned at the bitterness and pushed it away. She’d rather have a cold glass of water and an aspirin. She drummed her fingers on the desk, then opened her purse and withdrew the help wanted ad for a nanny she’d clipped from the day-before-yesterday’s newspaper. She’d stapled the ad to the sheet of notes from her telephone conversation with her prospective boss. She smoothed the wrinkles from the paper. Mr. Ryan had said to get here as soon as possible for an interview. She had grabbed her already-packed bag and took a bus to the truck stop at the edge of town. Luck was on her side. When she hitched a ride with the first truck heading south, it had been Elmer, and he was going straight to the Bar R. No one could have gotten here faster.

Amber extracted a small mirror from her purse. Using a mini brush, she gave her hair a few strokes. Then, she smeared on some apricot mist lipstick and smudged a little onto her cheeks. God, she still looked awful. What she needed was a complete makeover. Oh well, she wasn’t applying for an office or modeling job. She just needed to look presentable—and reliable.

With no credentials to back her up, she had to rely on her wits. She got up and paced, rubbing her arms. Had she made a mistake coming here? No, it would be all right. What better place to hide?

Outside the door near the stalls, a young couple was arguing. Amber pressed herself close to the door frame and listened. With a razor-sharp tongue, the girl was dressing down the guy about flirting with some gal at a rodeo in Reno. Amber moved closer where she could see them, but they couldn't see her. Maybe she'd hear something to help her ace this interview.

The young man had a thick rope of black hair hanging down his back. He was about nineteen, tall, lean, and had a wild, brooding look. The girl, poured into jeans and a halter top, was about the same age, maybe a little younger. The way she tossed that sexy mane of blonde hair and thrust her breasts about suggested she was used to using her physical attributes to her advantage.

"Y'all know two can play the flirting game, Roberto." The girl's tone twanged with the threat.

"What are you talking about, Suzy?" Roberto eyes flashed, reminding Amber of an Indian brave about to go on the warpath.

Suzy smiled sweetly. "Mando's here. He drove in a couple of hours ago."

"That boozier may be God's gift to the empty-headed *chicas* on the circuit, but you're too smart to fall for a loser like him. Mando showing up is bound to cause trouble on the ranch. He's bad news for Luke."

"Luke?" Suzy arched her eyebrows.

"Yeah, he and Mando were two-fisted drinking buddies when they rode the circuit together. Luke won't be able to stay sober with him around. A hundred bucks sez Luke'll hit the bottle within the week."

Suzy lifted her chin. "I'll take that bet. He didn't topple when Connie Lou died. No ol' drinking buddy will send him over the edge."

"Hate to take money from an innocent young thing." Roberto grinned. "Oh, that's right, there's nothing innocent about you."

Suzy gave him a shove. "Ridin' the rodeo circuit's ruined your manners. Maybe when I win that C-note from you, it'll prove you're not such a hotshot after all."

He laughed. "Last chance to back out. I'll give you fair warning, Luke's been hanging on by a thread."

Amber groaned to herself and moved back into the office. She plunked down in a chair and rubbed her aching head. What next? Her prospective employer had a drinking problem. This wasn't going to work. She got to her feet and headed out of the barn.

She'd only taken a few steps when a lasso came from the front and flipped over her head, knocking off her straw hat and closing tight around her arms. She dropped her suitcase. The latch broke, and her clothes spilled out into the dirt next to her hat.

"What the devil?" she screeched, fighting the taut rope, as well as fear.

Three men blocked her path. They were Pete, the ranch hand who had taken her to the office and given her the bitter, simmered-to-death coffee, and a vaquero who looked like Poncho Villa. She zeroed in on the smirking cowboy at the end of the rope. He was tall and lean with a body sculptured to wear those hip-hugging denim Levi's. He had coal-black hair, and in spite of a faint zigzagging scar on his cheek just below his eye that made him look as dangerous as hell, she determined she wasn't in any real danger. At least not if she discounted that something about him made her heart race like a floor-boarded engine.

"Well, lookie here," the cowboy said. "I'll be damned if I didn't lasso myself a cute li'l heifer."

Under the black Stetson tipped high on his forehead, the cowboy's angular face twisted with a cocky, bad-boy smile. He was in his mid-twenties with a demeanor that screamed strength and reckless arrogance. The flicker of boyishness in his eyes confirmed his intention to have a good time at her expense while showing off for his buddies. Her head throbbed. She didn't need this. "Look, rude dude, don't call me a cow. And get your blasted rope off me."

"Mighty tough talk, sweet thing. But you aren't goin' nowhere until I say so."

Amber glared at the too-full-of-himself cowboy. "Let me loose, or I'll get you fired for sexual harassment."

The vaquero standing next to Rude Dude laughed. "Chihuahua! This one's got a mouth on her."

Rude Dude locked in on Amber's gaze. "Sexual what?" He sauntered toward her like he owned the place, holding the rope tight, keeping her trapped.

Blast him. She'd like to rope him with his own rope and show him how it felt to be vulnerable, degraded. "Does Mr. Ryan know you torment his guests?"

The cowboy's earth-brown eyes clouded. "You a guest, miss?" His voice lost its arrogance. A flush crawled up his neck. "I saw you get out of that semi a while ago and I thought—"

"I don't care what you thought. You shouldn't treat any woman like this."

"You're right. And I'm mighty sorry."

"You ought to be."

He removed his Stetson and raked his unruly hair. He looked contrite, and even better without a hat shading his expression. But dangerous with that scar and those penetrating eyes. It was then that she noticed the slice missing from the top of his right ear. This man had faced trouble. And when she got loose, she'd give him another dose. Was she really so tough? She wished she knew. Going forty-

eight hours without sleep or food, and suffering from an aching head, wasn't all that contributed to her off-balance feelings. It seemed this man's piercing gaze could reach inside, scramble her emotions, and bring out the worst in her.

"I'm trying to apologize," he said, "if you'd kindly simmer down. I'm downright sorry about what just happened here. I didn't mean to lasso you. I was showing Sanchez how I . . ." His voice trailed away in a regretful tone that softened her heart.

"Let me go, and we can forget the whole thing."

He took the lasso from around her, brushing her arm in the process. She flinched from his searing touch. Something deep within told her it was a good thing she wasn't staying on the Bar R, because her mixed emotions about this cowboy meant trouble.

She looked down at her spilled clothing. A bra and a pair of panties peeked out beneath the tangle. Face flaming, she bent to retrieve them. The cowboy squatted to his haunches beside her. Beating her to the draw, he scooped up the undies, along with her other dusty clothes, and stuffed them back inside her suitcase.

"Damn it. You're not helping." Amber counted to ten. She couldn't let this man lasso her emotions like one of the cattle.

"I'm trying," he muttered. He picked up her dusty hat, swatted it a couple of times against his powerful-looking thigh, then plunked the misshapen straw hat with the crooked sunflower back onto her head.

She adjusted it. "Well, don't," she said. "You're not good at handling women's things."

All signs of agitation left his face. He laughed and looked up at her with mischief in his eyes. "That's not what most women say, sweet thing."

She glared at him. "I'm not most women, and I'm not a bit interested in what your bimbos say to stroke your overinflated ego."

A masked expression crossed his face. When he stood again, he said, "How about we start again?" His voice deepened. He wiped his hand on his Levi's and extended it to her. "I'm Luke Ryan and—"

"What?" Amber stepped back. "You left me waiting twenty minutes in your office to play with a lasso? If that's how you run your business, Mr. Ryan, I'm glad I decided not to take this job."

He closed his eyes briefly and groaned. "You're Amber Smith?"

She didn't bother to answer. He knew. Awareness was written all over his rugged face.

For some puzzling and unsettling reason beyond the regret she saw in his eyes, and her immediate need for a roof over her head, she was suddenly willing to reconsider the job. But even if she killed

her chances, this cowpoke deserved to be told off. She gestured with her head toward Pete. “Don’t try to say he didn’t tell you I was waiting.”

“Like I said, I didn’t know it was you.” He looked her up and down, then gestured helplessly with his hands. “You said you’d taught kindergarten and worked as a librarian. I was expecting someone more . . . well, plain.”

“Forgive him, miss,” Pete said. “Ever since they opened Lady Liela’s place on the other side of the mountain we’ve had a string of real pretty women coming through, hitching rides with the truckers. And when I saw you get out of the semi—” He cleared his throat. “It’s my fault. I told Luke you might be one of them.”

Amber frowned. It was getting worse by the minute. “You think I look like a hooker?”

“Let’s get off that,” Luke said. “It’s all a stupid mistake. You don’t look like a hooker. You’re pretty, that’s all.”

“Don’t say that again. From you, it sounds like a character assault.”

He settled his Stetson back on his head. “Trading digs will get us nowhere. You came all this way, and I think we can work this out. How about we finish our talk in the office in private?”

“We’re already finished.”

“Come on.” He flashed her an irresistible grin. “Where’s your sense of humor? Haven’t you ever made a mistake—something you wished you could take back?”

If regaining consciousness next to a dead body counted—she’d made a doozy of a mistake. Besides, she *had* come all this way. She should at least check out the job. Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad. The whites around Luke’s intense brown irises weren’t bloodshot, and his tanned skin looked vibrant, healthy. Perhaps he wasn’t an alcoholic. Even if he was, so what? Maybe his boozing could work in her favor. A drunk wouldn’t be sharp, which would make it easier for her to avoid a lot of questions.

* * * *

Luke watched the stiffness roll from Amber’s body. Reading the more-relaxed stance as a yes, he took her by the arm. “Tom, take care of the lady’s bag,” he called out over his shoulder.

Although Amber allowed him to lead her away, she gave a defiant shake of her head that sent her hair swishing across her shoulders. She gave that little shake every time he said something she didn’t like, which was often. The habit riled him. Yet, she intrigued him, and for the life of him, he couldn’t say exactly why. The prickly female had hair the color of blazing amber, all full of gold and red highlights, and a tongue as sharp as a razor. Roping her had been an accident, and he was sorry as hell it had happened, but she had a rotten sense of humor about it. The hooker remarks had only made the situation worse.

When they reached the office, Luke took off his Stetson and tossed it across the room. It hooked over the wooden name plate of Matt Ryan, burying his brother’s symbol of dominion beneath the

cover of suede. Luke motioned to a chair, then sat on the edge of the desk facing Amber. "I've never hired a nanny before," he said. "Need to be sure you're right for the job. Alicia is very precious to me."

Amber jumped to her feet. "I came all this way. I thought this was a done deal, that the interview just a formality."

"You knew we needed to meet first. Besides, you gave the impression a few minutes ago that you weren't sure you wanted the job. Looks like we were both keeping our options open."

Amber glared at him with the greenest eyes he'd ever seen, but she sat back down. He'd bet that if she had other options, she wouldn't have come here to the end of the earth in the first place. And sure as hell wouldn't stay.

"Like I told you on the phone, my three-year-old daughter needs a loving companion, teacher, and playmate."

"Sort of like a mom. I can do that."

The word *mom* shot through Luke like a bullet. His daughter had no mom. He'd tried to be both mother and father to her in the past year and found himself lacking.

From a file folder, Luke pulled the application he'd taken yesterday over the phone.

Amber had sidestepped most of his questions. Now he needed to fill in the blanks. He wanted the best person for the job. The trouble was, only two people had applied. The other woman, Ms. Simms, had backed out when he told her the ranch was five hours from a big city and an hour from the four new establishments that had just opened in Stampede Junction.

"Your teaching and librarian jobs in San Antonio covered only two years. Where did you work before that?"

"Are you the owner of this ranch?" she demanded as though he had to prove his right to ask her questions.

He drummed his fingers on the desk and saw her looking at them as though his impatience told her something. "My brother, Matt, and I are partners."

"Who'll sign my paycheck?"

He frowned at her excessive interest in money. "I will. It's a personal expense."

"This is a big ranch," she said.

"Two thousand plus acres. What's your point?"

"The buildings look well cared for. Cattle look fat, healthy."

Damn it, if she was leading up to asking for more money before she even got started, she could forget it. He handed her a framed picture. "This is my Alicia. You're here to take care of her. And that's it." Only a strong, unexplainable instinct about this woman kept him from sending her back where she had come from.

"Big, blue eyes," Amber said. "She's adorable. Not much family resemblance, is there?"

Luke refused to react. He had a hunch the subtle insult was a distracting tactic to avoid giving facts about herself.

Amber stood and paced, her movements smooth, effortless, like a mountain cat. "You mentioned there'd be some travel with this job. What does that entail?"

"I want to hit the rodeo circuit again, and I need my daughter with me." He needed time away from the ranch—from the memories. He'd start with the upcoming charity event. Then he wanted to go after some big purses—get some cash that had nothing to do with the ranch or his brother—something that would be his very own.

"Separate accommodations?"

He couldn't contain his smile. "Gonna rent a two-bedroom travel trailer. A big, classy one with all the bells and whistles."

Luke groaned. He'd never interviewed anyone before, and Amber was twisting him around her little finger, making him answer all the questions. What was she hiding? Her Levi's and shirt definitely didn't hide her long legs and gorgeous body. She stopped and, facing him, rubbed her arms. Her hard shell crumbled right before him from the outside in, like a human implosion. He had a ridiculous, overwhelming urge to go to her. He gripped the edge of the desk and hung on for dear life. "Back to your work record . . ." He tapped the paper with his pen.

"Look," she said, "I don't have an extensive work history, but I need the job and I'm good with kids. If you give me a chance, you won't be sorry."

The desperation in her voice curled inside him. He knew what it was like to need a chance. If his brother hadn't given him repeated chances, he might still be a drunk instead of a responsible part owner of the Bar R.

He leaned forward, drawn by the feisty woman's vulnerability. Then, it hit him like the impact of a charging Brahma the reason he felt so sympathetic to her, and the reason he wanted to believe in her, was because she reminded him of his brother's wife, Molly, a woman he deeply respected. It wasn't just the red-gold highlights glittering in her hair, and the beguiling heart-shaped face. It was something he couldn't quite put his finger on. Both women were lookers and spunky as hell, but it was more than that. It was an expression on her face—a flicker of something in her green eyes. When he'd met his sister-in-law, she'd had the same wary look. And although Molly had had her secrets when she'd first come to the ranch, it turned out that she was all about everything good and honest. And she was a wonderful mother.

Amber's chin trembled like she might cry. "Look, either hire me or send me away," she said with a tremor in her voice. "I haven't slept for forty-eight hours, and my last meal was a breath mint. I'm losing ground fast."

He was, too, and it had nothing to do with a lack of food or sleep. It was about how she made him feel, how she stirred an urge to help her.

Luke glanced at Amber's pathetic application, then into her hopeful eyes. He sighed. "We'll give it a try for a month, and if we're both happy with the deal, we'll work out something more permanent." He held her gaze, looking for an inner integrity, and wanting to believe he found it.

"Thanks. I promise, I'll take good care of your daughter," she said with a fierceness that twisted his heart.

A hot, reckless emotion he hadn't felt in a long time rose like a Phoenix from the ashes. He extended his hand and said, "Welcome to the Bar R." His heart pounded as he took her small, soft hand in his and shook it. He suddenly felt like he'd leaped off a twenty-five-hundred-pound bull and slipped beneath its hooves. His throat constricted and he had trouble getting his next words out. "I know you'll be a great nanny for my little Alicia." He prayed his instincts about this secretive woman weren't wrong. He was trusting her with the most important person in his life—and his only reason for living.

* * * *

Amber followed Luke up the porch steps and admired the ferns planted in huge ceramic pots.

"We can get some eats fast here at the main house," Luke said as he opened the front door to a foyer that looked like a set for the movie *Giant*. Elegant, impressive. "Kitchen's this way."

He took her arm and escorted her across the shiny, quarry tile floor, allowing only a glimpse of the Spanish-influenced grandeur. Amber stiffened when she heard voices. Luke propelled her through the doorway. Aromas of eggs and bacon filled the air. Her stomach growled—then clenched into a knot. A man and two women sat at the kitchen table like a jury waiting to decide her fate. Fighting an impulse to run, she wiped her damp palms on her Levi's.

Luke placed his hand in the small of her back and urged her forward. He gestured to the man sitting at the head of the table. "Amber, this is my brother, Matt." Matt was tall and dark-haired like Luke, but a few years older and a bit more muscular. Luke winked at the woman sitting next to Matt. "And this lovely redhead, with a fiery temper to match, is Matt's wife, Molly." He met Matt's gaze and gestured with his head to Amber. "Notice any resemblance?"

Matt frowned.

Apparently unruffled by Matt's silence, Luke leaned over and kissed the cheek of a silver-haired woman. "And last but not least," he said, "this is my mom, Virginia. The best cook in the whole state of Texas."

"Hi," Amber said past the constriction in her throat.

Her heartbeat quickened when Luke brushed her arm as he gestured in her direction. “Folks,” he said, “this is Amber Smith, Alicia’s new nanny.”

Surprise widened their eyes. Amber wondered why Luke hadn’t discussed this with his family? Weren’t they as close as they seemed?

Matt wrinkled his brow. His probing gaze reminded Amber of cop’s eyes, so brown, so hard. She shivered. After a tense moment, he smiled. “Welcome to the Bar R.” He stood and extended a hand.

Luke sent him an unreadable look. “I thought we could scare up some breakfast leftovers to hold Amber until she’s had a chance to rest.”

“Of course,” Virginia said, rising. “Are biscuits and scrambled eggs all right, dear?”

Amber’s throat was dry, but somehow she managed to say, “Sounds wonderful.”

“Where are you from?”

Matt’s words hammered out like a cop grilling a suspect. Amber rubbed her aching head. Would her skull split open and pour out all of her secrets? Secrets she had yet to learn? “Would you happen to have an aspirin?” Amber asked Molly.

“Sure thing. That and Virginia’s biscuits and eggs will fix you right up.” Molly handed her a pill and a glass of water.

“Thanks,” Amber murmured, wishing she could disappear.

Matt poured her some coffee. “Where’d you say you’re from?”

The knot in her stomach tightened. “San Antonio,” she said, praying this would be the end of the questions.

“She taught kindergarten there,” Luke said.

He glanced at her with a warm look that made her feel oddly protected. In this family setting, Luke seemed more real, like someone she could count on. But that was ridiculous. She could count only on herself.

“Which school?” Matt asked.

Amber swallowed. “San Antonio Elementary.”

Matt wrinkled his brow.

She hoped there was a school by that name. God, she hadn’t planned this. All she remembered was the bloody body and her need to escape before the cops locked her up for murder, or before the real

murderer, if indeed there was one, came back for her. She grasped her coffee mug with both trembling hands.

Amber felt Molly's gaze on her, studying her like she sensed some mysterious sisterhood between them. "Are you all right?" she asked.

Virginia placed steaming eggs in front of Amber. "Let the girl eat while it's hot," she said. "Biscuits coming right up."

"Yeah. Eat up," Luke said. "After breakfast, I'll take you to my place and get you settled so you can rest." He glanced at Matt. "Amber hasn't slept for forty-eight hours, so ease up, bro."

"Oh?" Matt's eyebrows shot up. "Why's that?"

Luke sent Matt a quelling look, then distracted everyone with a joke one of the vaqueros had told him.

Thank you, God, Amber thought. Huddled in her chair, she sat quietly and , wishing she were invisible, tried to make herself very small.

When Luke finished his joke, Virginia and Molly discussed the new shopping mall in Stampede Junction.

Matt shook his head. "It'll be nice for you gals having shopping so close, but Liela's Passion Palace will be a headache. The place has only been open two weeks, and already Liela's started sending her girls here to solicit our men."

Luke exchanged a look with Amber. She lowered her eyes, still furious that he'd thought she was one of them.

"Let the sheriff worry about it," Virginia said. "What about the charity rodeo for Mother Maria's Orphanage?"

"It'll be at Buck's place," Luke said. "Same as always. Matt and I offered to help set things up."

"Let's make it a family thing," Victoria said. "I can't ride bulls or fix fences, but I can cook for all you hungry workers."

Amber sighed. She already liked Luke's family. Did she have a family somewhere who loved her, missed her? Someone she could love?

"Ever been to a rodeo?" Molly asked.

Not sure, Amber merely shook her head. She wanted to offer to help with the charity event, but helping meant getting involved, and she couldn't risk that. Working for this inquisitive cowboy entailed enough risk.

Chapter Two

In spite of Luke's keen awareness of Amber sitting in the passenger seat next to him, he stiffened as he pulled in front of the house he'd built for Connie Lou and Alicia. He turned off the ignition but didn't move, waiting for the loneliness to hit. He had finished the main level of their two-story home before Connie Lou's death, but afterward, he'd had no heart to complete the upstairs—no heart to even go into the house—but to make Alicia's life as normal as possible, he forced himself. During the day, he hid his pain in hard work, wisecracks, and an arrogant shell. In the evening when Alicia was awake, he was too busy to let the memories get him down. But after he tucked her in for the night, the quiet house closed in on him like a heavy fog, and he fought the mind-shredding torment.

"Will Alicia be here?" Amber asked. Two tiny creases formed at the bridge of her nose, which made her look adorable.

Damn it. He shouldn't be noticing that she was a very attractive young woman. But a man would have to be dead not to notice. When he'd taken her application over the phone, she claimed to be twenty-six. She looked closer to twenty. Was she worried about spending the night here without Alicia as a buffer? He wouldn't have let Connie Lou's family talk him into letting Alicia stay the extra day if he'd known he'd find a nanny this soon. He could pick Alicia up tonight, but it might spoil her fun. "She's with her maternal grandparents," he said, keeping his tone casual. He wasn't crazy about his in-laws because they badmouthed him in front of his daughter. They made it clear in a passel of ways that they hadn't forgiven him for his earlier sins and never would. Still, they had a right to see their grandchild. At least that's what everyone said. "I'll pick her up tomorrow after breakfast."

"Good, I'm eager to meet your daughter."

Amber sounded like she meant it. A good sign. He tapped the steering wheel, still not moving. In the distance, men worked on the split corral fences. He would check the job when he finished here. Sun poured in the open car window and fell on Amber's face, making it appear translucent. She sat stiff as a board. Maybe he should ease any concerns she might have.

"You'll be on your own today to rest and get settled," he said. "After I show you to your room, I'll take off to do some chores, and you'll have the whole place to yourself. I'll come back around dinner time. If you're up, we can eat a bite together. Then I'll head up to the main house. Probably spend the night there."

She exhaled deeply. "Good."

Luke rounded the truck and opened the passenger door. He offered his hand and started at the charge of electricity that passed between them. Amber's face flushed as though she felt it too. He had felt the same awareness when he'd brushed her arm while removing the rope. Luke took a deep breath and stepped back. When he had decided to hire a nanny, he hadn't thought about having a physical attraction to her. If he wanted this arrangement to work, he'd better keep his hands to himself.

Blaring music came from inside his house. Tita must've left the radio on, but it wasn't like her to play it so loud. Sometimes she brought her son, Roberto, along to move furniture so she could clean behind and under everything. That was probably it.

"Who else lives in your house?" Amber's eyes flashed, green as the deepest part of Verde Creek, as she measured him with distrust.

Driving a hand into his hair, he slicked it back from his forehead and sighed. "Just me and Alicia. The head vaquero's wife, Tita, comes a couple of days a week to tidy up. But my daughter and I are pretty much on our own."

At Amber's leery look, Luke added, "This job's all about my daughter—nothing else."

Amber's shoulders relaxed again.

Luke grabbed her suitcase from the bed of the pickup truck where Pete had stowed it. He started to take Amber's arm. Whoa. Not a good idea. The less he touched her the better.

She walked up the steps beside him, looking thoughtful. "Your family seemed surprised you'd hired a nanny. Didn't you tell them?"

"Wanted to get everything set first. Haven't sprung my rodeo circuit plans on them, either." Matt would probably explode when he left him with the full responsibility of the ranch. Luke paused and squeezed his keys so tight they cut into his hand. Matt deserved better, but even if it caused hard feelings, Luke knew he had to do this. Hitting the rodeo circuit would release his building tension and give the temporary escape he needed to get on with his life. Alicia would benefit from the change, too. At least that was what he'd been telling himself. With a nanny, he could keep his daughter with him. She needed at least one parent steadily in her life. And it could be fun for both of them, seeing new people, new places. Although traveling from rodeo to rodeo wasn't an ideal life for a child, with a nanny, she'd do okay. The uprooting would only be for a few months, and releasing his tension would make him a better father.

"Are we going in?"

Amber's words shook him out of his daze. "Sure thing," he said. He hadn't realized he'd stopped and was just staring at the keyhole like an idiot. He unlocked the front door and shoved it wide to allow Amber to enter first.

Whiskey fumes hit him in the face. Impossible. He'd never brought liquor into this house. Never.

Amber frowned and hesitated. He could see her doubt rising again—and almost see the wheels turning in her head, wondering what she'd gotten herself into, maybe regretting she'd taken the job.

"It's okay," he said.

She entered slowly. He followed her through the foyer into the living room. Alcohol fumes grew stronger. An open bottle of Wild Turkey sat on the coffee table. Saliva flowed into his mouth, and

sweat broke out on his forehead. He took a deep breath, drawing the fumes deep into his lungs, remembering too late, that for him. Even the intoxicating fumes could seduce him into hell.

Amber watched him. He felt like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar. The awareness on her face was one hundred percent wrong. "It's not my booze." Fighting the reckless feelings rising in him, Luke turned off the blaring radio and placed Amber's suitcase by the rocking chair. He had to dump the Devil's brew. Fast. "I'll just get rid of this," he said, grabbing the bottle by its neck and bridling his anger at whoever had brought whiskey into his house. "I don't know where it came from."

He met Amber's gaze. Her frown said it all.

Footsteps came from the back of the house. "I brought it," his old friend, Mando, said in a cocky slur, flashing his Ricky Martin grin. He hadn't shaved for several days and wore his trademark tight, black leather chaps over black jeans. "It's fiesta time, amigo."

Even with a buzz on, his Latin friend looked suave as ever. They were both twenty-six, but Mando had always looked a few years older. When they had been in their late teens and early twenties, it was a kick to hit the bars with a chica magnet like Mando. Excitement surged through Luke, followed by apprehension. His friendship with Mando had centered around rodeoing, women, and drinking. They'd never hung out together without booze in the picture.

"What's wrong, amigo, not glad to see me?" Mando asked with a mock sad face.

Luke plunked the bottle back on the coffee table. His sobriety didn't mean he couldn't show some Texas hospitality to an old friend. He slapped Mando on the back. "What a question. Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

"Last-minute decision. Heard about the charity rodeo and figured it'd give me some good press." His eyes swept over Amber. "Carumba! Who is this?"

Amber stepped back.

When Luke introduced them, Mando stepped forward and kissed Amber's hand. "Mucho gusto, Amber," Mando said in a deep voice, exaggerating his Latin accent. He held her hand far too long.

"Nice to meet you, Mando," she said stiffly and yanked her hand away.

Luke bridled his smile. *Good for you*, he thought. It had never bothered him when Mando moved in on other women. But . . . "Hey, pardner, don't hit on Alicia's nanny."

Mando grinned, flashing a gold tooth. "Hey, remember the night we met those gals from Reno? They weren't too friendly at first either, but they got hotter than pistolas once they got to know us."

Amber rubbed her arms, and Luke could guess her thoughts—that booze, plus two roughshod cowboys, equaled trouble. He wouldn't have been surprised if she ran out the front door.

“Look,” she said, “if you’re going to party, I’ll spend the night elsewhere. Maybe your sister-in-law, Molly, could suggest a place.”

“Don’t worry. We’re leaving. You get the place to yourself just like I said. Nothing’s changed.”

She nibbled at her lower lip.

He wanted to touch her, comfort her, but touching her would make things worse. “I promise, it’ll be all right.”

She met his gaze, searched his eyes.

“Come on, I’ll show you to your room.” He was careful not to touch her. He grabbed her suitcase. “Back in a minute, Mando.”

Mando plunked down on the couch, propped his feet up on the coffee table, and took a swig of Wild Turkey. “Too bad you can’t stay for the party, bonita.”

Luke felt his neck muscles bunch up. “Back off, Mando.” Leading Amber into one of the two master bedrooms, Luke said, “This is your room.”

He had decorated it himself, walls and drapes in Tijuana white, everything else in shades of blue. “I hope you like blue.” He placed her suitcase on the cedar chest at the end of the bed.

“It’s my favorite color.” She examined the lock on the door and frowned.

“It’s not a dead bolt,” he said, amused, “but it’s the best lock money can buy. You’ll be safe here.”

Bright spots of color flamed her cheeks. She clutched her purse as though the tight grip gave her comfort. “I’ll hold you to your word.”

She met his gaze with a challenging look and a sexy tilt to her head, which had the sunlight catching fiery lights in her hair.

In his wild teens and early twenties, booze and sex went together. Fumes from the booze seemed to have followed them into the room, or maybe he just imagined it. Heat galloped to his groin. *Oh, hell*, he silently moaned as his Levi’s tightened around the zipper. Standing in a bedroom with Amber felt too damned intimate. Dios, he needed the touch of a woman. Needed it as much as he needed air to breathe. The vibes charging between them told him she was as aware of him as he was of her. He cleared his throat. “There’s a nice view of the mountains from here,” he said, opening a window to ease his closed-in feeling.

Amber glanced out, but held her distance.

“To get your bearings, the main barn is just over that knoll on the other side of that stand of mesquite trees.”

“Oh, yes, the barn,” she said as though it triggered an important thought. She lowered her eyes, then met his gaze. Those green pools sent weird spasms to his gut. “Look, I know it’s none of my business,” she said, “but for your daughter’s sake, I think I should tell you something.”

“What’s that?” His words came out louder and sharper than he’d intended as he fought his desire.

Her eyes widened. She twisted her gold bracelet, emblazoned with the name *Amber* in black letters. “I heard a couple of people talking in the barn—bets went down,” she said with a tremor in her voice.

“Yeah, so? Our vaqueros bet on everything from weather to the exact time a mare will drop a foal. No big deal.”

“The bet was that Mando and you . . .” She closed her eyes a moment. “God, this is so hard . . .” She swallowed, her throat looking smooth, kissable. “That you two would hit the drinking trail again.”

Her words hit him like the kick of a mule. His desire plummeted. The damned busybodies. “Thanks for your concern,” he said, unable to control the hard edge to his tone, “but I’m a grown man, and it’s no one’s business what I do.”

Amber went rigid like he’d slapped her. “You’re right. I’ll make you a deal. From now on I’ll stay out of your business, if you’ll stay out of mine.”

“You got it, as long as your business doesn’t interfere with what’s best for Alicia.” He turned on the heels of his dusty boots and left her standing there looking ashen.

Damn. He felt like a rat. He’d taken his anger out on her. It wasn’t her fault people were betting against him. And it wasn’t the first time. That’s exactly why he needed to get away from the small-town mentality of the ranch for a while. He was sick of people watching, waiting for him to trip and fall. Sick of his fear that, in a weak moment, he just might make them right.

* * * *

Amber locked the door, then for extra protection, shoved the dresser in front of it. She didn’t unpack her suitcase. She intended to keep her options open. Later, she would set the clock for four thirty, just in case.

She wanted a shower desperately, but until she saw how things played out tonight, she wasn’t about to undress. She did a quick wash up and got into bed fully clothed. Her eyes felt gritty, and her lids were heavy, but she couldn’t relax. She lay there rigid, listening.

Mando’s raucous laugh pierced the walls several times, then a door slammed and the house went silent. She heard the truck engine rev to life, then fade. Luke had kept his word and left the house. Slowly, the tension eased from her body, but she still couldn’t sleep. Her mind was too active. She got up and took a shower, letting the warm water soothe her.

Maybe Luke was an all right guy after all. The determination and strength she'd heard in his voice when he'd said the job was all about his daughter and nothing else surprised her. And the way he was with his family was warm and real.

He wasn't the same taunting, arrogant man who had lassoed her. He was caring, complex man fighting the tragedy in his life with both fists. Yes, he had problems, big problems—he'd lost his wife and had a daughter to raise alone. Although it remained to be seen if he had conquered his past drinking demons, she found herself rooting for him to succeed.

Was he off partying with Mando? Or had he gone to do chores like he'd planned? He'd trusted her. She should show him the same respect.

Blast Mando for showing up now. Her heart pounded, reaching out to Luke with every throb. Her arms ached to hug him, to add her strength to his. Good grief, what was she thinking? She couldn't make his fight hers. Her best chance to dig herself out of the murky world of confusion was to keep a low profile until her memory returned.

Amber's stomach churned. How could she remain distant and uninvolved when her instinct to help was so strong? Maybe she should be relieved that she had a soft, helpful heart. It lent support to her constant prayer that she hadn't really killed that man.

Amber stepped from the shower and dried herself briskly. With the men gone, she felt safe enough to put on pajamas. Were they hers? They fit. It was useless to question the small details now. The answers were lost in her brain. Besides, at the moment, her feelings about Luke were more of a priority.

When he'd shown her to her room and asked if she liked blue, the low timbre of his voice had wrapped around her like a caress, thrilling her against her will. Dear God, she was in big trouble. She paced the bedroom trying to douse the flames in her heart. Her attraction to Luke and her urge to help him could be her downfall. Seeing his wounded underbelly had touched her in a way she didn't dare ignore.

* * * *

Luke stared at Matt and Molly. Their serious faces made him wish he hadn't come by their place. Why couldn't they just stay out of his business?

"I took a look at your application on Amber Smith," Matt said. "It says zip. What do you really know about her anyway?"

Knowing, as always, Matt was right, Luke sipped coffee that had turned as bitter as his thoughts. But with his own ego still stinging from hearing he was a joke—a second-in-command boss who people bet against—he refused to admit it out loud. "I know enough about her to suit me, so back off, bro." He'd wanted to tell Matt why he'd hired a nanny and prepare him. But now wasn't the time. Not until Matt accepted Amber as a capable caregiver for Alicia.

"You're turning over the care of my niece to a woman with no credentials?"

“Damn it. Trust my instincts for once. You know I wouldn’t let Amber look after Alicia unless I felt good about her character.”

Molly reached over and touched his hand. “Don’t take this personally, Luke. We care, that’s all. You have to admit you don’t know much about her.”

“I wonder,” Matt drawled, “if you’d be so all-fire protective if she wasn’t a looker?”

“That has nothing to do with it,” Luke said, but he wasn’t so sure her beauty hadn’t worked into the equation. “She’s down on her luck and asked for a chance—promised I wouldn’t be sorry.”

“Come on, Luke. Do you know how lame that sounds? Let me do a little checking. In the meantime, I’ll set up a video camera in your house.”

Luke jumped to his feet, upsetting what was left of his coffee. “Are you crazy? This is a woman who needs a job, not some FBI criminal. You’re retired from the bureau so quit seeing crooks around every corner.”

“You have to do this. If the tape proves she’s a loving nanny we can all relax. If not . . .”

Luke paced the room. “I won’t let you invade her privacy, or my privacy.”

“You can switch the camera off when you’re in the house, and no one has to see the results but you. Just give the taping a couple of days. Alicia’s well-being is worth tromping on Amber’s privacy.”

“I told Amber I’d trust her,” Luke said.

“Your word’s important, but Alicia is more important.”

Matt had used the weapon Luke couldn’t fight. He couldn’t argue against Alicia’s best interests.

“Get Amber out of the house for thirty minutes,” Matt said. “I’ll take it from there.”

Yeah, like always, Luke thought. “Okay, but I sure as hell don’t like it.” God, he had to get away from Matt’s controlling ways, and from everything that reminded him of his loss. If he didn’t get relief, he feared he’d do something reckless, and his thoughtlessness would hurt Alicia and the whole family.

* * * *

Amber snapped wide awake at the sound of Luke’s truck pulling up in front of the house. She threw her legs over the side of the bed. The sun was setting in a last-ditch blaze of coral and gold. She glanced at the clock—6:00 p.m. He’d come back to have dinner with her just as he’d promised, and she wasn’t dressed. Amber shucked out of her pajamas and yanked on her Levi’s. She trembled with a puzzling excitement. *Why?* she wondered as she pulled a sleeveless sweater over her head. Running a comb through her hair, Amber shook off that question as others came to mind. Was he alone? Would he be sober? She pushed the dresser away from the front of the door and headed down the hall.

She'd only seen part of the downstairs, but what she'd seen she'd liked. The house was spacious and well designed, and decorated in classic western with rich mauve and terra cotta tones. The high, gold-inlaid ceilings contributed an elegant touch, yet the placement of the heavy, masculine furniture and oversized pillows around the slatestone fireplace gave the area an intimate, homey feel.

Amber crossed the living room into the foyer as Luke tiptoed in the front door and eased it closed. "Oh, I see you're up," he said, smiling. "Good." He had a picnic basket in his hand. "Mom made us her famous bowl o' red chili and a batch of corn biscuits."

He was alone and clear-eyed. Amber sighed in relief. "It smells wonderful."

"Let's eat outside under the elm trees."

She followed him from the air-conditioned house into the evening heat. He flipped a switch, and a string of colored lanterns blinked on over a picnic table.

"Pests aren't too bad this time of the evening."

"Where's Mando?" she asked.

Luke laughed. "You don't like him much, do you?"

"I take the Fifth," she said, not wanting to slam his friend anymore than she already had.

"He's gone to Stampede Junction with some of the single vaqueros."

Good. She hoped he didn't hurry back. She helped Luke spread the red-checkered cloth on the table and lay out the big bowls and the oversized spoons, while enjoying the sense of unity from working together. "Your house is great," she said. "Congrats to your decorator."

"Why thanks, ma'am. That's me." He beamed. "Did it all, designed it, built it, and decorated it."

"You're kidding?" She couldn't stop her voice from rising in surprise. "A cowboy designer, decorator? I'm impressed."

He laughed. "You shouldn't be. Ranchers who live miles from services learn to do things themselves. Or do without."

"Yeah, but you're good at it all. That's rare, my friend. Very rare."

His eyes twinkled. "Amber, I think I'm going to like having you around. You've salved my bruised ego and made me feel damned good. I needed that. Especially today."

"Glad to be of service," she said. Maybe this job would work out after all. She liked being around him, too. He was much more of a man than she'd first thought. Strong, determined, capable. And gentle in the ways that counted.

As Luke dipped steaming chili from a large-necked thermos into the bowls, he asked, “Of all the ways to travel to the Bar R, how come you came by truck?”

That was a question she should ask herself. Besides the fact she didn’t have any friends to give her a ride, or money to buy a bus ticket, why had she immediately thought of a trucker? She’d felt perfectly natural asking Elmer for a ride, as though she’d done something like it before. Maybe she had a relative who was a trucker, or maybe she’d worked as a waitress in a truck stop. Or maybe she was a trucker. “Not conventional enough transportation for your image of a nanny?”

“Hey, don’t be so touchy. No insult intended. Just trying to get to know you.”

“Okay, then.” How long could she hold off his questions? Amber gestured toward the pasture land in the distance. “What kind of cattle do you raise?”

He met her gaze. “Do you really care?”

She didn’t, but darned if she wanted to admit it. “Is it some kind of cattleman’s secret?”

He laughed. “Hardly. We raise a breed called the Santa Gertrudis—the best stock for this arid climate because they’re unaffected by heat and insects.”

She frowned. Heat and insects. Boy, could she pick a place. “I saw quarter horses in the barn.”

“We have all kinds of livestock, including bulls.”

“Like Fernando, the gentle bull of my childhood?”

“Like a bull named Mankiller.”

A bloody image flashed in Amber’s mind. She rubbed her arms. Was she a mankiller? To push away the recurring and frightening worry, she asked a potentially touchy question that had been eating at her mind. “Do you mind telling me what happened to your wife?”

Luke watched her with a silent intensity that made her squirm. The wind blew her hair about her face, and lashed her body with nerve-frazzling electricity.

She cleared her throat. “I thought if I knew it might help me with Alicia. But if you’d rather not talk about it . . .”

Seconds passed. She wished she hadn’t asked about his wife. She wouldn’t answer his questions, yet here she was asking him something so personal. Finally, he sighed and said, “It was a drunk driver. Horrible irony for an ex-drunk, right?” His hard-edged words were bitter, pained, as though it hurt a thousand times worse than if he’d cut off his arm.

“Oh, Luke, I’m so sorry.”

“Yeah, me too. What makes it worse is my guilt. I can’t count how many times I drove drunk and might have killed someone myself. Only by the grace of God . . .”

Amber closed her eyes. His cold, hard honesty sent a chill skittering across her arms. She closed them across her chest to fight the impact of his words. He'd been selfish and reckless in the past, but she believed his regret was sincere. Her sympathy for him worked against her own interests. But on the plus side, she was learning her own values in small pieces, as though putting together a complicated puzzle.

"I guess I shocked you," he said with incredible sadness.

"We've all done things we wish we could erase." The trouble was, she didn't remember beyond a few days ago, didn't know what sins she might have committed.

"If I could take it all back, I would. But since I can't."

Luke's pain went through Amber like a knife. He may never fully forgive himself for his past—may never find peace and pick up the shattered pieces of his life. It was a shame. He was too young to let his wild teenage years destroy his chance for happiness. Everything in her nature reached out to him, but her own troubles made it unwise to get emotionally involved.

"Now it's your turn," he said. "Anything you'd like to confess?"

He'd been open with her, and she ached to tell him the truth. The truth that she didn't know—that she was walking in a shadowy world with no memory of her past. "I'm afraid my life is too dull for confessions."

He grinned mischievously, looking overwhelmingly male. "Not even that you secretly resent one of your parents, or a sibling?"

She had to tell him something. The simpler the better, she decided. It had to be a story she could remember and not goof up later. "My parents were great," she said, forcing a lightness into her tone, "and I didn't have any brothers or sisters. It's boring, but not all of us can have deep, dark secrets."

"Parents were great—are they deceased?"

It was awful not to know. "Yes," she said softly.

"How did it happen?"

"Look, this is too heavy a subject for dinner conversation. Tell me about Alicia."

"You and my brother have something in common," Luke said. "You both know how to push my Daddy buttons."

Amber heard the disgust in his tone, and she wasn't sure if it was aimed at her or himself. It didn't matter—her diversionary tactic worked. He started talking about Alicia with a warmth that convinced Amber he was a terrific father.

"The first time she called me Daddy," he said, "it really got to me—thought my heart would stop."

Amber smiled. She was lucky to have Luke and his daughter in her life. In that moment, she decided to stay as long as she could. Elmer would have to make the return trip to San Antonio by himself. She wasn't sure how to keep Luke's questions at bay, but she would face them one day at a time—the way he faced his sobriety. She said a silent prayer that her memory would come back soon—she needed to know herself before she could let him, or anyone, into her real life. In the meantime, she had his trust. And although she had to hide things about herself to survive, she wouldn't let him down.

Chapter Three

Amber stopped outside Alicia's bedroom. It adjoined hers, and Luke had said she could go in if she wished. Perhaps she should have waited until Alicia offered to show it to her, but she'd hoped the room would tell her something about the child to make their first meeting go smoother.

Regardless of her good intentions, she felt a small pang of guilt as she eased the door open, followed by a sense of wonder that took her breath away. The enormous bedroom-playroom was an enchanted garden brought indoors. The headboard and foot of the bed were white picket fencing—tops rounded and child-safe. Tossed casually at the head of the bed were two oversized pillows and two small, lacy ones. Nestled in their softness was a Barbie doll in gardening clothes.

For a fleeting moment, a ghastly image popped in Amber's mind of another Barbie doll, naked with the hair mussed and missing a leg. The image was such an appalling contrast to the doll on the bed that she didn't try to hang onto it. Her unnerving phenomenon was followed by the odd sensation of being watched, like the walls had eyes. Good grief, her mind was really doing a number on her. How could she have such disagreeable thoughts in this marvelous fantasyland?

Amber smoothed a wrinkle from the comforter designed with a scattering of pink roses and green vines. She gently touched a child-sized straw hat with a pink ribbon and a velvet bow that hung on the corner end of the bed. The room was perfect from the soft lilac walls to the white horizontal blinds that gently diffused the light beneath flowery valances. Nearby, a chest of drawers was painted green to match the spread and valances. Someone had put a lot of time and imagination into planning this room, someone for whom she felt an instinctive connection.

Luke had said he'd designed the house. Had he designed this room, too? Could that be? Amber laughed softly. If so, he was certainly like no other cowboy she'd ever known—or ever heard of. Of course, she had to admit, with his less than perfect, dark good looks, and the mystifying way he could hold her with a gaze she couldn't escape, he was darned unique anyway.

Amber jumped at the loud coo-coo from a little bird that popped out of the birdhouse-shaped clock on the wall. That's what she got for daydreaming about her employer instead of keeping her mind on his child. The giant numerals on the clock would be perfect to teach Alicia to tell time, Amber mused, pushing Luke to the edges of her mind.

One of the windows had a small wicker planter with living strawberry plants. This was going to be easier than she had thought. The plants could be another teaching prop.

In wonder, Amber circled, trying to see everything at once. Ceramic bunny rabbits and frogs peeked from behind furniture, and mobile butterflies hung from the ceiling. She flicked the switch and the white ceiling fan painted with daisies rotated slowly, its hidden music box playing *Farmer In The Dell*. She chuckled. How delightful.

A narrow, floor-to-ceiling bookcase filled with children's books divided two window seats. She ran her fingers over the bindings. There were all the old favorites from *Little Red Riding Hood* to *Hansel and Gretel*, and some titles that were new to her like *Where The Red Fern Grows*.

She gave the adult-size white wicker rocking chair a push, setting it in motion. A ridiculous stab of envy whipped through Amber. Had she ever had a room as wonderful as this? She doubted many little girls had. For that matter, had she ever had a room of her own of any kind?

Amber hoped the image of the naked and mangled Barbie wasn't a clue to her childhood. She rubbed her head. Whatever her life had been, she was ready to face it. *Dear God, give me a clue to my past.*

Her legs felt a little wobbly. She sank down into the rocker and scanned the rest of the room. Raggedy Ann and Andy dolls dressed in farm clothes occupied two child-size, upholstered chairs. There was a low wooden play table with games and puzzles laid out. Dolls and stuffed toys were everywhere—an elephant, zebra, lion, tiger, lambs, bears, even a camel.

Alicia had no mother, but she certainly had lots of toys. Had Luke bought these to replace what could never be replaced? Amber wondered if her own mother and father were living. Did she have siblings, or was she an only child like Alicia? Amber rose and ambled to a nearby slate board. She picked up a piece of chalk and scribbled her first name and a question mark. Amber, because she'd been wearing a gold bracelet with that name on it when she'd regained consciousness. The question mark belonged to Smith, a name she'd plucked from the air.

She erased the board in two swipes and forced her mind back to the room. It told her as much about Luke as his daughter. He'd spared no expense in decor or toys. The overindulgence of the little girl with a dream room made Amber wonder if he'd provided all these *things* to make up for his emotional absence. Or was it to make up for losing her mother? Besides wondering about his motivation, she'd gotten a couple of unnerving glimpses into her own fears. Still, a few misgivings wouldn't stop her from digging out the truth, whatever it was. One thing was sure, she'd have to proceed with care to protect herself from jail—or an unknown killer.

* * * *

Amber paced the living room, her insides churning like a thrashing machine. Alicia would be here any minute. Would the child like her? Amber rubbed her arms. Did she have any experience with children? Would she know what to do in an emergency?

For the fourth time, she thought she heard Luke's truck engine and raced to the front window, only to be disappointed. She glanced at the grandfather clock in the foyer—it was a quarter to twelve, and Luke had promised to return before noon.

A truck thundered up the road again. She tensed. Then forced herself to count to ten before looking again, hoping this time he'd be there.

Luke climbed from the truck, lifted Alicia out after him, and hoisted her onto his wide shoulders. The child was small for three years old and had delicate features. Her thick, blonde Shirley Temple ringlets bounced about as she threw her head back and laughed in delight as Luke galloped up the stone walkway. Luke bent his knees and crouched low as they came through the entry doorway to leave sufficient inches above the child's head.

“Amber,” he said in a booming voice. “Meet Alicia.” He bent and dumped the child on the couch. When she scampered to her feet, he grabbed her by the hands and danced her across the cushions. After seeing the child’s room and her bud-like lips, Amber thought Rosebud would have been a better name to go with the garden theme.

“Hi, Alicia,” Amber said past the constriction in her throat. “Pleased to meet you.”

Luke released the child and she jumped to the floor and stuck out a tiny hand. “Pleased to meet you,” Alicia mimicked, flashing deep dimples.

Surprised at the child’s remarkable manners, Amber met Luke’s gaze. His eyes were earth brown, velvety, and warm as melted chocolate.

“We’ve been practicing,” he said, grinning with pride.

Amber squatted down and shook the baby-soft, chubby little hand. She wanted to hug the child, but feared it might frighten her. “I didn’t expect such a big, grown-up girl.”

“I’m not too big for cookies.” Alicia’s spunky little voice touched Amber to her soul.

Amber laughed. Luke must have bribed Alicia with cookies. “Well, that works out perfectly. I just finished taking a sheet of peanut butter cookies out of the oven for your homecoming.” She braved taking the child’s hand, and when Alicia looked up at her with such trust, she could barely breathe.

“You ladies get acquainted,” Luke said. “I’ll be back in an hour or two. I have to meet with the vet.” He blew Alicia a kiss. “Be a good girl and I’ll give you a ride on Sleepy when I get back. One of the old mares,” he told Amber.

Her mouth went dry. “Wouldn’t you like some lunch or cookies first?” *Don’t leave me alone so soon.*

Luke winked. “You’ll do fine,” he said, and headed out the door.

She hoped so. The importance of the job hit her; she was here to mold, shape, and influence this wonderful child’s life. She hadn’t thought about that until now. She’d only worried about herself and escaping the trouble she’d left behind in San Antonio. An image of the man lying dead on the floor in a pool of blood, along with the ridiculous sensation of being watched, sent a shiver down her back.

* * * *

It was past midnight. Everyone was in bed when Luke retreated to the library to watch the video tapes of Amber and his daughter. In his heart, he knew nothing negative would show up, but to appease Matt, he’d agreed to review the film right away. He started with the video from the kitchen camera and was immediately torn between guilt and fascination.

Amber transferred cookies from the cookie sheet to a paper towel with a spatula, all the while talking to Alicia, drawing her out, and responding to her answers with laughter. Amber eyes glowed, and the sense of wonder in her voice convinced Luke that she was enjoying herself as much as Alicia

was. Luke scooted his chair closer to the screen, captivated by Amber's animated expressions and the gentleness in her voice.

Suddenly, Alicia bounded out of the chair and was back in seconds with her Barbie doll and a stack of Pokemon cards. She handed the doll to Amber. Amber straightened the doll's straw hat with long, graceful fingers. "I saw a book about gardening in your bookcase."

Alicia clapped her hands in delight. "Daddy just bought it for me."

Amber beamed. "Let's read it. I'll help you learn to read the words so we can act out parts of the story together like actors do on the stage."

Alicia nodded enthusiastically, but looked a little puzzled.

"After we learn our parts, we could act them out for your daddy."

"He's pretty busy."

Luke winced at the sadness that had crept into his daughter's voice. Amber gave her a little hug and said, "Well, we'll work it out. What else do you like to do?"

"Best is when my daddy rides horses with me. But he hardly ever has the time."

Alicia had said he was busy twice. *Damn. What a lunkhead I am.* He'd been selfish, driving himself hard all day to block his own pain and forgetting hers.

"Sometimes daddies have to work a lot to take care of their little girls," Amber said.

A knot formed in Luke's stomach. It felt odd to hear Amber defending him to his own child. Did he need defending?

Before he could think any more about it, Amber added in a determined voice, "But maybe that'll change soon."

It was as though she'd read his mind. After hearing Alicia's wistful tone, he would make it a point to spend more time with her, starting tomorrow.

Luke jumped at a sound outside the door. He stopped the video and looked. It was just his dog. "Come on in, Perro."

Luke eased back down in his brown naugahyde recliner and flipped the video back on. When his Australian Shepherd looked up at him expectantly, he scratched his ears. "I'm glad it was only you, boy." A stab of guilt pierced Luke's gut. He was spying on this wonderful woman like she was a criminal, and if she caught him, there would be hell to pay.

His attention was yanked back to the video screen by Amber's soft voice speaking to Alicia. "What are these cards?" she asked, looking through them.

“Pokemon cards,” Alicia said in her very grown-up little voice. She handed the instructions to Amber and crawled onto her lap. “Wanta play?”

“Love to,” Amber said, sounding like she meant it.

Alicia twisted her tiny body and reached up to pat Amber’s cheek. “You’re nice.”

Amber’s eyes shimmered with moisture and Luke felt something inside him go all mushy at her show of emotion. “You’re nice, too, Rosebud.”

Alicia laughed. “I’m not Rosebud, you’re Rosebud.”

Amber tickled Alicia, then gently tapped her lips. “With these rosebud lips, you are definitely my little Rosebud. Now, hold still a minute while I read these Pokemon directions.”

After she finished reading them out loud, they began to play, heads close together, both of them laughing as though they had known each other forever. Amber knew how to draw his daughter out and bring smiles to a sweet little face that many times was far too somber for a child.

Luke’s heart thudded hard against his chest. Amber was moving into his world fast, maybe too fast, shaking the very foundations of his old world and restoring those crumbling walls with something ethereal, invasive, frightening. The irony was, instead of learning about Amber’s shortcomings, he was learning about his own. Just as disturbing was a sneaking awareness—he could easily fall in love with his child’s nanny. Damn. He couldn’t let that happen. It was too soon after Connie Lou’s death—downright unfaithful to even think of loving another woman. Besides, getting emotionally involved would mess up his rodeo plans and complicate his life.

* * * *

The slam of the front door jolted Amber awake. She glanced at the bright red numerals on the clock—4:00 a.m. Blast Luke. Did he have to make so darned much noise? Groggy, she turned over and went back to sleep. When the alarm sounded at 7:00 a.m., she bounded out of bed and found a note under her door from Luke. It read: *Make up a picnic basket for three. Have yourself and Alicia ready by 8:00 a.m.* The tyrannical tone of his note surprised her. He could have at least said please.

It took some doing, but she made the deadline. When Luke drove up, she and Alicia were dressed and waiting on the porch.

Luke’s inky hair curled unevenly at his collar. He wore his trademark hip-hugging jeans and a fresh, long-sleeved red shirt, rolled high on muscled forearms. Amber forced her words from her tight throat. “Where are we going?”

He lifted Alicia high in the air and swung her around. “Does it matter? I’m spending the whole day with my best girl.”

Amber watched Alicia’s face light up like sunshine and decided he was right. It didn’t matter where they went.

When they arrived at the main barn and Luke brought out three saddled quarter horses, suddenly what really mattered was not where they were going, but how they were getting there.

“Meet our transportation.” Luke’s voice deepened to a resonant bass. “Rocket, Firebrand, and Sleepy.”

Sleepy was Alicia’s horse. Dear, God, that meant she got Rocket or Firebrand. She swallowed. “Don’t you have a horse named Gentle Lady for me?”

He laughed. “You’ll love Firebrand. She knows just what to do with a new rider.”

Amber groaned. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

“Don’t be ’fraid, Amber,” Alicia said. Then she grinned, showing mischievous dimples.

“She don’ buck much anymore.”

“Oh, you little tease,” Luke said, but he looked proud as a bull rider who’d stayed on for the count.

Amber eyed the horse nervously and cleared her throat. “Like her father, Alicia is a razz master.”

“Li’l chip off the old block.” Luke dropped the tangle of reins to the ground and grabbed Sleepy by the bridle. “But we’d better quit kidding, Rosebud,” he told Alicia. “Don’t want to scare Amber away.”

Both Amber and Alicia laughed. “Rosebud?” they said in unison.

Luke’s tanned faced darkened, but he said nothing. Amber frowned. It was as though he had heard their earlier conversations. But that couldn’t be.

He drew Sleepy close and swung Alicia onto the horse as though the child were a feather.

His gaze raking over Amber made her feel vulnerable. He stroked the mane of the sand-colored horse, Firebrand, without releasing Amber from his piercing look. “Okay, your turn,” he said, making it sound like a dare.

She forced a smile and nodded without going any closer. Her heart raced. The horse looked big. Really big. “I don’t know how to ride.” At least she didn’t think she did.

Luke brought Firebrand to her. “All you need is a few basics. If Alicia can do it—”

Oh great, he was using the old if-a-child-could-do-it rationale. “Alicia was born on a ranch,” she reminded him. “Probably cut her teeth on horseshoes.”

He laughed. “Don’t worry. I’ll be here with you. Put your left foot in the stirrup. Here, let me help you.”

As he touched her thighs to boost her onto the horse, the heat of his fingers burned through the heavy material of her jeans, causing a hot tremor to shoot through her. Why was her body so sensitive to his touch? Fear of the horse and an embarrassing desire for her employer battled within Amber, setting her cheeks on fire.

“Grab the saddle horn,” he said, “lean forward and throw your right leg over.”

She took a deep breath, and did as he instructed. To her surprise, she slid with ease into the saddle. Her fleeting satisfaction disappeared when she looked down. It was a long way to the ground. She clenched the horn tighter.

Alicia laughed in delight. “You did it!”

Amber smiled for the child’s sake. “Yeah, piece of cake.”

Alicia wrinkled her brow. “Cake? You’re funny.”

Luke rattled on, saying something about sitting up straight and slipping the reins through two fingers—then everything faded, leaving only the hum of his voice and his earth brown eyes staring up into hers.

Luke adjusted the stirrups. “Firebrand’s a good-natured horse.” He patted the horse on its rump and handed Amber the reins. “You two should get along like two peas in a pod.”

Firebrand sidled in a shift of weight. Amber sent Luke a doubtful glance. “Of course we will,” she said, not bothering to hide the sarcasm in her voice.

Luke swung smoothly onto Rocket. The way he slid his lean hips into the saddle sent a ridiculous surge of desire cutting through her fear. Good, Lord. Surely her hormones were out of balance or something. She forced her gaze to Rocket. Along with a picnic basket, a rifle was lashed to the animal’s rump. Her gaze darted to back Luke. “Expecting trouble?”

He shook his head, the brim of his Stetson shading his eyes. “Naw, but preparedness is part of ranch life.” He urged Rocket ahead, and Firebrand and Sleepy followed. “Don’t dig your heels into the horse’s flanks unless you want him to take off in a fast gallop.”

A fast start was the last thing she wanted. “Thanks for the tip,” she said, determined not to make any rash moves.

Luke moved expertly with his horse, his tight butt riding the saddle leather in a slow, even rhythm. Amber’s heart pounded, and she lifted her gaze. He settled his Stetson high on his head, and sunlight glistened on a strand of inky hair that had fallen to his forehead. His expression was very intense, very male. He looked all cowboy and too ruggedly handsome for his own good—more honestly, for her own good. He was a little rough around the edges, but she had to admit that he was one handsome dude. Darn. She didn’t want to have these feelings about her employer—a man who had too many problems of his own. She took a deep breath, taking in smells of earth and animals. Wind whipped her hair, the static electricity rubbing her nerves raw.

Alicia waved her straw hat like a cowgirl riding a bull. “Go faster, Daddy.”

Amber wanted to scream no, but remained silent.

“On the way back we’ll go a little faster,” he said, “but let’s give Amber a chance to enjoy the sights. She hasn’t seen the ranch, and we want her to get acquainted with it, right, Rosebud?”

Thank you. Amber was so grateful to Luke for sidestepping Alicia’s request that she barely noticed he’d used her special nickname for Alicia again. She shouldn’t be surprised that they’d come up with the same nickname. The child’s garden bedroom and her cute, little rosebud lips had inspired Amber to coin the name, and Luke could’ve been inspired the same way. At least that’s what she tried to tell herself.

Their three horses ambled side by side in an easy gait as they followed the fence line past grazing cattle. Grinning and looking relaxed and happy, Luke began to sing “Home On The Range.” Alicia began to sing, too, her soft, little-girl tone barely audible under Luke’s strong, manly voice. Amber laughed and joined them on the second chorus, her heart bursting with the joy of sharing this moment with a father and daughter who obviously loved each other very much.

The arid ranch looked better and better to Amber. Now she could see that the land sprouted with life. Blades of thin, brown bluestem and the state grass, sideoats grama, stretched across the sandy pastures. Mesquite thickets twisted in tangled patches. The flat ranch land and distant purple mountains felt like a buffer to the world she’d left behind. If only she could remember what had happened so she could face the trouble and find her niche somewhere. Even here.

The hot wind whistled a warning refrain. *Don’t get too settled here—this job is temporary.* On a slight rise in the land, a cluster of windmills beat the air with cautious wings. *Go slow, keep your options open,* they told her.

She swallowed to moisten her dry throat. “Why all the windmills?”

She had addressed her question to Luke and was surprised when Alicia giggled and said, “Windmills pump water for cattle, silly.”

Luke beamed. “That’s my girl. She’s already knows more about ranching than new-hire tenderfoots.”

Amber couldn’t help but smile at the pride in his voice. He slowed Rocket, and Firebrand and Sleepy moved up parallel to the stallion. They rode close to a chain of rocky hills.

He pointed at an opening in a cluster of boulders. “That’s *Eterno* Cave.”

Amber shaded her eyes from the sun. “Endless Cave.”

“You speak Spanish?”

“A few words,” she said, instinctively knowing it was more but not sure of her level of proficiency.

"I want Alicia to learn to speak Spanish fluently. She has a good start. Her maternal step-granddad is Mexican and speaks Spanish to her when she visits him. And the other vaqueros are teaching her, too."

"If you let me order some language tapes and preschool flash cards, Alicia and I can learn together." She grinned. "Maybe some French, too."

Luke laughed. "That's what I always wanted, my li'l Texas princess spouting French in her sweet li'l Texas drawl."

"Can we go to the cave today, Daddy?" Alicia asked.

"We'll see." He used the words daddies everywhere employed to pacify a child in hope their offspring would forget. Amber doubted it would work with Alicia.

Amber cast sideways glances at Luke when he wasn't looking. As much as she tried, she couldn't deny that his daddy image fascinated her as much as his hard edge. She had been concentrating on him so intently she wasn't aware when the terrain changed to rougher, more desolate land. Her arms prickled. "People ever get lost out here?"

"It can happen, especially if they go into the endless cave."

"So, what's the story about that place?" she asked, sensing there was one.

He laughed. Then his voice took on a deep, mysterious tone. "Well, many years ago a señora with dark, flashing eyes and a handsome vaquero, not her husband, went into the cave to seek shelter from a blasting windstorm. It was all very innocent. But when her husband came looking for his wife and found the couple's horses outside, he assumed the worst and rolled a boulder into the mouth of the cave, sealing their fate. While the couple waited to die, they sought comfort in one another's arms and fell deeply in love."

Amber glanced at Alicia. The child's eyes were wide and her gaze riveted on her daddy. Luke winked and eased his horse closer to Amber. Why did he have to ride so close? It made her acutely aware of the smooth rhythm of his body riding easily in the saddle—acutely aware of her own desire.

"Is that it?" Amber asked, trying to rein in her emotions.

"It's only the beginning," Luke said. "Many moons later, when ranch hands removed the boulder, they found the lover's skeletons in such a tight embrace that they had calcified into one. The men removed the bones, but the couple's spirits stayed behind, and to this day, they wander the winding tunnels, hand in hand. Sometimes, their ghostly figures float about the entrance, trying to seduce visitors inside, but if anyone dares to venture into the bowels of the cave, they are never heard of again."

"Remind me to stay away from that place," Amber said. *And to keep my distance from you.*

"It'll be okay, Amber. Daddy will protect you."

Amber smiled at Alicia's faith in her daddy. She hoped he never disappointed his daughter. Amber closed her eyes, trying to block the frightening and overwhelming urge to finish her thought—*or disappoint me either.*

Chapter Four

Luke reined Rocket to a stop at Lustre plateau. Purple rocky hills reached high into the clouds against a sky of azure blue. Below stood a grove of trees. Luke crossed himself. His mother had raised him a Catholic, but he had strayed from the church when he hit his teens. Still, he always felt close to God here.

Amber bowed her head as though saying a prayer of her own. When she looked up, she murmured, "This place takes my breath away."

Luke nodded, unable to find the words to express the fullness in his own heart. Besides, humor and arrogance had always worked as a shield, and why mess with success? He lowered his voice so Alicia wouldn't hear. "Thought it might take a hot kiss to do that."

Amber darted a sharp sideways glance at him, but her voice came out even when she asked, "Aren't those mesquite trees?" Pods dripped from the branches and fallen husks encircled the base like prickly brown grass.

"Yep. Also called honey locust." Being from San Antonio she shouldn't have to ask—another distracting tactic. Luke grinned and raised a suggestive eyebrow. "They're as fertile as a vaquero after a month on the range." The minute the words left his mouth, he wanted to jerk them back. He'd spoken too loud and—

"Daddy, what's fur'l?"

Luke groaned. "When big trees have lots of seeds to make baby trees."

"Did I come from a seed?" Alicia's sly little grin told him that, although she was too young and innocent to understand what she'd said to make him squirm, she knew something had.

He cleared his throat. "That's one way of looking at it."

Alicia giggled. "Was it a big, big, strong seed, or an itty-bitty seed?"

"Strong and beautiful, just like you, Rosebud."

Amber didn't cover her mouth quickly enough to hide her smile. He met her gaze. The stillness of the moment thundered at his senses, the quiet broken only by the stomping hooves of their restless horses. He couldn't stop looking at Amber. Her hair, a tumble of amber waves, caught glints of sunlight and cascaded about her shoulders.

"What are we waitin' for?" Alicia asked in an impatient tone.

"Just admiring the scenery, Rosebud," Luke said.

Forcing his gaze from Amber, he took a deep, fortifying breath, and took the lead as he reined his stallion to the path that led down a slope. His tension eased as the distance grew wider between

himself and this woman he found dangerously attractive. Her sigh suggested she, too, was relieved to have a little distance between them.

He rode toward a shady cluster of old pecans and oaks. Their deeply furrowed layers of bark captured the shadows of the leafy branches. Luke reined Rocket to a stop by the green waters that spilled over boulders in mini waterfalls.

When Amber and Alicia caught up, he pointed to a grassy clearing next to Verde Creek. “Anyone hungry? This’s the best spot for lunch.”

Getting no argument, he dismounted. His saddle groaned with his shift of weight. Luke swept Alicia from Sleepy and then turned to assist Amber. He steeled himself against desire as he grasped her waist and swung her to the ground.

As though unaware of his hands on her, Amber said, “Listen to the mockingbird, Alicia. I’ll bet it doesn’t have a birdhouse as nice as the one in your room.”

Amber was doing what he should be doing—ignoring the attraction between them.

“Daddy, will you build a birdhouse for the mockingbird?”

“I’ll give it some thought.” Luke darted another look at Amber. “See what you got me into?”

“It might be fun. We can all help.”

“With two expert carpenters like you ladies, how could I refuse?” He didn’t try to hide his sarcasm.

Amber smiled sweetly at Alicia. “Looks like we roped your daddy in.”

Luke shook his head, and then laughed thinking of how he’d roped Amber. He’d like to believe this was payback, but he had a hunch she wouldn’t let him get off that easily. He tied their horses’ reins to a contorted oak branch and snatched a rolled navy blue blanket from the back of his saddle. Amber and Alicia helped him spread the cover under the tree, each laughing as the wind grabbed a corner from their hands. It was heartwarming to hear Alicia laugh so freely, and stirring to hear a woman’s laugh again. He hadn’t realized how much he’d missed having a woman around. He placed the basket on the edge to hold it in place and dropped to his knees. Amber positioned herself at the farthest corner of the blanket, looking as stiff and prim as an old-time schoolmarm. She returned his stare with a questioning look.

Finally, she arched a brow and said, “Are you guarding that basket? Or would you like to pass it over here and I’ll spread out lunch.”

When their hands brushed, Amber gasped at the crack of static electricity. He smiled at the sizzle between them. Rather than sharing his amusement, Amber looked like a colt about to bolt.

“Relax, Amber. A little electricity never killed anyone.”

Debate glinted in her eyes, but she held back. With trembling hands, Amber laid out the thermos, apples, peanut butter cookies, and sandwiches she'd made. Unwrapping a sandwich, Luke wondered what she'd chosen from his well-stocked refrigerator. The aroma of mesquite-grilled barbecued beef and onions wafted in the air.

"Ah, you found the carne asada." He'd brought a big plate home from Matt's house.

"Is it okay?"

He winked. "Couldn't be better."

Amber prepared a plate for Alicia before she made her own. They chattered about their favorite picnic foods, and Amber promised next time she'd include the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches Alicia preferred.

To make Alicia and Amber laugh, Luke shared stories about some of the weird concoctions he and his brothers used to whip up, but he wasn't thinking about talk, food, or laughter. A leaf fluttered from the oak and caught in Amber's hair. He wanted to brush it away—wanted to tangle his hands in that thick mane of hers and kiss her breathless. Damn. She was his daughter's nanny. He had to keep reminding himself.

"You and Alicia seem to have hit it off. She's happier than she's been in a long time."

"Me, too. I never expected to have so much fun."

He laughed. "It's never boring, is it?"

The harmony between them was important to him on more levels than he cared to examine. If he didn't want to lose this nanny who seemed to have a natural way with Alicia, he'd have to keep a professional relationship and resist the vibes surging between them.

"Do you have some kind of special degree in child care that you failed to tell me about? Or is it that you came from a family full of kids?" The mystery about Amber kept him off balance. Who was he kidding? Everything about her kept him off balance.

Her laughter tinkled like wind chimes. "Not really. Guess I'm part kid myself."

She looked down at her plate. He saw a tremor go through her. She had to be feeling the all-consuming tension between. He couldn't feel the force so strongly if it were one sided. And if it wasn't one-sided, she was putting up one hell of a fight. For all their sakes, he had to do likewise.

He forced his gaze from Amber and watched the breeze ripple the meandering, silvery-green creek. The restful gurgling of water did nothing to soothe his inner turmoil. He wanted Amber more than he'd ever wanted any woman.

When they finished eating, Alicia laid her head in Amber's lap and fell asleep. Amber stroked the child's back with a gentle, mothering touch. He'd done the right thing when he hired her. She truly cared for his child.

Several heartbeats of silence passed. He ached to hold her. Wrong as it was, he couldn't block his desire.

Amber looked up and caught him staring at her. "What?"

He shook his head, and as a cover, repeated himself. "You're incredible with Alicia."

"She's a great kid." The softness in Amber's voice touched him plumb to his soul. "And you're a great father, Luke Ryan."

God, she was making this difficult. He wanted to hug her so damned bad. "I try. It isn't always easy." He didn't want to talk about himself, but so far, he'd failed in all his efforts to draw Amber out. Maybe if he revealed a few skeletons in his closet. "I used to be an unbroken stallion, wild as they come. Thought of myself as a ladies' man."

Amber laughed. "I think I heard about that side of you, and believe me, it's not nearly as charming as the daddy side of you."

"Thanks, I think." He'd made her laugh again. That was a start.

"From what Mando said, it sounded like you guys were two-fisted drinkers."

"Can't deny it." Luke swallowed. The drinking part rubbed him like a burr under the saddle. "I used to choose the messy route, drifting through life with no real goals, falling into barroom brawls and unfit relationships. I played life like a crap game and risked it all."

"What changed?"

Images of Parker's bloody body lying in the dirt hit him like the kick of a bull. Luke's throat constricted. Heat rushed to his face. Damn. He'd thought it would be easier to talk about this. It was a moment before he could speak.

"Some lowlife murdering my big brother had a lot to do with it." He winced at the huskiness in his voice. "Parker and I were both drunk as skunks when it happened. Reckon losing him made me see that he and I were just marking time, not building anything. Contrary to what some say about the middle siblings, Matt was the responsible one. Suddenly I wanted to be just like him."

"I'm sorry about Parker," Amber said softly.

"Yeah, well, it's been a tough three years." His brother, his wife, and six months ago, his dad had died of a heart attack.

Amber touched his hand. "I heard about the others. All that loss must've been hard on Alicia, too. She needs you now more than ever."

He took a fortifying breath. "I know. But sometimes I feel I'm not up to the job."

“From what I’ve seen, I’d say you’re doing fine.”

Hypnotized by her gentle, comforting words, Luke moved closer to Amber. He caught her fragrance—the scent of ginger blossoms stirred by a hot afternoon breeze. The muscles at the back of his neck tightened. Lordy, how he wanted to hold her. . . . No. He had to forget that!

Luke squared his shoulders. Damn it, he’d bared his secrets. Now he wanted to hear hers. “What made you answer my ad? You strike me as a woman with many talents.”

She toyed with a blade of grass. “I’d never lived on a ranch. Thought it would be a healthy change.”

He didn’t buy it for a minute. He’d bet limited options were part of it. Her evasiveness rubbed Luke’s nerve-endings, made him edgy. But he couldn’t lay all the blame on her for his edginess. The damn incessant hot wind, the loneliness, and the constant strain from battling his reckless impulses got to him. He still walked a mighty narrow rail, afraid his old destructive ways and inner wildness would burst loose like a herd of wild horses. But Amber wasn’t helping one damned bit with her secretive behavior!

His throat felt as dry as sun-scorched hay. “What did your family and friends say when you just picked up and left?” he asked, approaching the subject from another direction.

Amber moistened her lips. They parted slightly, beckoning to him with their natural pinkness and delicately sculpted shape. He fought a reckless urge to kiss her.

Her look intensified and hummed with so much sexual energy that he barely remembered his own question when she finally said, “I’ve been on my own for a while. No one knows I’m here.” The finality in her tone declared clearly that she wanted to keep it that way.

He was getting nowhere. “I’ve told you some private stuff about me over the last couple of days, and I’d like to think that means we’re friends.”

“We are,” she said, snapping the words out as if she regretted the truth behind them.

“Then how about opening up a little?” He was taken off guard by the bedroom-huskiess of his voice. He sounded like he was trying to seduce her, rather than just get a blasted straight answer.

“In a very short time, I’ve grown fond of you and Alicia. But I’m an extremely private person, and you’ll have to respect my limits.” Her chin surged up as she drew her protective veneer around herself and slammed her emotional door in his face.

“Damn it. What are you hiding?” Luke wanted to shake Amber almost as much as he wanted to gather her in his arms.

A swift flush rose in her cheeks, and she nailed him with a searing look that could have branded a steer. “If you brought me out here just to grill me, forget it.”

Alicia sat up, rubbing her eyes. “What’s wrong, Daddy? Are you mad at Amber?”

“No, honey. I’m mad at myself.” He’d tried to take the bit in his teeth and forge ahead, and it hadn’t worked. But this sure as hell wasn’t the end of it.

Abruptly, Amber stood and walked toward the horses. Her slim body, softened by gentle curves, moved as fluidly as the flow of Verde Creek. Anger rushed out of Luke like a burst dam, leaving in its place a longing just as volatile.

For Alicia’s sake, he tried to smooth things over. The results rolled out unsuccessful. Although Amber put up a friendly front for her charge, the ride back to the ranch was mostly silent, and filled with tension. Even Alicia was upset. She wanted to go to Eterno Cave, but he knew Amber wasn’t in the right frame of mind to explore the inside of a mountain. Saying no to Alicia was something he seldom did, and disappointing her knotted his stomach.

Later that night, as he tossed and turned in bed, he wondered how a day that had started out so well had ended with disappointment all around.

* * * *

Amber couldn’t sleep. She threw off the light sheet and went to the window, rubbing her arms as she stared out into the darkness. It would be impossible to avoid Luke’s questions forever. If only she could remember what had caused her amnesia. Maybe if she analyzed the events of that horrible night step by step . . . Amber closed her eyes. Dear God, she couldn’t move beyond the image of the man’s bloody body lying there next to her.

He was a big guy, silver-haired, and dressed in a gray Armani suit. Blood stained the front of his white shirt. He’d been shot in the chest. Probably by the .38 she had discovered clasped in her hand. She had searched frantically for a pulse and found none. Blood splattered her tailored, camel-colored dress. The name Amber was engraved on the gold bracelet she wore. Desperate for clues about who she was and what had happened, she checked the two suitcases by the door. One was full of women’s clothing, probably hers.

Sirens wailed. Tires screeched. She glanced over the terrace railing. Police charged into her high-rise. She grabbed the suitcase and the gun, and ran for the fire exit.

Shock and a sense of danger beyond her fear of the police had driven her irrational actions. The next morning, she had looked for headlines on the murder and found none. She didn’t know what was going on, or who she was, but she knew she was in big trouble. She had checked the classified ads for any job that would take her out of town.

Coming here had brought new problems. If she had thought her predicament through, she might have stayed and sought help from a doctor and a good attorney. However, in her confused state, she had allowed adrenaline, instinct, and fear to spur her to run. Now she had to face the consequences. She was probably a suspect in a murder. To make things more complicated, she had fallen for her employer and his child, and the closer she got to them, the more he pressured her for personal information. She yearned to tell him the truth, wished she trusted him that much, but he would likely call the police. Besides, he had enough problems of his own without having to deal with hers.

Amber clasped her hands, prayer-like. *Please, Lord, help me find my way out of this. I don’t want to run again.*

* * * *

Before sun up, Luke slipped into his daughter's bedroom. Moonlight streamed through the window, bathing Alicia in a shimmery glow. She looked like an angel. He kissed his finger and lightly touched it to the widow's peak on her forehead. "Daddy loves you, Rosebud," he whispered.

He ached to pick her up, to cradle her close, to breathe in her little girl scent. Instead, he tiptoed out of the house and headed for his brother's place.

As though waiting for him, Matt was on the porch drinking coffee in the growing darkness. Luke searched his mind for the right words to tell Matt his plans. He wiped his sweaty palms on his Levi's. Maybe he shouldn't jump right into it. Timing was everything. Best to start with ranch business.

"Mornin', bro," he said. "I'm on my way to Dodson." They had already discussed the cattle auction and agreed that he would go as high as a hundred fifty thousand for a breeding bull with prime lineage.

Matt took a gulp of coffee. "You taking the Cessna?"

"The chopper. Luis is using the Cessna to drop fencing in the west sector."

Matt went silent and rubbed his jaw as if something mighty serious was on his mind. Luke frowned. Could Matt already know about his plans to spend some time away from the ranch? "Something bothering you, bro?"

"Someone murdered Elmer."

"What?" Luke recoiled as though a mule had kicked him in the gut. "Who would kill Elmer?" Everyone liked the gentle giant trucker.

Matt shook his head. "The murderer was after information. Elmer was tortured."

"Tortured? Good God! How could that be? Elmer was a trucker, not an international spy."

"San Antonio police said the attacker repeatedly jabbed a razor blade under Elmer's finger and toe nails. You can bet whatever information he had, the murderer has it now."

Luke winced, imagining Elmer's suffering.

"It happened in a shed at the rear yard of the trucking firm where Elmer worked." Matt paused and sent Luke a hard look. "Right after he returned from our ranch."

"You think there's a connection?"

"Wasn't Elmer the trucker who brought Amber here?"

A chill slithered down Luke's spine. "Maybe Elmer ignored the no riders rule one too many times."

“Didn’t look that way,” Matt said. “The cops believe the killer waited for him, then clobbered him over the head with a tire iron. The blow knocked Elmer out, or dazed him. Next, the killer dragged him to the shed and tied him up to torture him.”

“Elmer was a big guy . . .”

“Probably more than one assailant.”

Luke tried to force the image of the attack from his mind. “We should have a memorial service here on the ranch for those who knew him.”

“Good idea,” Matt said. “And we can take up a collection for the widow.”

“Elmer would like that. He was big on family.”

“I want to talk to Amber,” Matt said. “She was one of the last people to see Elmer alive. Maybe he said something to her that might help the cops find his killer.”

Luke bristled. “Why are you digging around in this? You’re retired from the bureau, remember?”

“Elmer was a friend. That makes it my business.”

“Well, Amber’s my daughter’s nanny. If she’s to be questioned, I’ll do it.”

“You? She hasn’t answered one of your questions yet. What makes you think you’ll ever get anything out of her?”

Luke hated lying, but he hated more that his brother was always right. “You’re wrong. She’s opening up to me.”

Matt sent him a doubting look. “I’ll bet. What about the tapes, did you watch them?”

“I did, and she’s great with Alicia. You’re not messing this up, Matt. I’ll talk to her about Elmer myself.”

“Don’t turn this into a power struggle, Luke. I’ve given you a wide stall to work in, but this is murder, and Elmer was our friend. If you don’t want me to talk to Amber alone, fine. But I want to be there.”

“Yeah. I forgot. You never completely let go of the reins.”

“That’s not fair, Luke, and you know it. Don’t let this woman come between us.”

“It won’t be a woman. But . . .” Luke had put up with his dad’s lack of confidence in him, but he wasn’t gonna take it from Matt.

Matt frowned. “I’ve tried, Lord knows, but I just don’t share your confidence in Amber.”

“I said I’ll talk to her!”

Matt threw his hands in the air. “Have it your way. But do it today. Time’s a factor in catching killers.”

“Yeah, right.” It galled him that Matt was always right.

Luke shifted his weight and looked down at his worn snakeskin boots. Damn. He couldn’t tell Matt he was leaving on the heels of Elmer’s murder. Nevertheless, their argument had strengthened his determination to go. “Gotta run. Can’t bid on the bull from here,” he growled.

* * * *

Amber liked the housekeeper, Tita from the moment she met her. The woman spoke her mind and seemed to adore Alicia. Her son, Roberto, was with her. Although Tita looked too young to have a nineteen-year-old son, the family resemblance was strong. Tita was tall and dark like Roberto with the same expressive brown eyes. Roberto appeared nicer than he had in the barn. He tickled and teased Alicia, and she ate up the attention and followed him about the house like a puppy. After Roberto finished helping Tita, he sauntered outside, Alicia on his heels. Amber chased after them. Roberto mounted the fence of a small pen.

“Stay back, niña,” he called.

Amber grabbed Alicia’s hand. “Honey, we can watch from the fence,” she said, boosting Alicia up on the rail. Excitement sent a shiver through Amber. This could be her chance to learn to use a lasso. Tita had bragged that Roberto was one of the best cattle ropers on the ranch, and that he loved to show off.

The calf changed speed and dodged the rope. Roberto lassoed the skittish animal with ease, then released the calf to do it again.

“Way to go, Roberto,” Amber said. “Hey, pardner! Ever give lessons?”

He laughed. “I’m willing. But we’d better start with a fixed object like a post.” He vaulted the fence and handed her a rope. He showed her how to stand and knot the loop. “Posture’s *muy importante*, señorita.”

Although Amber found that handling a rope wasn’t as easy as it looked, she wouldn’t give up. After an hour, she managed to get the lasso air bound. She tried to help Alicia, but the rope was too heavy and the child kept getting herself tangled in it.

“I must go now,” Roberto said, “but I can come back every day for a short lesson until you get the hang of it.”

“Great!” Amber said, and then swore him and Alicia to secrecy. “We want to surprise your daddy,” she told Alicia.

* * * *

Luke returned from the auction earlier than he'd expected, and his heart soared when he heard laughter coming from Alicia's room. Darned if the day hadn't turned out well after all. He'd made a great deal on the bull and got home early enough to tuck his daughter into bed. It couldn't get much better than that.

The door to Alicia's bedroom stood ajar, and he tiptoed in. The room was strewn with toys, dolls, and stuffed animals. A puzzle on the table was half completed. Amber and Alicia sat in the rocking chair, Alicia curled up in Amber's lap holding Raggedy Ann and listening to *Little Red Riding Hood*. Both of the ladies wore pajamas and light cotton robes. The room smelled of soap and shampoo.

"What's this word?" Amber asked, pointing to the page. Her still damp hair fell across her face in loose waves.

"Wolf!" Alicia said proudly.

"Right," Amber said, a little breathless and animated from laughing at some joke they'd shared.

Luke stepped closer, eager to get in on the fun.

Alicia looked up. "Daddy!" She slipped from Amber's lap and raced to him.

He swung her up in his arms. "Hi, Rosebud, my little brainchild." Winking at Amber and holding Alicia closer, he drank in her just bathed scent and reveled in her spunky, little-girl innocence.

Amber, smiling, rose from the chair and handed Luke the book. "It's your turn, Daddy. I'll go make us a bedtime snack."

"Make it hot chocolate," Luke and Alicia said in unison.

Luke took Amber's place in the rocking chair, hugging Alicia close. He kissed the top of her head and traded the *Little Red Riding Hood* book for *The Three Bears*. After he finished reading the story they both knew by heart, he hummed to Alicia to soothe her, to soothe himself.

Amber returned with a pitcher of chocolate and three mugs on a mesquite wood tray. She looked radiant, happy. Damn. He'd promised Matt he'd talk to her tonight.

After the three of them shared mugs of chocolate with plump marshmallows floating on the top, he laid Alicia in her picket-fence bed and turned on the clown music box.

Amber put the empty mugs back on the tray. "I'll say good night now." She blew Alicia a kiss and turned to go.

"Wait!" Luke's throat felt dry. "I need to talk to you in private before you race off. It's important."

Apprehension flickered in her eyes. "Er . . . all right. I'll wait for you in the kitchen."

He swore under his breath. He'd ruined Amber's happy mood. He didn't want to do the same thing to Alicia. He sat beside her, tucked the sheet around her pixie face, and kissed her on the nose.

“Sing to me, Daddy.”

He brushed a curl of golden hair from her cheek and sang “Where Has My Little Dog Gone” in French—the only French he knew. He had learned the song in second grade and had never forgotten the words. Maybe because that year he’d fallen in love for the first time—with his beautiful teacher, Miss Duval.

When Alicia’s eyelids fluttered closed, he lowered the lights and tiptoed out of the room.

* * * *

Amber had listened outside the bedroom door and had been surprised when she heard Luke singing in deep, resonant French. He certainly didn’t fit the mold of the typical South Texas cowboy—or any mold for that matter. He was a one of a kind man, and seeing him with Alicia played havoc with her emotions. As thrilled as Alicia had been to see him walk in that door, she’d had to restrain herself from following Alicia right into his open arms.

Whatever he wanted to talk to her about sounded serious. Had he found out something about her? Was she about to get fired?

Amber poured another cup of hot chocolate and plunked down at the kitchen table. She heard Luke’s footsteps coming her way. She clasped the mug so tight her knuckles lost all color. She looked up when he entered the room. It unnerved her how little she could read in his eyes.

“May I get you another cup of chocolate?”

* * * *

Luke shook his head. The concern in Amber’s voice hummed through him, touching him in tender places he’d thought were dead, making what he had to do even more difficult. He swallowed. “That trucker you rode in with, Elmer, he’s—” Luke’s throat constricted and he tried again. “Something’s happened.” He was botching this, but the look on Amber’s face told him she hadn’t just hitched a ride with the man—she’d connected with him on some level and his death would hurt her.

Amber stood. “An accident? Is he all right?”

“He’s dead, Amber. Murdered.”

Amber’s face went white. She closed her eyes. “No, please.” When she opened her eyes again, they were brimming with tears. Her reaction seemed strong. Luke hadn’t pegged Amber as the emotional type, and he had a hunch Elmer’s death wasn’t the only thing behind her tears. No matter the reason, she was hurting.

Luke knew it was a mistake, but he drew her into his arms and held her close. She rested her head against his shoulder, dampening his shirt with her tears.

After a few seconds, Luke lifted Amber’s chin so he could look into her eyes. “Did you know Elmer before you hitched a ride with him?”

“No,” she murmured, her lip quivering. “He was just this big, sweet teddy bear.”

Luke stared at Amber’s lips. Before he could stop himself, he was kissing her hungrily. She pushed against his chest. He started to release her, but she quit struggling and her mouth went all soft, responsive, and fiery against his. He tried to tell himself he was merely consoling her in her grief, but his pulsating hardness called him a liar. He grappled for a trace of sanity. Was it just a year ago that Connie Lou had filled his arms and his heart? Having Amber here under his roof stirred passions he thought he’d buried for good. Damn, he was supposed to be questioning Amber, not seducing her.

He held her away. “I’m sorry, Amber. I shouldn’t have done that. But you looked so sad, so sweet.”

Face flaming, she laughed without humor. “I didn’t exactly discourage you. But we can’t let it happen again.”

“Right.” He cleared the huskiness from his throat. “Back to Elmer. You were one of the last people to see him alive. Did he mention anyone threatening him—any enemies—any trouble of any kind?”

Amber looked, sad, dazed, maybe even a little disappointed. “No. He just talked about his family.”

“What did you tell him about yourself?”

“Just that I was coming here for a job. He did most of the talking.”

Luke could believe that. She was an expert at shifting the conversation from herself. “You told him your name?”

Her eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking about me?”

“Because if others asked him about you, I need to know what he could tell them.”

She stiffened, and then stared at him with an expression of stunned comprehension. “You think he was murdered because of me?”

Chapter Five

Amber raced to her bedroom with Luke following on her heels. She grabbed her suitcase from the top of the closet and slammed it down on the bed.

Luke's voice, hard and demanding, penetrated the shroud of fear that had formed in her brain. "What are you doing?" His enormous shadow dwarfed her.

"What does it look like?" Breathing heavily, she yanked clothing from drawers with trembling hands and stuffed them into the open suitcase.

Luke grabbed her by the arms and turned her to face him. Heat swept through her at his touch. She got a whiff of leather and sweat, and the pleasant, strictly male odor deepened her awareness of him and the danger to her heart.

"Talk to me, Amber. What kind of trouble are you in?"

"I don't know," she said. She squeezed her eyes shut to force back tears of frustration that begged for release. *What would make an innocent woman run? Fear of my own guilt? Or did I see the killer and instinctively fear I might be next?* Fighting the shadows lurking in her mind, and her heightened sensitivity to Luke's presence, she tried to twist free, but he was too strong. She lifted her chin. "You're the one who apparently has inside details on this. You say Elmer was murdered and someone tortured him"—she gave a quick shake of her head to force away the unbearable image before finishing her sentence—"maybe to get information about me."

"Your trigger reaction to run proves you're holding out."

"What are you, some kind of cowboy shrink? I told you I don't know anything about this, but I'm not waiting around for a mysterious killer to show up."

Luke's gaze bore into hers. "Why would a killer be after you?"

"Are you deaf? For the third time—I don't know!"

Luke drew her closer, and that damnable erotic male scent rose between them and enveloped her. "I won't let you go," he said. "You need protection."

"You can't keep me here." *Or could he?*

"I have to try." He plunked down on the bed and drew her down beside him in an unrelenting hold, his arm around her shoulder, his hip pressed against hers, his heat firing her heat. "I'll get the sheriff to lock you up if I have to."

Frustration tightened in her chest. *Oh God, not the cops.* If they learn she was a suspect in a murder, they'd throw away the key. "On what charge?"

"Self-endangerment, for starters."

Their determination to outstare each other only made her more aware of the physical attraction sizzling between them, ready to explode into flames. She'd only known him days, and already their lives were linked by something so powerful it frightened her. She wanted to stay in his arms, and it terrified her that her need rose from emotions beyond fear and desire. "Why are you doing this?" Her heart skipped erratically.

"Because you're too bullheaded to face that you need help."

"My independence has gotten me this far."

"It's landed you on a killer's hit list. Can't you see it? You're safer here at the ranch with me than running helter-skelter with no plan."

Maybe he was right. Her mind churned in confusion, and she needed help, but once she admitted her amnesia and told her story, there would be no going back. "Why are you looking at me like that?" It was the same look he'd had just before he'd kissed her. Luke's silence seemed to last forever. Her heart raced. "I can't let myself rely on you."

His eyes, the color of rich earth, softened. "You can. I won't let anything happen to you."

Right or wrong, it was clear Luke believed he could protect her. The sincerity in his tone confirmed that. She closed her eyes.

Taking her vulnerability as an invitation, he closed over hers so lightly, so tenderly, she thought for a moment that she was imagining it. The kiss was warm, comforting, and brought a glimmer of hope to her heart. Dear God, she desperately wanted to trust Luke. Was it fate that had sent her running straight into his arms?

When he ended the kiss, she said, "We weren't going to do that again."

"Things have changed."

She took a shaky breath. "What things?"

"Don't try to distract me, Amber. Level with me." His voice was low, hypnotic. He brushed a wisp of hair back from her face. "Please."

She felt her resolve shredding. "Will you keep it to yourself—no matter how bad it is?"

"What did you do, kill someone?" His tone was light, obviously unaware how close his statement could be to the truth.

"Just promise." She hated the waver in her voice, hated the way his expression immediately darkened.

"Anything," he said. "Just get on with it."

She related what little she knew, watching his hard-etched face for signs of disapproval. He got up and paced the room like a caged cougar. She could almost see his brain cells sparking. He had asked her the same questions she'd been asking herself.

Once she had convinced him she wasn't holding anything back, he sat down beside her again. He took her soft hands in his callused grip. "Okay," he said, "we'll take this one step at a time. We need to find out who you are, and who the dead guy was, to figure this out."

"No hesitation? Why are you so willing to believe me? To help me?"

"Let's just say I know what it's like to have the odds stacked against you."

His willingness to accept her story had to be more complicated than that, but she decided not to press it.

He grinned. "Besides, nannies are hard to come by out here in the boondocks."

She wanted to reward his attempt at humor with a smile, but her heart wasn't in it.

He cleared his throat. "Back to your problem. First, you should see a doctor."

Things had gotten completely out of hand. She'd crossed the line and kissed her employer—twice—then foolishly confided in him. "No. No doctors!" She was afraid of the physician's questions—afraid the doctor might call the police.

"I know just the guy to help us," he said, ignoring her protest. "I have a hunch what we're dealing with here. Molly went through something like this a while back."

Amber felt like screaming. It was comforting that Luke wanted to protect her, and it would be so easy to let him take over, but something deep within didn't want to be bridled. "You're not listening."

"I heard you, loud and clear." He put his arm around her waist and gave her a squeeze. "I understand your hesitation. But this will be perfect. The doc is in Mexico, far from here. He can examine you and make a diagnosis. Maybe even give you medication to help you remember."

Her heartbeat quickened. It was starting to sound good. She would give anything to get her memory back.

"The trip will get you out of harm's way. After we see the doctor, we can go straight to the charity rodeo at Buck's place. From there, we'll hit the rodeo circuit and stay on the move. In the meantime, I'll find out about you and the murdered guy."

If only he could. She clenched her hands. "How?"

"My brother has an in with the FBI."

Her heart sank. "I thought so! He has cop eyes." She could hear the prison doors clanking shut. "No. No. This is just between us. Until I remember what happened, you mustn't tell anyone. Damn it, Luke, you promised."

"But Matt could find out everything we need to know."

"No!"

"Why are you so damned stubborn? You're making this harder than it has to be."

"You trust Matt. I don't."

Luke swore under his breath. "Okay. We'll try another course. Matt's working on Elmer's murder on his own and could turn up something that'll help us. I'll get him to keep me informed."

The worry that Matt might learn things before she did sent knots to her stomach. She should run. But she'd have to get past Luke. She considered his broad shoulders, his strength, and more dangerous, the bond she felt with him. She had to face it. Now that Luke knew everything, they were locked in this mess together. "If I go along with this doctor idea, when would we leave?"

Luke glanced at his watch. "It's too late to do anything tonight. I'll set things in motion in the morning."

"Meaning?"

"I'll make an appointment with the doctor, get the Cessna ready. Groundwork like that."

She hesitated. She still wasn't sure about this, but if there really was a medicine to unlock her memories . . . "What can I do to help?"

"Pack a suitcase for Alicia, then relax."

"Sure. If I can forget a killer's after me."

"Don't worry, I'll stake out a couple of vaqueros to watch the house."

"To protect me, or stop me from leaving?"

He grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "Both," he said, then rose and left her sitting on the edge of the bed and praying she hadn't added another mistake to her list of blunders.

* * * *

Amber heard Luke leave the house before sunup. She'd planned to make breakfast for him so they could talk again, but after tossing and turning most of the night worrying whether confiding in him had been a mistake, she'd failed to hear the alarm.

She made breakfast for herself and Alicia, and then together, they packed two bags for the child. She put them by the front door next to hers. “We’re going on an adventure,” she told Alicia in answer to her question.

At the knock on the door, Amber stepped outside to greet Roberto, Alicia following her.

“Ready for your lasso lessons, señoritas?” He handed Alicia a shortened rope, then set up a stand with a foot-high, sawed-off pitchfork handle protruding from the center.

Amber gestured to the rope and stand. “You made these?”

He lowered his gaze and dug the toe of his dusty boot into the dirt. “*Si*. Alicia’ll learn faster with gear that’s small and easier for her to handle.”

Amber smiled. Roberto was a good kid after all.

“Watch me, Amber,” Alicia called in her sweet, little girl voice. With tiny arms, she circled her child-size rope until it whirled lopsidedly over her head. She threw it outward and yelled in delight when the loop closed over her special stake.

Amber hugged Alicia. “Good roping, Rosebud.”

Alicia beamed. “Now you do it.”

Sure, Amber thought. *Piece of cake*. Too bad she didn’t have child-size props. She groaned when her try failed.

Alicia giggled.

“You don’t have to look so darned pleased at my goof, Rosebud,” she teased, then yanked the rope back, and got in position to try again.

“Keep your wrist straight,” Roberto called. “Make your upper-arm muscles do the work. And follow through.”

She let the loop fly and circled a fence post. Alicia clapped and jumped up and down in delight.

“*Muy bueno*,” Roberto said. “Tomorrow we’ll try a moving target.”

“Oh, I’d love that,” Amber said, “but we’ll be gone for a while. Not sure how long.”

“No *problema*. You—”

“We’re going on an adventure,” Alicia said proudly.

Roberto grinned down at the child. “Well, have fun *niña*.” Then, he told Amber, “Call me when you return and we’ll start again.”

Amber hated to stop the lessons before she perfected the technique, but she sighed in relief when he didn't ask questions.

After Roberto left, Amber gave Alicia her lunch, then a bath. Amber lifted the child into her arms, and drew her close, inhaling cherry shampoo. Alicia's child-soft, warm arms encircled her neck. Amber smiled. Thank God Luke had stopped her from leaving. She'd fallen in love with this sassy little pixie and couldn't easily leave her. Amber switched on the musical fan and put Alicia down for a nap, promising they would finish the *Cinderella* puzzle when she woke up.

At loose ends, Amber headed for Luke's library to find a book for herself. An unlabeled video tape lay on his desk. Maybe it was a home video of Luke and Alicia. Pictures were worth a thousand words and she'd like to get to know her employer better. She hesitated, then thought of the two times he'd kissed her—of his body pressed hotly against hers—of her own wanton response. She chuckled. They'd gotten to know each other pretty well already. He wouldn't mind her seeing his home videos. She smiled and shoved the cassette into the VCR and pressed play.

The TV screen brightened and the image cleared. It was *her* and Alicia! Frames and frames of them together. Her stomach knotted. Luke had been spying on her!

* * * *

Sunlight swept through a window in the haymow and spilled onto a pile of golden hay. Horse snorts and hooves stomping restlessly echoed through the barn. Working next to his brother, Luke pitched fresh straw into the stalls, his fingers tight on the handle. Sweat trickled down his back, soaking his shirt, anxiety riding his raw nerves harder than a vaquero riding a bucking bronco. Now that he had made up his mind to leave, he couldn't put off telling Matt any longer.

"Did you talk to Amber?" Matt asked, beating him to the draw.

Luke's stomach knotted. This was his chance. "Yeah. Elmer didn't tell her anything to help. Just talked about his family."

Matt shot him a doubting glance. "You believe her?"

"Absolutely."

"Why?"

The walls of the cavernous barn closed in on Luke. "I can't explain it. Trust me on this, bro. I'm working everything out. And I have to do it my way."

"What the hell does that mean?"

"I want to leave the ranch for a few months."

"Does this have something to do with Amber?"

Luke swallowed. "Only indirectly."

Matt leaned on the handle of his pitchfork and gave Luke his narrow-eyed, probing look. “I thought we were in this ranch business together, equal partners, equal responsibility.”

“Load on the guilt. I deserve it. I’ve fought the urge, but I’ve needed time away since I buried Connie Lou.”

“What about Alicia?”

“She goes with me. That’s why I hired Amber, to care for her.”

Matt laughed without humor and shook his head. “Where’re you going?”

Luke squared his shoulders. He felt like a ten-year-old asking permission. Except he wasn’t asking—he was telling. “Rodeo circuit—just for a few months. But you have to keep it under wraps.”

Matt swore under his breath. “Guess you know how irresponsible that sounds. Won’t be good for Alicia to be dragged all over the country, away from her home, surrounded by a bunch of roughnecks. And it won’t be good for either of you to be thrown in with strangers and away from your family.”

Luke suspected Matt was worried that he might start drinking again. For Alicia, for himself, he was staying dry one day at a time. “I think it’ll be good for both of us.” The pressure in Luke’s chest tightened. “You gonna hassle me over this?”

Matt sighed. “No. I just hope you come to your senses before you drag us all into a mess. When are you leaving?”

“Later today, or in the morning. Depends.”

“On what?”

Luke looked at his boots. “Confirming some things. Just let it go at that.”

“Amber’s rubbing off on you. You’re getting as evasive as she is. What about the charity rodeo?”

Luke forced himself to meet his brother’s gaze. “I’ll be there. I gave my word.”

Matt laughed humorlessly again. “Yeah. Like you did when I made you partner.”

Just as Mr. King-of-Control intended, guilt gathered in Luke like black clouds during a summer storm. But he had to do this. “Live with it, Matt. I’ve worked by your side for the last two years without a break. A couple of months’ change of scenery isn’t too much to ask.”

Matt removed his Stetson and wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. “Not much notice.”

“I’ll make it up to you.”

“Yeah. Well, keep in touch. You’ve been my right arm.”

Luke blinked. “Did I hear you right?” It was the first time Matt had ever admitted he was important to the ranch—that he needed him.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” Matt drawled.

Luke laughed. He would miss his brother. If it hadn’t been for Amber’s trouble, he might’ve scrapped his plan to leave for a while, but he wanted to get her to a doctor and away from here. He looked at his watch. “I gotta go. We can hash this out again at Buck’s place in a few days.”

Outside the barn, away from prying ears, Luke stood in the long shadow of a fence post, flipped his cellular phone open, and got Dr. De La Fuente’s nurse on the line. She had managed to juggle the doctor’s schedule, and the appointment was set for tomorrow morning at the doctor’s home office. De La Fuente had a spread near the border where he raised grapes. The three of them would stay in a two-bedroom patient cottage on the grounds. With everything settled, Luke showered in the bunk house and then, humming, headed home. Amber would be relieved that he had arranged things so quickly.

When he entered the house, Alicia raced into his arms. “Daddy, Daddy,” she called, sounding out of breath. He picked her up, inhaling her powdery, just bathed scent. Her little jaw jutted defiantly and she narrowed her eyes. “Why did you make Amber mad?”

The hair on the back of Luke’s neck prickled. He removed his Stetson and hooked it on the hat rack. “Where is she?”

“Right here.” Amber stepped from the shadow of the kitchen doorway. Her green eyes sparked fire and she nailed him with a look that seared him clear through his body to the soles of his boots. She wore Levi’s and a man’s white shirt—traveling clothes. A suitcase was by the door. “Now that you’re home, I can leave,” she snapped.

“Leave?” He thought of their hot kisses. “I thought we settled all that last night.”

A swift, hot flush rose in her cheeks. “Well, you were wrong.”

Luke stood his daughter on her feet and gave her a gentle shove. “Alicia, wait in your room, honey. Daddy needs to talk to Amber.”

Alicia stomped her tiny booted foot. “I like Amber, Daddy. And you ruined everything!”

Luke swallowed. “Daddy will fix it. Now go.”

She glared at him with little girl impudence.

Luke lowered his voice. “Go!”

When Alicia was out of hearing distance, he said, "Let's talk in the library." He reached for Amber's arm.

She stepped back. "There's nothing to talk about. I'm leaving. Period."

"What happened?" In spite of his tight control, his voice came out husky and choked with dread.

"You made me trust you, rely on you!"

His attempt at a grin failed. "I'd say that's a good thing."

"You didn't trust me, yet you ask me to trust you."

"I trust you. I hired you, brought you into my home—"

Moisture glistened in her eyes. "And then you spied on me! Invaded my privacy, for God's sake." The video! The cord in the back of Luke's neck tightened. He clenched his hands. Damn it, he had trusted her, but he had to admit that the tape had reassured him. Damn, he shouldn't have let Matt talk him into spying. "I can explain."

She folded her arms across her breasts. "Although it might be a kick to hear you try to wheedle your way out of this—"

"Wait a minute," Luke said, narrowing his eyes. "Why were you snooping around in my library, playing my personal videos?"

"I thought we were friends," she said, "and that the video might be of Alicia." She paused and frowned. "Hey, don't try to reverse the blame here."

"I see no difference between snooping and spying."

She lifted her chin. "Well, I do."

They were both shouting now, and their heated words were bound to upset Alicia. Luke grabbed Amber's arm to usher her out of his daughter's earshot. Amber tried to shake free. He couldn't let her go. He had everything planned. He didn't have time to analyze why he felt he was bargaining for his life.

"Take your hands off of me, Luke."

He refused to let the loathing in her voice stop him. With a firm grip, he hustled her to the library and kicked the door closed. He took a deep breath to calm down and eased her into the upholstered swivel chair behind his desk. Without releasing his hold, he leaned over her.

She glared up at him. "Your roughshod tactics won't work with me."

He bent down before her on one knee and took her hands in his. When she tried to pull away, he tightened his grip. They had both invaded each other's space, but he couldn't let this argument

escalate any further. “Look, I’m sorry. I didn’t want to video you—I shouldn’t have.” *Damn Matt and his brilliant ideas.* “But I had to be sure Alicia was in good hands. You have to admit your application was sketchy, and you avoided questions like the plague.”

* * * *

Amber’s heart quickened at the truth of his words. He’d only been protecting his daughter. She had to admire him for that. Luke’s nearness closed in on her—his smoldering gaze caressed her like enveloping flames. “It’s hard to get past knowing you were watching my every move,” she said softly.

“Not every move.” His voice lowered and hummed through her. “There weren’t any cameras in your bedroom or the bathrooms.” Before she could respond, Luke added, “It won’t happen again.” His face was a sculpture of strong angles and planes—fiercely and totally male. Luke’s intensity burned her like a hot branding iron. He drew her to her feet, bringing her even closer.

A hot flush rose in her cheeks. She stepped back from his heat, his maleness, and hated that she was still irreversibly attracted to him. “We have to set some ground rules, Luke.” Even as she said it, she didn’t believe that either of them could ignore the fire between them for long.

He sighed. “I know.” Magnetism radiated from the hard planes of his face and the lean lines of his body, charging the air around him. After several heartbeats, he added, “There’s too much at stake.” He was silent again as though reining in his own desires. Then, he studied her face with a masked expression. “Everything’s set. We need to leave right away.”

He was right. There was too much at stake for her to back out now. She would do whatever was necessary to get her memory back. A tiny voice deep within told her there was more at risk than her memory, and even her life. Luke was trouble, but she was falling for him and couldn’t stop herself. And she couldn’t love Alicia more if she were her own child. The longer she stayed, the harder it would be to go, but she couldn’t bring herself to leave them, not yet. “All right,” she said. “Rev up your plane.”

* * * *

Luke piloted the six-passenger Cessna while Amber and Alicia huddled together playing games in the seats behind the cockpit. For a while, they pointed out clouds that resembled zoo animals, and then they crayoned in Alicia’s Disney coloring book.

It was a relief to be away from Luke for a while. Amber hoped the distance between the cockpit and her seat in the cabin would defuse their sexual attraction and make it easier for her to think. Unfortunately, her bewildered mind was like butterfly wings, fluttering about aimlessly, unable to form a concrete thought.

She glanced toward the cockpit. The back of Luke’s head was well shaped, and the powerful expanse of his shoulders looked capable of bearing all of their problems. Something deep within rebelled at the thought of letting him have that much control. *But you need help,* a small internal voice argued. Then, flashes of the sneaky video played repeatedly in her head, tormented her.

When they landed at the private airstrip near Dr. De La Fuente's villa, a classic, eight-window, white limousine met their little group. Inside the vehicle, Alicia wedged herself between her daddy and Amber. She talked a blue streak, seemingly unaware of the tension raging between the adults.

The dusty road curved through acres of grape vineyards. The setting sun and smudges of rust-colored clouds streaked low in the sky, giving the world a surreal glow. The painted sky and flat beauty of the vine-strewn landscape should have made Amber's trouble seem a thousand miles away, but the closer they got to their destination the more her stomach knotted. A quick glance at Luke's stony face only made the knots tighter.

Amber bit her lip. While she had struggled with her doubts throughout the flight, Alicia's infectious excitement and delight had been a welcome distraction. Now Amber had to face her fear. Was she afraid the doctor couldn't help her? Or that he'd uncover something horrible?

When they arrived at their cottage, Luke took their bags inside, then left to attend to the plane. Amber got herself and Alicia ready for bed. Afterwards, they curled up in a big wicker chair in their robes to read a while. Amber's hand trembled as she turned the pages of *Jack and The Bean Stalk*.

"What's the matter, Amber?" Alicia asked, looking up at her with huge, blue eyes.

"It's been a long day, Rosebud, and I'm exhausted." Calling Alicia Rosebud reminded Amber of Luke's invasion of her privacy. Her face warmed, wondering what had gone through his mind as he watched her.

Alicia patted Amber's cheek with baby soft fingers. "Are you 'fraid of the doctor?" Amber forced a smile. "A little." Would the doctor be able to help her? Or was this just a wasted trip? At least coming here had whisked her far from the reach of the killer.

* * * *

The next morning, Amber clutched Luke's and Alicia's hands. They assured her she'd be fine. Maybe so, but she would have been more comfortable meeting the doctor at a real hospital than at his home. Outside, the sun baked the earth unmercifully, but inside the doctor's mission-style villa, the air blasting from air-conditioning vents turned the rooms as cool as a tomb. The rooms were silent, as though the walls held mysterious secrets. In a home this large, there had to be servants, but if they were moving about, they came and went like ghosts.

A shapely nurse with eyes and hair as black as ebony showed them to a garden. She had skin like mocha cream and her tight, thigh-length uniform made her look more like a centerfold for *Esperanza Compañero De Juego*, Mexico's equivalent of *Playmate Magazine*, than a medical assistant.

Before Amber could take a seat in one of the padded wrought iron chairs, the nurse said, "Por favor, follow me, señorita."

Amber took a deep breath and followed the nurse to a small room at the back of the rambling house. It was equipped like a regular hospital examining room. *So far, so good.*

"Undress and put this on," the nurse said, handing Amber a tissue-thin paper gown.

As Amber stripped with trembling hands, she couldn't stop herself from looking for hidden cameras. Damn Luke. He'd made her paranoid.

The room grew colder. By the time the dark, hawk-nosed doctor entered the room, Amber's teeth were chattering. In a thick Spanish accent, De La Fuente introduced himself curtly, then issued commands as he examined her. She felt like a frozen piece of meat as he checked her back and head. He flashed a small pencil light into her eyes and asked her follow the beam.

"Squeeze your eyes shut as tightly as you can," De La Fuente said as he pressed hard all over her face.

He asked her a series of questions. When he learned it had been over a week since the root incident without her symptoms growing more severe, he felt confident that the blow to the back of her head hadn't caused the amnesia. However, to rule out any serious injury he decided to send her to the nearest hospital for a CT scan and an EEG.

De La Fuente immediately sent her, attended by his nurse, by helicopter to have the tests. Luke insisted upon going, too. And he brought Alicia along. During the flight, he read *Little Critters and The Fussy Princess* to Alicia. Father and daughter seemed relaxed, as though on vacation. Amber sat ramrod stiff next to the nurse while thinking of the horror stories she had heard about Mexican hospitals and unapproved drugs. To get her mind off the whole foreign-hospital bit, she decided to engage the nurse in conversation. "You're related to the doctor?" she asked in a questioning tone over the propeller and engine noise. Amber had seen affectionate glances between doctor and nurse.

The nurse smiled proudly. "*Si*. He is *mi padre*."

Amber's face grew warm. Her father. She'd thought perhaps he might be the young woman's lover. "Does he see patients at home often?"

"When he is on vacation, he does so. For special friends."

Amber felt another surge of guilt. She was intruding on his time at home. And here she was thinking ungracious thoughts. Although she hated going to the hospital, the tests the doctor ordered suggested he might actually know what he was doing.

When they landed on the hospital roof, Amber was surprised how quickly and efficiently everything moved along. You would have thought her care was urgent. The tests were painless, and knowing Luke and Alicia were waiting nearby gave her a sense of belonging somewhere. Even for a little while.

The four of them returned to the doctor's villa by late afternoon. Luke and Alicia disappeared. It was past the child's naptime. Amber wished she could take a nap, too. She was exhausted and had a terrible headache, but the nurse escorted her straight to the doctor's office.

After checking the computer for messages, the nurse said, "The doctor will be with you in five minutes. He's studying the CT scan films sent to him via computer."

Exactly five minutes later when the doctor strode briskly into the room, Amber was surprised to see Luke following on his heels.

Dr. De La Fuente bowed his head. “Señor Ryan asked to join us for the diagnosis. With your permission, of course.”

Although comforted Luke was there, Amber shrugged, faking indifference. In spite of the cool air gushing from the vents, her palms felt moist.

Dr. De La Fuente looked at Amber with probing eyes. “You have bruises on your back and skull, but your CT scan and EEG look good. As I suspected, the blow to your head was not serious enough to cause amnesia.”

Rigid, Amber leaned forward and, digging her fingernails into the leather arms of the chair, waited for the punch line. Luke closed his hand over hers, which gave her the support she desperately needed.

“With no double vision, I’d say your amnesia is an acute nonpsychotic syndrome. From what you told me, you seem to be in a fugue state. Probably stress induced.”

Amber swallowed to moisten her dry throat and asked, “Could you please explain that in layman’s terms?”

“It boils down to this, señorita—there’s a limit to how much stress a person can take at a given time, and when things become too stressful, the mind escapes for self-preservation.”

“Can you help me?”

“Time will be the best healer, but I’ll give you a shot for anxiety and some tranquilizers.”

“Molly had the same symptoms,” Luke said. “The doc helped her. That’s why I brought you here.”

Amber ignored Luke and asked the doctor, “How long until I get my memory back?”

He shrugged. “Days, weeks. Maybe longer. It may come in flashes with random images. Don’t try to hurry the process—anxiety makes the condition worse.”

Amber closed her eyes. That was just great. Anxiety rode her raw nerves, and she saw no signs of a let up. If distress made her symptoms worse, how would she ever get well?

“It will take more than simply regaining your memory,” De La Fuente said in a grave tone. “Before you can heal completely, you’ll need to deal with what caused the trauma.”

She sighed. She would be glad to, just as soon as she learned exactly what that was. Was she a murderer, or the killer’s next prey?

Chapter Six

To escape the sweltering night, Matt Ryan and his wife Molly had taken a midnight horseback ride to the pool-size, open-concrete water well for a nude dip. Moonlight danced on the dark water and bathed their bare shoulders with a shimmering glow. Cool water lapped at their heated skin and the rounded sides of the well in a rhythm Matt should have found soothing. But he was too upset. Damn that Amber. She'd brought trouble to the family and the ranch.

Matt rested against the concrete and drew Molly into his arms, bringing her back to his chest. He didn't want to see her face until he'd said his piece. He tightened his jaw. "I tried, Molly," he whispered, pressing his lips to the back of his wife's damp hair. "But you know how I am with family."

She was quiet for a moment. The air was heavy with the scent of mesquite. Finally, she turned in his arms, stroking his neck. "What did you do?" Her voice was soft. He was so lucky. Molly was always in his corner, even when he slipped back into his controlling ways.

"I sent Amber's fingerprints off to the FBI lab and faxed a picture I copied from a frame of the video to local authorities for identification."

Molly went silent again. A coyote howled in the distance.

"Say something." His voice was husky.

She turned and faced him. "You won't like it."

"Tell me anyway."

She rained kisses on his chest. "Okay, cowboy, you asked for it," she murmured against his hot skin. "You're always interfering in Luke's life. That's probably why he wants to leave the ranch."

If Molly knew the whole story, she might have another take on the situation. The trouble was, if he told her everything, she would be as worried as he was. "You're right," he growled. "I don't like to hear that I'm a controlling bastard." It was a bitter pill to take. Besides, he didn't want to talk about it now while Molly was setting his chest . . . his whole body . . . on fire with her kisses.

He pressed her against the slick wall and made love to her in the cool water, throwing his whole mind and body into the pleasure, and didn't return to the subject of Amber until they lay beside the well on a blanket, satisfied in one another's arms, basking in the afterglow.

"Well, I'm waiting," Molly said, her voice teasing and tinged with curiosity. "What did you find out?"

Matt would have laughed at Molly's impatience except the subject was too serious. "Her name is Amber Miles, private secretary for the late Phillip Rhoades. The guy's a rich industrialist said to have connections with a Las Vegas crime boss."

Molly stiffened in his arms. "Oh, no. I take back everything I said about your interference. It's a good thing you checked on her. What are *we* going to do about it?"

“It gets worse. She’s a suspect in Rhoades’s murder.”

“Good grief. Luke could be in danger. Where did he go?”

Matt tightened his jaw. “I don’t know.”

* * * *

The next morning, Luke tried to call Matt as he’d promised, but his brother didn’t answer his cell phone. He tried the big house and got his mother. “How are you feeling, Mom?”

“Couldn’t be better.”

He smiled at the energy in her voice. “Glad to hear it. Is Matt around?”

“No, but he’s eager to talk to you. Claims it’s urgent. He tried your cell, but . . .”

“Had it turned off.”

“I won’t ask why.” A teasing tone frolicked in his mother’s words.

He groaned. “I think you just did. But it’s a long story.”

“Hmmm. What you mean is it’s none of my business, right?”

He laughed. “You tryin’ to give me a hard time, beautiful?”

She laughed, too. “Who, me? Never. Give me the number where you’re staying, and Matt’ll call you back.”

Luke felt pressure building in his chest. He couldn’t tell anyone where he was without giving away Amber’s secret. “I’m on the move. I tried to reach Matt’s cell . . .”

“Doesn’t work. He dropped it in the well last night. Drowned the poor gadget. Don’t ask how. Another mystery.” Her voice carried amusement.

“Where’s Matt now?”

“Stampede Junction. He and Molly are bringing Mando Gomez back to the ranch.”

Luke furrowed his brow. “Why?” Mando was a former Ryan vaquero, and now a guest on the ranch, but Matt and Molly weren’t at all fond of him.

“Someone beat up the poor fellow. Took everything he had with him, our horse, Blaze; all the gear; and his cash.”

Luke felt a prickle between his shoulder blades. “Is he hurt bad?”

“Just his pride, according to Matt.”

“I’ll bet. Mando always fancied himself a fighter.” Luke had, too, once. But he had traded a night on the town to have chili under the stars with Amber. Smart decision, it seemed.

“Tell me, son, what’s going on around here? Everyone is so closed-mouth, and there’s this tension on the ranch that puts my teeth on edge.”

“We’re all a little stirred up over the murder of one of the truckers. It’s nothing for you to worry about.”

“I wish you hadn’t said that.” By her tone, he could almost see her crossing herself. “Every time one of you boys assure me there’s nothing to worry about, that’s when the roof caves in.”

* * * *

Amber glanced at Luke from across the expansive tiled terrace where she’d paused from reading *The Cloudmakers* to Alicia. Luke’s face darkened like the sky before a storm, yet he gently eased the receiver back into the cradle.

He turned and came toward her. His walk made her heartbeat quicken. His tall stance, erect shoulders, and strong stride drew her eyes to his Levi encased thighs. They were clearly powerful enough to control stallions and bulls, or anything else he might choose to grasp between them. Her cheeks burned. “Bad news?”

“Mando ran into a passel of trouble in Stampede Junction, but he’s okay.”

She shivered without knowing why. “What kind of trouble?”

The intensity of Luke’s eyes burned through her like the first day they had met and stirred uncontrollable emotions.

“A fight. I don’t have the details.”

She had the feeling he was holding something back. “Stampede Junction sounds like a place to avoid.”

“Wouldn’t go that far.” He lowered his eyes and drew the shade down on the topic. When he raised his eyes again he asked, “How did your session with the doctor go?”

“He gave me another shot. Told me to relax. Every time someone tells me that, I want to scream.”

Luke laughed, but the usual cocky sparkle failed to reach his eyes. “There’re some ancient Mexican ruins near here. Want to go exploring? ”

“Not now. The shot has made me terribly sleepy. I’d hate to fall off a horse.”

Alicia jumped off Amber's lap and wrapped her arms around Luke's legs. She looked up at him with wide, blue eyes. "What's a ruin?"

Luke's voice deepened and took on a mysterious quality. His explanation about the remains of an old Inca city sounded so magical that Alicia begged to go.

Luke grinned. "How about it, Amber? We don't have to ride horses. We can borrow the doc's Jeep. Take a pillow. You can sleep all the way if you wish."

They both looked at her with such hopeful eyes that she couldn't refuse—didn't really want to. She liked being with them, liked watching the love that flowed between father and daughter.

Luke bribed De La Fuente's cook to pack them a picnic basket, and they were ready to leave within the hour.

"You and the doctor seem really close."

Luke strapped Alicia into the back seat. "He's friends with the whole family. Matt met him through some FBI case where he saved De La Fuente's niece from terrorists, and he was Molly's doctor when she suffered from amnesia."

"I'd like to hear about that."

"Get Molly to tell you. I don't want to get into her private bailiwick."

After they were underway, Alicia began to hum softly to her Barbie doll. A hot breeze blew through the open Jeep window and whipped Amber's hair about her face. In the distance, a hawk swooped low in a cloudless, deep blue sky. After about fifteen minutes on the road, the vineyards ended, the green vines replaced by miles of cactus and mesquite. Amber covered her mouth to hide a yawn.

"Close your eyes, sleepyhead." Amused glints sparkled in Luke's eyes. "I'll wake you when we get there."

Amber groaned to herself. No way did she want him watching her conked out with her mouth gaping open, or some other equally unattractive pose. She would stay awake even if she had to hold her eyelids open with her fingers.

"Let's sing to her, Daddy. That always puts my dolly to sleep."

"Good idea, Rosebud. How about a lively 'Don't Rock the Boat, Baby.' Or 'Rock Around the Clock'?"

"Nooooo, silly. 'Rockaby Baby' is better."

Amber laughed and shook her head as they began to sing. It warmed her heart the way Luke sang softer than Alicia so he wouldn't drown out her tiny voice.

The heat, the vibration of wheels on asphalt, and the sound of Luke and Alicia harmonizing “Rockaby Baby” lulled Amber into a soft, hazy world. Just before she went completely under, Amber chuckled to herself. Even knowing that she would eventually have to face the trouble waiting for her back in San Antonio, she’d never been happier than at this moment.

She floated in a silvery magic place for a moment longer and then sank deeper and deeper into sleep. Suddenly, she was captured in a dream and whisked back in time.

She was in a plush hotel room in San Antonio, holding airline tickets in her hand. She squinted, trying to make out the destination. The silver-haired man next to Amber addressed her as Miss—something. What? She tried to latch onto the last name, but the man’s raspy voice sounded as though it had traveled through a long tunnel. “Did you mail those documents to my sister?” he asked.

“Yes, sir,” she said. He had given her the sealed package, and she had addressed it. Then she had rushed it to the post office, just as he had instructed. Why was he so edgy?

She waved the tickets and forced a smile. “We’re set. Everything is arranged—top drawer all the way. The limousine will arrive in exactly ten minutes. The driver knows a shortcut to the airport, so we’ll be there early.”

His pacing and jerky pivotal turns unnerved her. He looked a great deal like a middle-aged Gregory Peck. In spite of his distinguished good looks, she wasn’t attracted to him for a host of reasons. The main one was his lack of warmth. Besides that, he was at least fifty, and she was only twenty.

There was a tap-tap on the door. His face paled.

She started to answer the knock.

“Wait!” he said. “I’ll do it.” He opened the door slowly.

Her heart pounded..

Luke hit a bump in the road, and Amber awoke with a start. Pressure squeezed her chest. Dangerously close to tears, she tried to hang onto the dream. She needed to know what happened next. But the dream was gone.

“You okay?” The concern in his voice touched her, soothed her. “You look as tense as an unbroken stallion.”

She had an urge to smooth the thick hair that curled ruggedly at Luke’s collar, anything to make a connection with him. “I had a dream,” she said softly. “Not one of those unreal kinds, but an actual fragmented memory.”

“You remember any of it?” Luke’s low, hoarse drawl hummed through Amber and worked as a balm to her spirit.

“A little. I was a traveling secretary—leaving San Antonio with my boss.”

“Good lead. What’s his name?”

She shook her head. A warning instinct twisted her insides. “It’s so strange. I can see his face in my mind as clearly as I see yours, but that’s as far as I can go.”

“Hey, don’t sound so frustrated. You know more than you knew yesterday. We have time.”

Amber nodded, but since Elmer’s murder, she’d had an eerie feeling that time was about to run out.

* * * *

A busload of tourists pulled away from the ruins as Luke parked the Jeep. *Good*, he thought. They had the site to themselves. He didn’t want to share this place or this day with anyone but Alicia and Amber.

The ruins consisted of a series of adobe foundations, steps, and crumbling walls. Steel and copper plaques provided dates and history. Luke grabbed a camera while Alicia and Amber raced ahead laughing. He was encouraged by the fact that Amber had had a flash of memory, sketchy as it was, but he also had an irrational surge of jealousy every time he thought about her traveling with her boss. He had no doubt that the situation was strictly professional on her part, but a man would have to be impotent not to want to lure her into bed.

Luke hurried to catch up with them. Ahead, Amber crouched next to Alicia to study hieroglyphic figures painted low on a crumbling wall. Amber laughed and shook her head, which sent fiery tangles of thick, amber hair into a dancing coil of silky flames. Alicia hugged her. It was a Kodak moment, if he’d ever seen one, he thought, and snapped a picture.

Alicia raced to him, and jumped up and down. “Lemme take a picture of you and Amber.”

“Promise you’ll get your little finger out of the way?”

“But she has such a cute little finger,” Amber said.

“Hey. No fair—two against one.” He grinned. With them, he liked the odds. He gave Alicia the camera and reminded her how to use it, and stepped next to Amber. “Okay, shoot.”

“Hug her, Daddy,” Alicia called out with mischief in her blue eyes.

Smiling, he put his arm around Amber. For Alicia’s benefit, he meant to keep it a child-rated hug, but at the touch of Amber’s smooth skin, heat raced to his groin, and he hugged her closer than he’d intended.

Her startled gaze flew to his. With her face turned up like that, he was further tempted to kiss her. Both times he’d kissed Amber her mouth had been like flaming marshmallows—soft, sweet, yet fiery against his. *Oh, God*, he silently moaned as his Levi’s tightened against the zipper.

“Click the picture,” he called. “We can’t stand here like this all day.” Then, he whispered to Amber, “How about a moonlight walk in the doc’s gardens tonight?”

“I’ll think about it,” she said in a saucy tone.

He would, too. And probably little else. It frightened him the emotional investment he was making, not only for himself but also for Alicia. This arrangement was getting more complicated and risky with each passing day.

* * * *

When they returned to De La Fuente’s villa, the doctor pulled Luke aside. “You told me Amber was merely your daughter’s nanny,” he said in his thick Spanish accent, “but I’ve noticed there’s definitely some chemistry going on between you two.”

Luke’s neck prickled. “So?”

“Medically speaking, Amber is very vulnerable, and until those shots work their way through her system, a seven-day window, she’s not a true consenting adult.”

“Meaning?”

“I’m administering the last shot in the morning. If you have any romantic designs on the señorita, it would be the fair and gentlemanly thing to hold off the required seven days before acting on your lusty Ryan emotions.”

“You make me sound like a lecherous Romeo.”

“Quite the opposite. I know you, Luke. You wouldn’t want to take advantage of a wonderful señorita like Amber, a woman your niña loves very much.”

Luke groaned. “Okay. You hit your message home—in spades.” So much for the romance he’d planned after the moonlight walk. “When will you discharge Amber?”

“She may leave, if she wishes, right after I give her the shot in the morning.”

“What kind of results can we expect?”

“The shots may speed the return of memory. However, there are no guarantees. Try to keep her happy and relaxed. Tension is her enemy.”

* * * *

An hour later in De La Fuente’s formal dining room, the maid served an excellent dinner of broiled carne asada on roasted garlic mashed potatoes with peppers and braised onions. Wonderful aromas wafted around the room. Soft violin music played in the background. The doctor sat at the head of the table with his daughter, Carmen, at his side. Luke seated himself at the other end of the oval table flanked by Amber and Alicia. The butler had removed the table extensions to bring the guests and host within easy conversation distance. Candlelight flickered around the little group, the dim glow gentling each person’s features and relaxing the mood.

Because the doctor knew of Luke's past problem with alcohol, he served a special white grape punch rather than wine. It was probably the first time wine hadn't been served in the doctor's home in years. Luke appreciated his thoughtfulness but hated depriving the others.

"Excellent punch," Amber said. "Are the grapes from your vineyard?"

De La Fuente gave a wide, gracious smile. "But of course. What else would I serve?"

"If you'd like the recipe," Carmen said, "I'd be glad to give you a copy."

Amber and Carmen discussed punch recipes, and then the conversation turned to Carmen and her father working as a doctor–nurse team.

Carmen smiled. "I see Papa more now than I ever did growing up. Mama died when I was very young, and I expected Papa to fill both jobs." She put her hand on her father's and looked at him with affection in her large, expressive brown eyes. "He did very well, considering he had to run a practice and the vineyard. But I always wanted more of his time. Now I have my dream."

Alicia's eyes widened, taking in all the adult conversation. Luke could almost see the wheels turning in her head. He hoped all the talk about losing a mother wasn't upsetting her.

He gave her a hug. "You okay, Rosebud?"

She gave a wistful smile and nodded.

Amber turned to the doctor. "You never remarried?"

"No. But I'm not a confirmed bachelor. If the right opportunity ever presents itself . . ." He glanced at Luke. "How is your charming mother?"

Mention of his mother jolted Luke like a right cross to the jaw. The doctor had visited the ranch several times in the last six months, but Luke had thought he was there to see Matt. Now, he wondered. "She's well. Making a new life for herself on the ranch." He wasn't sure how he felt about the doctor talking about the right opportunity and his mother in the same breath.

Luke caught Amber's gaze. "Mom and Dad had moved to Florida," he explained, "but after his fatal heart attack, she returned to the ranch to be with family."

"Perhaps I could be of some assistance to your mother," De La Fuente said. "I know firsthand how devastating losing a loved one can be."

Luke knew it three times over—his dad, his eldest brother, Parker, and Connie Lou—all dead within the span of three years. The whole family shared the losses and consoled each other. *What would Mom need Señor De La Fuente for?* Then Luke's Texas hospitality kicked in. "Of course, you're welcome at the ranch anytime."

A small smile crossed the doctor's face and he bowed his head a fraction. "Most gracious of you."

Luke felt a weight lift from his shoulders when Amber changed the subject to the vineyards and the doctor's double life as grape grower and medical man. Everyone steered clear of any talk of Amber's amnesia. But the problem always lurked at the edges of Luke's mind.

Alicia was on her very best behavior. He'd bribed her with the promise that he'd let her sit in the copilot's seat for a few minutes on the return trip if she was a very good girl.

When the maid served a dessert of vanilla ice cream taco with fruit salsa, Alicia squealed in delight. "Oh, my favorite."

Luke laughed. "You act like you never have ice cream at home."

"Not 'nilla. You always get chocolate."

"From now on," Luke said, "I'll buy both. That's a promise."

After the adults enjoyed their Brazilian espresso and withdrew from the dining room to find their own pleasures, Luke and Amber took Alicia for a walk. The child was full of chatter at first but finally wound down.

"I have some things to check out on the plane for our return trip tomorrow," Luke said.

"No problem." Amber smiled and scooped Alicia into her arms. "I'll get Alicia ready for bed and read to her for a while." Amber's eyes and voice softened. "Meet you in the garden in, say, two hours?"

Luke groaned to himself. Rather than looking forward to being alone with her with lustful anticipation, he wondered how he'd hold his desire in check now that the doctor had spoiled his romantic plans. If he revealed the doctor's warning, it would sound like he'd expected Amber to jump into bed with him. While that was what he'd like, it was way too forward for their situation. When they made love—and he hoped someday they would—he wanted it to be her move.

In spite of the restrictions on his actions, Luke found himself counting the minutes until he would see her again. After he checked out the plane, he showered and yanked on his best black western gabardines. Then, he shrugged into a western-cut white dress shirt, plopped his Stetson on his head, and headed out the door.

In exactly two hours, he was waiting at the entrance to the gardens. Amber was right on time. She wore a white, filmy, knee-length dress that seemed to float about her as she hurried down the stone path, its stones crunching beneath her strappy sandals. A flush of excitement radiated from her and touched him in ways he found impossible to ignore. He groaned as his control shredded. He was in big trouble.

"I remember my boss's name! Phillip Rhoades." Her smile was wide, brilliant, as though someone had given her a wonderful gift. Her breasts rose and fell with her uneven breathing.

His heart thudded crazily, and he forced his gaze to a safer zone. He took her arm as they began to walk. The touch of her skin sent adrenaline charging through his veins. He paused and picked a rose

bud from a nearby bush, a dark, lush red, the color of her lips. “To remembering.” His throat was so constricted he could barely get his words out. They came out husky.

She put the bud to her nose and inhaled. “Thank you. But there’s more!” she said almost breathless. “I remember we traveled a lot. Even internationally. Paris, London, Japan. Mr. Rhoades liked my work, praised me all the time.” She paused and frowned. “Then something changed. A few hours before he was murdered, he began to question my ability to follow his instructions about a package I mailed to his sister.”

Luke felt the fine hairs at the base of his neck prickle. “What was in the package?” he asked as they entered a rose-covered gazebo.

“I don’t know. He sealed it himself.”

Luke frowned. “Do you remember the address?”

She shook her head and sighed. “I should. I addressed it for him before I mailed it. Maybe it’ll come.”

He gave her arm a supportive squeeze. “You did fine. At least we have something to work with. We can backtrack from Rhoades to come up with your last name. No telling what we might learn from there.” He gave a humorless laugh. “Maybe those shots are worthwhile after all.”

She smiled and looked into his eyes. “Thanks for getting help for me.” She leaned back against a low railing, with her arms spread wide and her hands gripping the rail. Her quickened breathing thrust her breasts against the thin, white fabric, and her nipples poked at the cloth. Was her reaction just the excitement from remembering, or was she also responding to him as he was to her?

He focused on her face. Near the pulse point of Amber’s temple, she wore a white gardenia. Luke restrained an urge to lean close and inhale its fragrance. It would bring him too close to her moist lips, and temptation.

Drawn by lust and an instant of shredding control, Luke moved closer and covered her hand with his. The warmth of her skin seduced his fingers. He swallowed. He cleared his throat, forcing himself to heed the doctor’s warning. “Let’s walk some more.”

He placed one of her delicate hands in the crook of his elbow and guided her deeper into gardens fragrant with the heady aroma of rose blossoms. Soft violin music came from the villa, sending magic into the breeze. They passed arbors of bougainvillea, moss green lawns, and entered a maze of gardenia hedges. He glanced down at his spit-polished boots—*Keep moving*. Stopping would bring his dilemma to the forefront, and he wasn’t sure he’d be strong enough to handle his desire if he ever took her in his arms.

Her shiver got to him, and the need to protect snapped a line of his tightly held restraint. “Cold?” he asked. Without waiting for her answer, or worrying about the consequences, he drew her in to his warmth. She fit perfectly against him. She was firm, yet soft and womanly.

“Just a little afraid,” she said with a waver in her voice.

He tilted her head up to see her eyes. “Afraid of what?” He expected her to say the faceless killer, but she surprised him.

“Of learning something that will ruin everything.” Her lips quivered.

It was more than he could take. Seeking to give her his strength, he tossed his Stetson on a lattice post and covered her warm, moist lips with his. Instead, he found her fire. She murmured in pleasure, pressed her breasts against his chest, and drew his head down closer to deepen their kiss. He stroked her back, thinking of the soft mounds resting near his thudding heart. As though his hand had a mind of its own, it cupped a full breast and teased its stiffened bud through the wispy fabric.

Their kisses grew hotter, hungrier, tongues entangling. His head felt light. He ached to bring them both pleasure, and his arousal pressed against his zipper until he thought it might bust.

Amber twisted her heat into his. He’d never wanted anyone more. De La Fuente’s words echoed in his head. For the next seven days, she was off-limits. Luke ended the kiss abruptly and held her away.

He exhaled heavily. “Better walk. The doc’s been giving you some strong drugs, and I don’t want to take advantage of you.”

She nodded, looking disappointed.

Pretending not to notice, he stooped, picked up the rose that had dropped during the frenzy of their kisses, and placed it gently back into her hand. Electricity jetted up his arm as they brushed fingers.

He cleared his throat. “That job with Rhoades,” he said as they began walking back to the entrance, careful not to touch each other. “How did you get a job like that, anyway?”

“Just luck. One day Mr. Rhoades marched into my secretarial school and chose me out of fifteen women. Although I had top-notch skills, I didn’t have any work experience. He said that didn’t matter; he preferred someone green he could train.”

I’ll bet, Luke thought. Probably planned to train her right into his bed.

* * * *

Amber tossed and turned, unable to sleep. In the garden, Luke had aroused a frenzied hunger for a physical connection with him, and then pulled back. She understood his reasons, or at least the reasons he had given. She even admired and appreciated his chivalry, but she didn’t understand her emotions. Just thinking about the fire between them quickened her heartbeat and sent a steamy flush rushing over her body. When he had fondled her breast with those big, strong hands, it felt like hot wine had flowed through her veins, intoxicating her, making rational thought impossible.

Amber glanced at the rose in the small crystal vase she had found in the kitchen cupboards. The flower would wilt and die. But for now, it was perfect. Maybe there was a message there.

Throwing back the light sheet, she thrust herself out of bed. She paced a few moments, then looked out the window and basked in the moon glow, drinking in the stillness of the night.

For a little while in the vast gardens under the starlit sky she had felt safe, loved. She should thank Luke for stopping before they got carried away. It was risky enough that she had let him kiss her and touch her, but if she stepped farther over the intimacy line, it would change everything. Their actions wouldn't just mess up their lives. They might hurt Alicia, as well. Amber knew all the reasons she shouldn't want him, but her heart and body refused to heed the logic. She paced again. The situation was impossible. With a killer after her, she might have to leave at a moment's notice, and here her heart was putting down roots.

Chapter Seven

The moment Luke walked into Buck's living room, Matt swooped down on him like a hawk and grabbed him by the arm. "We have to talk," he said. "Now! In the barn."

The rest of the Ryan family, who had already gathered at the ranch about sixty miles west of the Ryan spread to fulfill their yearly pledge to help with the charity rodeo, lowered their eyes, which let him know he had to face this alone.

He bristled at his brother's sharp tone but did not question following him. Something was up, and neither of them wanted to air problems in front of friends and family. Their rivalry had always been as fierce as their love, and when they met head-on, walls trembled.

Silent as a brewing storm, they strode across the sun-scorched compound, both men used to giving orders, neither accustomed to taking them. They charged into the barn like angry Brahmas, ready to butt horns.

The barn reeked of hay, manure, and the smell of cigarette smoke. Luke frowned. Only an idiot would smoke in a barn. Luke wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve and glanced around. He sensed someone nearby but saw only two vaqueros pitching hay at the far end of the barn. Neither were smoking. Maybe he'd imagined it. He shrugged off his uneasiness.

"What's so all-fired important?" He met Matt's steely gaze, returning a look just as hard, just as unyielding.

The corner of Matt's eye twitched. "Your life, Alicia's life."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Amber."

Luke narrowed his eyes. He didn't want to hear anything against her, but this concerned Alicia, too, and he couldn't stick his head in the sand when it came to her welfare. Matt knew it, used it. "What about her?"

His brother exhaled heavily and squared his shoulders as though steeling himself for the expected ricochet of flack. "I sent Amber's fingerprints to the FBI lab and faxed a picture to the San Antonio police for ID."

"You did what?" Luke curled his hands into fists. He wanted to smash his brother's face so damn bad. Although Matt was the middle sibling, he had always presented himself as the family protector and believed his self-appointed position gave him a wide trough to do whatever he damn well pleased. Their father had reinforced that belief, which led to a helluva lot of resentment among the three brothers. But with Parker dead, and the family shrinking, it seemed they really oughta try to work things out peaceably. But damn it, he was fed up with always being the one to back down. "Look, Mr. ex-FBI, your suspicious mind doesn't give you the right to dig into my business and investigate Alicia's nanny like she's a criminal."

“Maybe she is. Wanta hear about her or not?”

Silence charged between them. A whinny echoed from a nearby stall. Luke shoved his hands into his pockets, dread and curiosity overriding anger. “Yeah,” he growled.

Matt exhaled heavily. “Name’s Amber Miles. And she lied about her age—she’s only twenty.”

Luke opened his mouth to defend Amber—she hadn’t lied, she simply didn’t know. “Amber didn’t—”

Matt held up his hand. “Wait. Here’s where her history gets scary. She was a private secretary to the late Phillip Rhoades, a high finance industrialist rumored to have connections with a Las Vegas crime boss.”

Luke’s neck prickled. He sank to a bale of hay. Amber had remembered the job, but not that her employer had crime connections. Or had she remembered and held it back?

Luke grasped a single straw, fighting his rising doubt. “Rumored, you said. Besides, even if the guy was dirty, who’s to say she’s mixed up in any of it?”

Matt snorted. “An attractive girl barely in her twenties—private secretary—to a shady old dude? Get real.”

Matt was right. It didn’t sound legit no matter how you cut it. “But—”

“It gets worse. She’s a suspect in her boss’s murder.”

Luke felt a surge of faith. “I know about that. She didn’t do it.”

“Innocent women don’t run. Don’t lie about who they are, don’t lie on their resume.”

Single-minded as a bull—Matt wouldn’t let this go. Luke knew the whole thing would blow up in their faces if he didn’t level with him. “She has amnesia. I took her to Dr. De La Fuente for help.”

Matt’s face clouded, but to his credit, he listened to the whole story before he said, “I don’t buy it. If she’s so innocent, why doesn’t she turn herself in?”

“I noticed you didn’t turn Molly in when she had amnesia.”

“She didn’t kill anyone.”

“Neither did Amber.”

Matt shook his head. “You don’t know that. Your blind loyalty to this woman could bury you in cow chips.”

“Damn it. I know I’m right about her.” Amber’s inner sweetness had touched him deeply, and he refused to throw her to the dogs.

“Look, Luke, you’re only twenty-six and your experience with women—”

“Get off it. What’s age got to do with it? Do ya have to be over thirty to know a decent person when you see one?”

“Hell no. But you’re on the rebound from losing Connie Lou, and along comes this curvy little filly looking all vulnerable and soft.”

“That’s not it. Amber’s in trouble. When have we ever turned our back on someone who needs help?”

Matt looked at him long and hard. Then, he swore under his breath and shook his head. “I know I’m going to regret this. Got something in mind?”

“I’ve been thinking—maybe the guy who killed Amber’s boss tortured Elmer to find her, and then the SOB murdered him. Maybe even Mando’s attack was part of it.”

“Bull!” Matt said. “Mando was just a cowpoke in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Luke slammed a fist into his callused palm. “Yeah? I say, find the damned stolen horse and we’ve got us a suspect.”

Matt’s laugh was hollow. “Forget it. Last night Blaze returned to the ranch on his own.”

“You sure about that? Or maybe someone rode him to the ranch to lurk around and get info about Amber.” Luke arched an eyebrow. “Hire anyone new in the last few days?”

“You know we’re not hiring now.” Matt took off his Stetson and scratched his forehead. “Wait a minute. Come to think of it, there were a couple of strangers who came through asking for work, but Alfonso turned them down.”

“Timing’s suspicious. You’re certain they left?”

“Yeah. Buck was hiring, so Alfonso referred them here.”

“What? They’re here?” Luke’s heart thudded—and he had left Amber alone.

* * * *

Amber’s cheeks burned. The room remained silent for several seconds after Matt and Luke stormed out the door. Why had Matt whisked Luke away so abruptly? She closed her eyes for a moment. Good grief, she’d been abandoned in a room full of near strangers. What now?

She darted a furtive glance around Buck George’s living room. It was a museum of rodeo memorabilia with pictures on the walls of cowboys on bucking bulls, trophies in glass cabinets, and cowboy gear displayed on hooks around the room. Buck and his wife, Wanda, fit right into the western setting. Buck was rangy and lean, the picture of an aged, hard-living Marlboro Man. His

handlebar mustache looked like it belonged on an old-time movie sheriff. Wanda was tall and silver-haired with an Amazon's bone structure.

Wanda laughed. "Those brothers! Always butting up against each other."

"They're just talking man talk," Molly said. Her cheery voice didn't match the worry in her eyes.

Amber had a hunch their talk might be about her. She wished she could've been a fly on the wall. What if Matt persuaded Luke to talk? The ex-FBI cowboy might turn her in. She'd gotten herself into a real fix—trapped way out in nowhere-land, miles from public transportation. She'd have to trust Luke, yet everything in her cried trust no one.

To calm her frayed nerves, she glanced at Alicia. She was playing roll-the-jack's-ball on the floor with Matt and Molly's child, Sara Jane, a two-year-old with carrot red hair. The girls were giggling over the big tabby cat trying to paw the small ball away from them.

"Aren't they great?" Wanda said. "They've grown so since I last saw them."

Amber smiled at the little girls, and her world softened a bit around the edges.

Wanda shook her head solemnly and lowered her voice so the children wouldn't hear. "She looks so much like Connie Lou. It must be hard for Luke to be reminded of his lost soul mate every day."

Amber felt like a horse had just kicked her in the chest. She gasped for breath. Soul mate—was Plato right? *Is there only one person we can love completely?* No. She didn't believe it for a minute. Love wasn't something people rationed out. If Luke could love his wife so deeply, he could love that way again. An unexplainable sadness welled up within Amber. Although she didn't entirely understand it, one thing was crystal clear—she could never settle for less than a man who could love her like that.

"Amber?" Molly said. "Are you all right?"

"Of course." Amber felt like crying. She lifted her chin and plastered a smile on her face.

Alicia laughed uproariously and pointed to her new Mickey Mouse watch. Sara Jane laughed, too. Amber sighed in relief to have the attention diverted away from her. "Alicia's learning to tell time, you know."

Molly stared at Amber with a question in her expression, then, as though she had come to some conclusion, she chimed in, telling some of the bright things Sara Jane had done. Virginia added her two cents to the conversation by bragging about both girls and mentioning how clever Parker's children were as well. Amber remembered Parker was the murdered brother. She'd never met his children. Someone had said they lived in Dallas near the maternal grandparents.

"We've got the best grandkids in the world," Virginia said.

The ice was broken. If Amber had nothing else in common with these women, at least they all adored children.

Amber turned at the sound of booted footsteps and hoped it was Luke. Suzy and Roberto came into the room holding hands, light apricot and deep coffee fingers loosely laced.

“Roberto!” Amber said before she could rein in her surprise.

“I thought I’d see you here.” His voice wobbled between boyish and mannish in a lyrical Spanish accent. “Maybe we can practice our lassoing later.”

Amber nodded. Why did he think he would see her here, and who else knew she was at Buck’s ranch?

From the moment their little group of three landed at Buck’s private landing strip, she had felt uncomfortable, as though someone were watching her. Maybe her uneasiness was a delayed reaction to the nightmares that had haunted her sleep last night—masked faces, hulking shadows—pain pressing into her skull. Or maybe her wariness came from a sense of real danger. Amber wished she were somewhere else, far, far from here.

Wanda turned to Amber. “Have you met our daughter, Suzy?”

Daughter? The pieces were starting to fall into place. Amber hadn’t exactly met Suzy, but from the conversation she’d overheard, she’d made judgments about the saucy little blonde.

“Suzy entered the calf roping competition,” Wanda said.

Hmmm. A charity event. Maybe Suzy wasn’t as shallow as she had first seemed. Amber had been wrong about Roberto, and maybe she was wrong about Suzy, too. Without a memory to keep her in balance, maybe she should question all of her judgments. Even her fears.

“Are you interested in entering one of the events, Amber?” Wanda asked. “It’s all for a good cause.”

“I’ll help, but I’ll stick to something that doesn’t require getting on a four-legged animal.”

“You don’t like horses?” Wanda looked aghast.

“Love them, but I guess I’m what you’d call a tenderfoot.”

“Hang around ranchers a while, and you’ll get the hang of riding and roping and such.”

If danger was really closing in on her, staying long enough to learn anything might not be possible.

Luke and Matt strode through the doorway—tension emanating from them like heat waves off the scorched Texas earth. When they’d left earlier, they’d looked like two lightning clouds about to collide. Now, neither looked bruised nor rumples, so they’d avoided coming to blows. However, the firm set of their jaws suggested the battle wasn’t over.

“Perfect timing,” Wanda said, looping her arms through those of the brothers. “Time to herd this party to the patio. I’ve got some good grub for y’all.”

The enclosed brick patio, decorated with sombreros on the wall and palm trees in huge clay pots, smelled of cooked beef and spicy peppers. Bantering and laughing, the group began to seat themselves at a long picnic table.

Luke grabbed Amber's arm before she could sit down. "We'll get something later. I need to talk to you. Now."

Amber's stomach growled in hunger. "Can't it wait?"

Luke glared at her. "No!"

Buck twitched his salt-and-pepper handlebar mustache and winked at Amber. "Better go, missy. These Ryan boys don't take no for an answer." His bass-drum drawl rumbled from his lips with fatherly warmth.

About time they learned to! Amber thought. "What about Alicia?"

"I'll bring her up, later," Molly said. "The girls are having a good time. And I know they're hungry."

"May I stay, Daddy?" Alicia asked.

When he nodded, Alicia rewarded him with a big, dimpled grin that warmed Amber's heart. She laughed in spite of her annoyance at Luke and wondered if a little begging and a cute pixie smile would work as well for her.

"If you're going upstairs," Wanda said, "please corral your bags and take them with you. Amber and Alicia can stay in the lavender room and you next door in the blue room. You can powwow in either room to your heart's content."

Without commenting, Luke grabbed the suitcases. Amber watched his arm muscles flex under his shirt as he easily lifted the bags, juggled two under his arms, and carried two in his hands. He headed up the wide, curving stairway two steps at a time, and Amber hurried to follow with resentment burning in her belly. "I could carry my own," she snapped, further angered that his flexing muscles and energetic agility had stirred her so.

He didn't answer. When they reached the top landing, Luke gestured with his head. "Get the door if you want to help."

In her haste to do her part, the strap of her purse slid off her shoulder. As she swung the door wide and stepped aside to make room for Luke and his burden, her purse fell to the floor and the clasp opened, sending her .38 revolver sliding across the hardwood floor.

Luke's eyes widened, and then darkened like black rain clouds. He dropped the suitcases with a thud. Holding Amber's gaze with a murderous look, he crouched and picked up the gun. "What the hell are you doing with this?"

The lavender walls closed in on her. Still, she squared her shoulders and met his gaze with all the calmness she could muster. "Protecting myself."

His eyes narrowed. "You carry a gun around my daughter?"

"You have guns in your house."

"Yeah, under lock and key." He flipped the chamber open.

Did he really expect to find bullets? She wasn't stupid. "Don't act like an empty gun on the ranch is some big deal. You had one lashed to your horse's rump when we went on the picnic."

"You know how to use this?" he growled. "Or did you forget that, too?"

She lifted her chin. "I know enough to load, aim, and shoot."

Luke shoved the .38 into a drawer, grabbed her wrists, and pulled her close, which quickened her heartbeat. He smelled of leather and hay. "Why didn't you tell me about the gun?" The hurt and anger in his voice sent pain surging to her heart.

"Because I couldn't answer the questions you were likely to ask."

His eyes flashed. "Like is that the gun that killed your boss?"

She wished the floor would open up and swallow her. "It could be."

"Are you the one who fired it?" His voice lowered to a dangerous rumble.

Amber bristled, but she held in her frustration. "I told you. Someone else did it." She looked up at him in hope of confirmation that he still believed her. When she failed to detect any sign of trust, she stepped back and tried to twist free of his steely hold. Still trapped, she rebelled by giving her tangle of hair a furious shake. "What did you want to talk to me about, anyway?"

He drew her so close she couldn't distinguish between his pounding heart and her own. "I have some news for you," he said. His tone was hard, angry. A warning flashed in his eyes. "But maybe it won't be news after all."

She bit her lip, terrified of what he might tell her. "Try me."

"I know who you are."

Her breath caught. "Who?"

"Amber Miles."

"Miles." She rolled the name over her tongue, tested it for familiarity, but the name didn't trigger anything.

Luke glared at her. "You failed to mention Rhoades had connections to a Vegas crime boss."

“He didn’t. At least not that I know of.” Then, the implication behind Luke’s mysterious knowledge hit her, and she narrowed her eyes. “Hold on here. How did you find out all of this?”

“What difference does it make?”

Tension stiffened her spine. “You told Matt about me, didn’t you?”

“He checked you out on his own. To keep him from bringing in the cops, I told him about your amnesia.”

She gave a little doubting snort. “What makes you think that will stop him?”

Luke met her gaze. “He could have gone straight to the cops. Instead, he came to me. He’s agreed to help us.”

“Us? Fat chance. He doesn’t approve of me. Hasn’t from the start.”

“Should he? With you toting a gun? Probably the murder weapon?”

Amber pressed her lips together tightly to keep from screaming. The amnesia had stolen her past and left her with a postage-stamp world, and the main person in it—the man she’d started counting on—was about to jump the corral. “When I regained consciousness, it was in my hand. But I didn’t kill Mr. Rhoades.”

Luke gave a hollow laugh. “Oddly enough, experience makes me believe you. After Web Viceman murdered Parker, he put the murder weapon in my hand. Only I had passed out, drunk—not from a blow to the back of the head like you.”

Hope rose within Amber. “Then you believe me?”

He stared at her as though still making up his mind. She was on the edge of quicksand—one false step . . . “Maybe all this has something to do with the package I mailed to Mr. Rhoades’s sister.”

“And conveniently forgot where you mailed it.”

Amber closed her eyes and tried to visualize the address she’d printed on the package. A tap on the door broke her concentration. Luke released her wrists to answer it. It was his mom, Virginia, looking all fluttery like a hummingbird.

“Wanda’s about to serve her prize-winning chocolate pecan pie,” she said, “and she wants Amber to try it. Can’t you two have your little gabfest later?”

Amber snapped her fingers. “That’s it! Chocolate. Coco. Coco Rhoades, Richmond, Virginia.”

Luke’s eyes brightened. “I don’t know how you came up with that, but with the name and state Matt can get the exact address for us. Let’s talk to him.” Luke smiled at his mother. “Pie suddenly sounds very good,” he said. “Lead on, we’re right behind you.”

Amber smiled at his change in mood. The address was a small thing, but coming up with it seemed to renew his faith in her.

* * * *

Later, after they'd devoured the scrumptious pie, Matt, Luke, and Amber went out on the front porch to talk. Luke gave Matt the name and city to check out.

An image of the tickets flashed in Amber's mind. "Before those men burst in, I had tickets in my hand. I don't know what happened to them."

"Do you remember the destination?" Matt asked.

She pressed her fingers to her forehead, straining to open her memory. In a surge of kinetic energy, the answer came to her. "Las Vegas, Nevada. Then we were going on to Richmond where his sister lives."

Suspicion flickered in Matt's eyes. "As private secretary, you must have known all about Rhoades's dealings."

Amber raked a trembling hand through her hair. She and Matt were like two pieces of sandpaper scraping against each other. She wished Luke hadn't brought his FBI brother into this. But maybe if she told Matt what she knew, he would start trusting her. "Mr. Rhoades bought businesses in trouble. He was going to see a man at the MGM Hotel about buying a plastics firm that was near bankruptcy."

Matt nailed her with a probing gaze. "I thought you had amnesia?"

"I'm starting to remember," she snapped. "I thought you wanted to know things as they came to me. But if not—"

"What else?" Matt growled.

Luke shifted on his dusty boots and sent his brother a scathing look. "Give her a chance. The doc says she should avoid pressure."

Amber felt warmed by Luke's concern. "There were government contracts involved. Mr. Rhoades sent letters to Senator Whitmore about them." Amber recalled that the senator was from Nevada.

Matt looked skeptical. "If the sister's name checks out, I should have an address by tomorrow noon. We can decide our next step then."

It sounded like Matt was taking over. She wanted to talk to Luke alone about that. If the cops or Feds got to the package first, she might never know the contents. The more she thought about it, the more she believed it might be the key to Mr. Rhoades' murder. And what she needed to prove herself innocent.

Before she got the chance to talk to Luke, Buck came out on the porch. Luke put his arm around the man's shoulder. "Buck, how many recent hires?"

The question and the serious look on Luke's face sent a chill up Amber's spine. Did he think the killer had somehow followed them here?

Buck twisted the corner of his mustache and looked thoughtful. "Always take on about a dozen 'round rodeo time."

"You got a list?" Luke asked.

Amber touched his arm. "Is there something you haven't told me?"

He met her gaze with guarded eyes. "Just being cautious."

"I'm on my way to the bunkhouse now," Buck said. "You can look over the sorry bunch for yourself."

Amber started to go with them. Luke stepped in front of her. "You should stay here. A woman in the bunkhouse around shower time wouldn't set too well with the men."

She rolled her eyes at his weak excuse. She would have insisted upon going with them, but she wouldn't recognize the killer if she saw him. She felt sure now that something had happened to make Luke suspicious of Buck's new hands. But what? She had several things to talk to him about when he returned.

Amber leaned on the porch railing and watched the men cross the grounds. Darkness, closing in on the ranch, sent deep shadows in every direction. The ranch was quiet now, but she imagined it would be brimming with life in a few days when the rodeo started. She listened to the crickets. The wind had died down and the heat enveloped her like clammy phantom fingers. Nearby bushes moved. Amber got the prickly feeling that someone was watching her. She rubbed her arms. What if the killer suspected she had the missing package and assumed she'd seen his face? Suppose he believed as Matt did that she knew all about whatever was going on? And what if the faceless person had somehow followed her here? It was absurd, but—

She glanced around, then rushed into the safety of the house. She found Molly in the living room reading to Alicia and Sara Jane. When Amber sat down on the couch, Alicia climbed up on her lap, clinging to her Barbie doll. Amber gave Alicia a hug and treasured the normality of holding this child she'd grown to love like her own.

The doll tumbled to the floor and Amber picked it up and returned it to Alicia. An image flashed into Amber's mind—the naked Barbie with the tangled hair and missing leg—it wasn't her doll at all! It was a doll her Grandmother Meta had taken home to repair. Memories flooded Amber's mind. Grandma had repaired dolls year-round, and in Amber's teens, she'd worked by the gentle woman's side repainting faces and making clothes for the dolls. At big yearly Christmas parties at the community center, her grandma and she would dress up like Mrs. Claus and her elf to give out the beautiful dolls to eager, smiling children. Relief washed over Amber—the Barbie wasn't a bad symbol of her childhood—it was part of a cherished tradition she'd shared with her grandma.

Amber's throat constricted as she remembered something else—three years ago her snowy-haired grandma had slipped away in her sleep, leaving her alone. Amber had buried herself in work and school, but nothing eased the pain. Living in her grandma's house was a constant reminder of her loss, and each day the loneliness grew more and more unbearable. Mr. Rhoades' job offer had been her escape.

Amber frowned. What about her parents? Why was she living with her grandma? She closed her eyes and more memory hit her in a jarring blow. Her parents had been killed in a car crash when she was five. Grandma had raised her. Amber willed her pounding heart to settle down. She kissed the top of Alicia's head, recalling the torment of losing a mother at a tender age. If only she could stay around and make the motherless journey easier for Alicia.

With a resounding clap, Molly closed the storybook. "That's it girls," she told the children, "time for bed."

With effort, Amber shoved her personal bombshell aside, and then she and Molly carried Alicia and Sara Jane up to bed.

After they tucked the girls in, Amber and Molly met in the kitchen for Lipton's Sun Spree strawberry tea and grilled cheese sandwiches. A silence had fallen between them. Molly toyed with her spoon, stirring the liquid beyond any possible need, her eyes not quite meeting Amber's. "Matt said you have amnesia?"

Amber's heart thudded. Did everyone know? "I'm starting to get my memory back in dribs and drabs. I'm sorry I misled you about who I am. But I simply didn't know."

"Matt called Dr. De La Fuente and verified your illness. I wasn't surprised you have amnesia. I sensed something like that the first time we met. Your eyes were guarded, leery—like I felt when I had amnesia." Her lips turned up slightly in the corners. "You have nothing to fear from us, Amber. We're okay folks, once you get to know us."

Amber managed to return a small smile. Molly understood. A weight lifted from Amber's shoulders. "Did it all come back? Your memory, I mean?"

Molly nodded. "It took months, getting flashes, then one day I just remembered everything."

"What caused you to lose your memory?"

Molly explained that while she was in the Witness Protection Program, the agents guarding her had been murdered and her baby kidnapped. "When the killers took my baby, I went off the deep end. Matt rescued Sara Jane, but the killers came after us again."

Amber's stomach knotted. It was bad enough that someone might be after her, but if they targeted an innocent child . . . She squeezed Molly's hand, wanting to comfort her and not knowing how.

“Matt and Luke were unstoppable heroes,” Molly continued. “Both of them got shot, but injuries didn’t stop them. Protecting me is how Luke got the tip of his ear shot off, in case you wondered about that.”

Amber had figured there was an interesting story behind it, but she would’ve never asked.

“Only the grace of God spared his hearing,” Molly said.

Amber silently added her own thanks. It seemed her Luke was a very brave man. *Her Luke?* What was she thinking?

Molly was drawing little grooves in the table cloth with the edge of her spoon. “In the end, Luke and Matt worked together like a whole posse. They stormed into the hotel room and saved everyone. You’re lucky they’re in your corner.”

Amber wasn’t sure Matt was in her corner. But maybe she’d misjudged him, too. Perhaps all this wariness was just part of her illness like Dr. De La Fuente had said. But she couldn’t rationalize away Elmer’s murder, or her feeling of being watched.

“I’ve been where you are,” Molly said, touching Amber’s hand. “If you need me, I’m here.”

“Thanks. Just knowing someone understands how lost and disoriented I feel helps.” She had felt a thready connection with Molly from the beginning, but now it seemed stronger, almost like they were sisters. With no other living family in her life, this developing bond meant a lot.

Wanda stuck her head in the door. “Amber, telephone.” She held out a cell phone.

Amber stiffened. “No one knows I’m here.” *Please, let that be true.*

“Take it easy,” Molly said. “It’s probably just Luke calling from the barn.”

Wanda shook her head. “No, I would’ve recognized his voice.” She shoved the phone a little closer and laughed. “Why don’t you just say hello and find out for yourself?”

Amber hesitated.

Molly gave Amber’s arm a supportive squeeze. “Maybe it’s Dr. De La Fuente. He knows you’re here.”

Amber gave a nervous laugh. “Of course. Why didn’t I think of that?” She wiped her damp palms on the side of her jeans. Still, her hands trembled as she put the phone to her ear. “Hello?” she said tentatively.

She heard breathing . . . even and calm . . .

Her throat went dry. “Hello?” she barked.

Chapter Eight

Luke swallowed his disappointment as he met seven of the new vaqueros. None of them gave him reason to be suspicious. They all denied any knowledge of the Ryan spread and were willing to have their photographs taken for identification. The other five new hires had gone to Mitchell's Corner to party and wouldn't be back until late. He had hoped to cut trouble from the herd before it struck. Now, he had to wait until morning to question the missing men.

He joined Matt and Buck to set up the temporary ticket booth for the charity rodeo. Darkness had crept up on them, and they had to work by portable floodlights. With the three of them pitching in, the cubicle went up fast. Luke nailed the last board. Then, leaving Matt and Buck talking to a neighbor who'd come to help, he headed for the main house.

Only one of the seven days had passed. Waiting for the drug to wash from Amber's system was like walking a narrow rail—one misstep and he'd fall. He tightened his jaw. Six more long days. He remembered her fiery kisses and wanted more. Hell, he wanted it all. He wanted to wake up in the morning and smell her hair—see it spilling across his pillow. No matter what happened, he couldn't imagine himself feeling any different from the way he felt now. No matter what her history might be or what she might have gotten herself mixed up in, he wanted her in his bed.

Hustling along, he hoped she was still up. Amber Miles. He repeated the name to himself. Now he had a valid name, and sooner or later, he'd have to deal with her background. He shook his head. A twenty-year-old woman taking a traveling job with a man of uncertain character raised questions. Had Rhoades drawn her into something illegal? Luke couldn't buy it. He couldn't be wrong about her core of sweetness. He had spent hours watching the tape, getting to know her every gesture . . . falling for her quick smile, her laughing eyes. With her on the road, it wasn't likely she had a husband somewhere. But what about a boyfriend?

Luke frowned. Her romantic life was not an issue. He had to concentrate on keeping Amber safe, and help her remember what had led up to the shooting. The more he could learn about her, the easier those two things would be.

The minute Luke entered the living room he knew something was wrong. His mom was wringing her hands, and Molly nibbled at her lower lip. Amber, looking pale, rushed up to him. He searched her face and found glints of fear in her eyes.

"What is it?" he asked, taking her icy hands in his steady grip.

"A guy called here and asked for me. When I took the phone all I heard was breathing, even, calm . . . chilling, frightening."

Luke cursed under his breath. Without a memory to gauge the danger, Amber's fear had to be tenfold, imagining faceless enemies behind every shadow. "Who else talked to him?"

"I did," Virginia said, her forehead wrinkling into deep worry furrows. "He had a radio announcer's voice. Sounded formal, maybe a Latino, not local."

“Good description, Mom. Don’t worry. We’ll get to the bottom of this.” He grabbed Amber’s arm. “I need to talk to you alone.” He turned to his mother. “Can you sit with Alicia for a while?”

“My pleasure,” she said in a cheery tone, but her expression remained tight.

Luke darted a glance at Molly. “Matt said to tell you he’ll only be about fifteen minutes longer. So warm up the . . .” Luke forced a light tone and arched a teasing eyebrow. “Whatever it is you usually warm up for my brother.”

His attempt at humor fell flat. Without another word, he and Amber headed for the barn.

The Texas sky hung above them, black as newly pumped oil, scattered with glittering stars, the darkness broken only by two floodlights in the distance and the porch lights behind them. The dual lighting threw grotesque, elongated double shadows ahead and behind.

“I sense the caller close by, feel him watching me,” Amber said rubbing her arms as they hurried across the compound.

Luke glanced around. He wished he could ease her fears and make the danger go away. “It was just a phone call.”

“Just a phone call?”

He winced at her wounded look. “That didn’t come out right.” Damn. He had meant to comfort her and failed. “I meant to say that the SOB is calling because he can’t get to you any other way. I’ll ask Matt to put a call tracer on the line.”

Amber mulled that over, then asked, “Did you know that Matt called Dr. De La Fuente to verify my amnesia?”

Luke shook his head. “But it’s Matt’s nature to check everything. See it as a positive thing, and be glad he’s on your side.”

“Why does everyone keep saying that? I’m not at all sure he is.”

“What can I say to convince you?”

“Forget it.” Abruptly, she stopped walking and faced him. Her eyes flashed, looking greener than the deepest part of Verde creek. “Now, what’s going on?” she demanded. “Why did you talk to Buck’s new hires?”

Three passing vaqueros looked them over with curiosity.

“Not here in the open.” Luke drew Amber inside the barn. She trembled against him and his awareness of how small and vulnerable she looked, how scared, shook him to the core. The doctor had said to keep her as calm as possible. Luke grabbed two grooming brushes from a shelf and handed her one. “Something about caring for horses makes troubles ride drag. Cowboy therapy, we call it.”

Amber rolled her eyes but followed him into the stall where Buck's quarter horse, Sandalwood, munched on straw.

Luke began to smooth the horse's coat in long strokes. "Come on, try it."

Amber gave Sandalwood's shiny coat several halfhearted brushstrokes, then stopped. "Well? What about the new hires?"

Luke sighed. He admired her tenacity, but worried that his answers might increase her anxiety. On the other hand, she had a right to know that the danger had climbed another notch. "Mando's attack might somehow be a part of all this. His attacker stole our horse, Blaze. Then Blaze showed up on the ranch. The stallion could've returned on his own, but it's possible that someone rode him back to the ranch."

"What are you saying?"

"Shortly after our horse showed up, so did some strangers, looking for work. One of them could've been the horse thief. And although it's a stretch, he could be the man who killed Elmer."

To soften the impact of his words Luke took some sugar cubes from his pocket and gave a few to Amber. "Sandalwood loves sugar."

Absently, Amber opened her hand and let the horse gently nibble the cubes from her palm. Two tiny wrinkles formed on the bridge of her nose. "So it's good we left?" she asked in a puzzled tone.

"Yes and no. We weren't hiring—but Buck was—so Alfonso referred the strangers here."

Amber's face paled. "You think the killer might be among Buck's recent hires!" Her voice cracked like a dry twig. She left the stall and sank on a bale of hay. Bracing her arms on her knees, she held her head between her palms.

Luke followed and squatted in front of her. She raised her head, and the worried look in her eyes reached down inside of him and gripped his heart like a fist of foreboding. He took her hand in his and kissed her knuckles. "Easy," he said in the same low tone that he used to quiet a skittish horse. "This is still speculation. We're not sure those guys who came to our ranch are here. Or if the killer is among them."

"Aren't we? What about the phone call? What about my sense of someone watching me? Oh, God . . ." She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. After a moment, she gave her long tresses a determined shake and lifted her chin. "Okay. Okay," she said as though the words gave her focus. "Buck's new hires—you talked to them. What did they say?"

Luke admired her brave fight to hold onto her courage. He wanted to take her in his arms, comfort her. But he couldn't trust himself to keep things platonic. "No red flags with the seven I talked to," he said. "Five went into town to party. I'll talk to them in the morning."

“Oh, just great.” Her expression darkened. “Oh, well. What good will it do to talk to them anyway? Do you really expect one of them to say, ‘I’m the guy who’s after Amber’? I don’t think so!” Unsteady, she rose to her feet. “I have to get away from here.”

A group of vaqueros entered the far end of the barn, laughing and joking. Luke drew her into the shadows of an empty stall. “Running isn’t the answer,” he said in a low voice. “If a killer followed you here, he could follow you anywhere. We have to find him and stop him.”

“How?” She sank to the stall floor and patted a spot beside her. “And I want straight answers! What are you looking for?”

He slid down the opposite wall and sat across from her, not wanting to test his willpower by sitting next to her. “Uneasiness, a guarded look in the eyes—”

“As concrete as all that?” Her sarcasm cut the air like a whip. “A red flag to me would be proof that one or more of those men stopped at your ranch before coming here. If Alfonso referred some vaqueros to Buck, he can identify them, right?”

“But he’s not here.”

“What about photos?”

“We’ll take some and fax them to Alfonso. But that’ll take time.”

“What about Roberto? Maybe he saw them, too.”

“I thought of that. But he and Suzy hit out for the open range on horseback. If I read those two right, I’d say they won’t be back until late. I’ll talk to him in the morning.”

Amber looked more frightened than he’d ever seen her. And she had every right to be. Without her complete memory, any stranger could spell danger. Luke’s arms ached to hold her, give her his strength.

“Roberto said he expected to see me here,” she said. “Why? And who else knew I’d be here?”

Luke tried for an unruffled voice. “Tita probably mentioned it to him. Or Matt. Or Mando. Maybe Alfonso.”

“Gee, why didn’t you just tell the whole blasted ranch?”

“Damn it, when I agreed to help with the charity rodeo, I didn’t even know you. And at the time, my plans sure as hell weren’t any secret!”

She lowered her eyes.

“Look,” he said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have shouted.”

She laughed. “So much for your cowboy therapy.”

“Yeah, well nothing works a hundred percent.”

Somehow Amber had managed to hang on to her sense of humor even in the face of danger. He had a reckless urge to show his admiration for her courage with a long, passionate kiss. But he didn't dare. He took a deep breath to rein in desire. “I've been thinking about the package you mailed to Rhoades's sister. Any ideas what might've been in it?”

“By the shape and weight, maybe a journal or ledger.”

Luke stroked his jaw. “Hmmm. A nervous, wealthy entrepreneur. Rumors of connections to a Vegas crime boss. A mailed register or journal. Then some guys broke in. Next, the entrepreneur gets murdered.”

Amber shuddered. “And I woke up with the murder weapon in my hand.”

“An obvious frame. I believe we're thinking the same thing—that the package might be the key to everything. If only you could remember more about Rhoades's dealings.”

“I told you all I remember. He bought businesses in trouble. He was going to see a man at the MGM Hotel about buying a plastics firm that was near bankruptcy.”

“A name would help.”

She rubbed her forehead. “Don't you think I know that?”

The desperation in her voice reached inside him and squeezed his heart. He took a fortifying breath. “What about those letters Rhoades sent to Senator Whitmore? With government contracts involved, I'll bet Whitmore could give us some helpful names.”

“What if the senator's the man behind the killings and the one who ordered a hit on me?” Amber asked, her fragile emotions growing more intense.

Luke's gut tightened. “Do you have some reason to think that?”

“I don't know. . . . I guess not. But don't you see? It could be anyone from the senator to some Las Vegas crime boss. Or even the owner of the plastics factory. Or goodness knows who else.” Tears welled in her eyes. “And the worst part is, they know me but I don't know them.”

A pulse throbbed in her throat. He longed to touch the pulsing point with his fingers to soothe her and lower her stress level. “Let's table this for tonight. Tomorrow Matt should have Coco's address in Richmond, and we—”

“We? That's what I want to talk to you about. The way Matt was talking earlier, it sounded like he was taking over. And once I have the address, I intend to go alone.”

“Alone?” Since they’d met he’d been on the edge of a cliff, fighting to keep his balance, and now she’d kicked the earth from beneath his boots. “Get it through your head, Amber. You’re not alone in this.”

“But if the cops or Feds get to the package first, I might never know the contents. And if the package is the key to Mr. Rhoades’s murder, it could be what I need to prove I’m innocent.”

“I’ll get Matt to back off—but it’s us! You’re not going anywhere alone. Got it?”

She nodded. But the defiant look that flickered in her eyes worried him. “I mean it, Amber. You’re still vulnerable from the effects of the drugs the doctor gave you. I’m responsible for you, and I take that very seriously.”

“I see,” she said softly.

He didn’t have a clue what she meant by “I see,” but he got the disturbing feeling that a hurricane was brewing in Amber’s mind.

“Luke, I have to leave tonight. With me here, you and Alicia could be in danger, too. Maybe even your whole family.”

Luke shook his head. Amber amazed him. Even when surrounded by trouble, she thought of others. “Matt and I have already set up safeguards. Tomorrow I’ll fly you to Richmond to talk to Coco. I’m sticking with you through this.”

“Why?” Her lip trembled.

He ached to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he didn’t dare get that close to her while he was feeling vulnerable himself. “Because right now, I’m all you have,” he said more gruffly than he’d intended.

“Oh,” she said softly. She lowered her lashes and nibbled her bottom lip.

“I reckon that wasn’t exactly the answer you’d hoped for.”

She shrugged. “It’s honest. Direct.”

Her disappointed tone made him want to say more, but his cautious side warned it wasn’t wise. Everything had gotten tipped upside down. He’d hired Amber so he could keep Alicia with him and wouldn’t have to rely on family to care for her. Now he was planning to leave his daughter with his mom while he traipsed all over hell and gone with Amber—a hundred and eighty degrees off center from his original plans. It wasn’t her fault she’d brought more trouble into his life, but a small part of him resented that he’d let her do it. Not only had he let her, but he’d insisted on facing the trouble with her.

His screwed up emotions were damned crazy, especially when he wasn’t sure where his feelings for her were going. All he knew for sure was that he’d left the chute too fast and his emotions were bucking and twisting out of control.

When he'd met Amber, he could have chosen to slam the chute gate closed before it was too late, but once he charged through into the arena and felt the sizzling chemistry between them, there was no going back. And now something more serious, more frightening, was happening—his heart was involved.

* * * *

By the time Luke and Amber landed at Chesterfield County Airport, rented a flashy cardinal Mercury Mystique, and drove the fifteen miles into Richmond, a bloodred sunset had inflamed the stately cluster of skyscrapers and the ribbon of the James River with an ominous glow that reached inside Amber and seared her nerve endings. Was her sense of foreboding the result of last night's phone call, or her fear of what might lay ahead?

A little girl about Alicia's age waved from the back window of a Toyota Camry. Amber waved back, missing Alicia already. But with danger in the wind, Alicia was better off with Virginia—out of harm's way.

Luke frowned and darted a sharp look at Amber.

"Is something wrong?" she asked softly.

He shook his head. "We're almost there."

He left I-95, traveled several miles, then turned onto a tree-lined street that snaked through a neighborhood of modest colonial homes nestled between green hundred-year-old umbrella elms and spruces. Coco Rhoades's house had a deserted, forlorn aura. The front door stood wide open and all the lights were ablaze. No noise came from inside. Amber's neck prickled. "Something doesn't feel right here."

Luke pulled into the driveway, his eyes narrowing.

A slim woman with silvery-blue tresses and big fuzzy slippers on her feet scurried out onto the porch next door and waved at them with a smoking cigarette between her manicured fingers. Her bulging eyes scrutinized them for a moment. "You with the police?"

"Let me do the talking," Luke told Amber in a low voice. His expression hardened with the same determined, don't-give-me-any-argument expression she'd seen last night in the barn. He got out of the car and smiled at the woman. "May I be of assistance, Ma'am?"

The woman took a couple of quick drags on her cigarette, sending smoke curling into the air. "It just happened, officer. When Coco pulled into her driveway, two burglars raced out of her house. They grabbed her and forced her into the back seat of a black van."

Amber clasped her throat. *Oh, no.*

"It was a Toyota 4Runner SR5. I know the model," the woman said with importance in her voice, "because my son just bought one a few months ago. Has running boards like old-time cars."

“Get a license number?” Luke asked.

“Paint splattered, but it was Nevada plates.” Her smoker’s voice cracked. “Headed North toward I-Ninety-Five.”

“Amber, stay with her.” Luke’s collaborating look said more than his words.

“Gotcha. We’re on the same wave length.” Her job was to calm the woman and get more information. If she could get a peek into Coco’s house before the cops got there—

“If I can spot the van,” Luke said, “I’ll relay the location to the cops.” As he opened the door of their Mercury, he paused and looked at the woman. “Like to clear something up, ma’am. I’m not an officer, but we are here to help.”

Amber’s respect for Luke soared. She was glad he was playing it straight, even though the woman would probably clam up now. In spite of the hot nerves jumping along her spine, she tried for a calming tone. “I’m Amber,” she said as Luke sped away.

“Evie Pimpleton.” Evie paused and gulped for air, as though running the last leg of a marathon. “It sounded like a demolition crew over at Coco’s place,” she said, shaking her head. “I came outside to see what was going on.”

“Let’s take a look,” Amber said and was surprised when the woman agreed.

Amber furrowed her brow as she caught a whiff of Evie’s whiskey breath. How reliable was a half-crocked witness? But Evie was right about the condition of Coco’s house. It looked like a tornado had blown through, drawers dumped, shelves cleared. Broken vases and lamps littered the floor. Whatever the intruders had been looking for, chances are they hadn’t found it, or they wouldn’t have had to grab Coco. That could mean that the package was still around somewhere.

“Do you know if Coco received any packages in the last week or so?”

“As a matter of fact, she did. I’ve kept it for her. She’s been away at an insurance seminar, and I didn’t get a chance to tell her that the mailman left it with me.”

Suddenly aware that they had invaded a crime scene, Amber stepped outside and Evie followed. “May I see it?”

Evie hesitated.

“I sent her a package,” Amber said. “That’s why we’re here. It’s about the size of a ledger. The sender was Coco’s brother—my boss, Phillip Rhoades. Return address was the same as the mailing address.”

Evie searched Amber’s face with her big eyes, then headed for her house, and disappeared inside. Amber followed and waited on the porch. She crossed her fingers, hoping the woman hadn’t ditched her. Be nice to have a watch. It seemed like Luke had been gone forever. Molly had said he

was daring. A hero. What if he found the 4Runner and, rather than wait for the police, tried to rescue Coco himself? Amber closed her eyes. If anything happened to Luke, Alicia would lose her daddy, her only living parent, and Amber knew she'd never forgive herself.

Evie returned with the package.

Amber's heart pounded. "That's it!" *Oh, God.* The cops were on their way here . . . she couldn't let them confiscate it. "I'm sure you know Coco's brother was murdered."

"Tragic," Evie murmured, smoothing the brown wrapping with shaky fingers.

"The package could help me find his killer. Even stop other killings."

Evie furrowed her brow. "But you're not with the police?"

"No, but I worked for Mr. Rhoades, and Coco would have given it to me herself if those men hadn't grabbed her."

Evie bit her lip. "Kidnapping . . . murder. I'm so confused. Won't the police want the package for evidence or something?"

"They don't know about it."

A desperate tightness in Amber's chest made breathing difficult. If she were in Evie's place, she wouldn't give up the package to a stranger, especially under the circumstances. Amber felt like grabbing it and running.

Luke screeched to a stop in the driveway. Amber sighed in relief. He was safe.

With a tight jaw, Luke climbed from behind the wheel and joined them on Evie's porch. "No sign of the kidnappers." He turned to Evie. "Cops should be here by now, right?"

Evie nodded, looking like a mouse with nowhere to run.

"Tell the officers what you told me about the kidnapping," Luke said hurriedly. He grabbed Amber's arm and gave it a little yank. "I need your help. Maybe with two of us looking, we can find the 4Runner before it gets too dark."

Amber dug in her heels and refused to budge. She gestured to Evie. "She has it."

Luke met Amber's gaze with a look that said, "Good going," then focused on Evie. "Hanging on to that could be extremely dangerous for you."

Evie frowned. "Dangerous?"

Amber gently touched Evie's arm. "Maybe for anyone to even know you ever had it. You saw the condition of Coco's house and the ruthlessness of men who tore it up. If they believe you have what they were looking for, they might do the same thing to your place. Or worse."

“Information in the package could help us find Coco and get her home safely,” Luke chimed in. “And save you from—”

“Enough,” Evie said, waving a trembling hand to ward off any more talk. She glanced up and down the street, and then shoved the package into Amber’s hands. “Don’t tell anyone I gave this to you.”

“You did the right thing.” Luke grabbed Amber’s arm and gestured with his head for her to get into the car.

“Put on your seatbelt, and hang on.” They sped away just as two police units skidded around the corner. “We could be in big trouble,” Luke said.

Amber gave a tight nod and clutched the package to her chest, imagining that electricity radiated from it. spurts of adrenaline rushed to her brain. Fuzzy memories skittered about at the far edges of her mind just beyond reach. She could scarcely breathe as she ripped off the brown paper.

Her heart galloped with excitement. “It is the journal!”

“Couldn’t wait, could you?” His eyes glinted with amusement.

“You’re just as curious. I saw you glance over here.” She flipped through the pages.

“Well?” he asked.

She gave a small sly smile. “Mostly handwritten entries followed by columns of numbers. In the back there’re hand-drawn engineering designs and some printed maps.”

“What do you make of it?” He sounded tense.

“Getting too dark to zero in on anything specific, but the break-in at Coco’s place has me convinced that I have something very important in my hands.”

“And very dangerous,” he said, his tone ominous.

A chill ran through her, and she rubbed her arms. “Coco is the one in immediate trouble.”

He nodded, his face solemn.

They drove silently until they’d reached I-95, and then they both scanned the traffic for any vehicle that resembled the 4Runner.

Amber cleared her throat. “I keep thinking about how terrified she must be.”

“Me, too.” Luke’s voice was hoarse with emotion.

His capacity to care about people warmed Amber’s heart. “The murderer tortured Elmer before he killed him.” Amber winced as vivid images gripped her mind. She forced them back into the

darkness and concentrated on watching for vans. They drove for miles, circling, backtracking, and alert to every black van until complete darkness made it impossible to distinguish one vehicle from another.

Amber stole a glance at Luke. He looked as miserable as she felt. He met her gaze briefly and covered her hand with his. "I'm sorry. We've done all we can."

"I know. But I wish—"

Ahead, several police cars with flashing lights lined the roadside. Uniformed officers were slowing traffic and selectively pulling cars over. "Something's going on." Amber couldn't keep the anxiety from her voice.

"Probably a roadblock for drunk drivers," Luke said calmly. "It's too much to hope that it's the cops looking for the kidnappers."

"I gave Evie my name." Amber dug her nails into the seat. "What if the cops are looking for me—their missing murder suspect?"

"You're overreacting. Police communication between Texas and Virginia over what is probably considered a small-potatoes murder isn't likely." He touched her knee. "Don't act guilty. Let me do the talking." Luke slowed as they approached the pull-off zone. A policeman with a flashlight waved them on.

Amber sighed in relief. "Thank you, God." After her heart returned to its normal beat, she said, "What's next?"

Luke laughed. "The way you can shift moods amazes me." The admiration in his tone caressed her like a gentle breeze.

"In answer to your question," he continued, "we'll get some food and a place to spend the night. Then take a good look at that journal."

Would they get two rooms? Right now, the last thing she wanted was to be alone with her thoughts.

Chapter Nine

The kidnapping and the elusive memories still lurking in the shadows of her mind disoriented Amber, and she struggled to regain her composure. Luke had gone inside the motel office to register them. He could decide whether it was to be room or rooms. She was too off-balance to face the risk of further rejection. Luke had kept his distance from her since he had kissed her in the garden, and even avoided touching her. His aloofness hurt, especially now when she desperately needed to be held.

He'd claimed he was sticking by her because she had no one else. His impersonal declaration should have thrown ice water on her desires, but she knew he wanted her. Obviously, he had decided, as she should have, that there were too many reasons they shouldn't let things get more complicated. The fact that he had brought her to live under his roof to care for his child was reason enough to keep their relationship dispassionate. Now that he knew she was a suspect in a murder case and the target for a killer he should send her packing. Any ordinary man would. His unwavering loyalty showed notable character. She should be satisfied with that.

Luke strode out of the office, a single key in his hand. Her expression must have revealed her surprise because he said, "Any objections? With the black 4Runner in the area, it's safer if we stick together."

Unable to speak, she shook her head. Opposing emotions of relief and tension played tug-of-war on her nerves. He grabbed the overnight bags from the trunk, and she followed him to a nearby room. She welcomed the cool air that blasted her hot cheeks as he shoved the door aside. He flicked on the lights. Table lamps cast a soft luminescence on two double beds and revealed the shadowy, narrow distance between them.

He tossed his Stetson onto one of beds to stake his claim. "This one's mine. It's closest to the door," Luke said. "An intruder will hafta get past me to get to you."

Did he really expect an attack? She leaned against the dresser and folded her arms to keep herself together, calm. "Ever hear that a hat on the bed is bad luck?"

He laughed. "Only if I sit on it."

After putting their bags on the luggage racks at the foot of the beds, Luke grabbed the phone. "Gotta check with the cops about Coco. If they got out an APB fast enough, their roving units might've closed in on the 4Runner by now."

Before he could finish dialing, and without thinking about how close it would bring her to Luke, Amber lunged forward and disconnected the line. "Is that wise?" she asked, feeling a surge of panic. "You could end up giving more info than you get. Why don't you call Matt and let him check for us?"

Luke's head jerked back in surprise. "I thought you wanted to keep Matt out of this?"

The question in his voice was unmistakable. Her cheeks grew hotter. "Things have changed. If Evie didn't tell the cops about us, why do anything to call attention to ourselves?"

Luke rubbed his jaw. “Good thinking. Matt can ask questions without involving us.”

He quickly called his brother, and after he finished explaining about the kidnapping, as he listened for several minutes, his face darkened like a storm cloud. “You gonna help us or not?” he growled. “A woman’s life’s at stake.” He was silent again, his jaw tight. Apparently Matt was chewing him out for getting involved with her. “Let me worry about that,” he said finally. “Call my cell phone when you have some news.”

After Luke hung up, he said, “It’ll take Matt some time to check on it.”

Amber bit her lip. There had to be something they could do on this end to speed things up. She sat down on the bed, grabbed the phone book, and thumbed through the pages until she found Evie’s number. “It’s a long shot, but maybe Evie has heard something by now.”

“Worth a try,” Luke drawled, his slow gaze taking in the bed—and her on it.

He braced one hand on the wall, which brought him almost directly above her. His stance lengthened the line of his torso and revealed the long, tapering lines of his lean body. A male model couldn’t look better than he did in that well-fitting chambray shirt and those tight Levi’s.

When Evie’s line rang repeatedly, the fine hairs at Amber’s neck prickled. What if those men had come back? She let the line ring much longer than reasonable before hanging up. She forced a lightness to her tone. “So much for that idea.”

Luke watched her. Shadows fell across his face, accenting the scar on his cheek and the missing tip of his ear. She looked away from the storm in his eyes to find herself staring down at the bed. With heat rising from the pulsing hollow in her neck, her gaze flew back to his, and she jumped to her feet. It was a mistake. It brought her mere inches from Luke. She pressed a hand against his chest to keep from falling into him.

She cleared her throat. “What’ll we do now?”

His wide shoulders and impressive chest made him look strong enough to do most anything he wanted. Although he looked downright intimidating, even dangerous, his woodsy aftershave and sexy male scent coiled around her like the loop of a lasso and drew her to him. She stepped back and bumped the edge of the bed. Why didn’t he say something? His even breathing whispered off the walls. Although she didn’t want to be alone with her thoughts, could she handle spending the night with a man who exuded such raw, hard-edged sensuality?

The clock on the nightstand blinked eight thirty. It had been a long time since they’d eaten. Still, with her worries over Coco and concerns about her own will power, she might not be able to do more than push food around her plate. Nevertheless, she needed to get out of there. She cleared her throat. “What about that food you mentioned earlier? The restaurant here looks promising. Sorta quaint and local. Maybe we can get some authentic Virginia ham or something.”

A slow grin spread across his face. “That’ll work. We can check out the journal while we wait for our order. But don’t you want to freshen up first?”

She'd love to shower and change into a dress, but that meant taking off her clothes. She grabbed her purse and the journal and headed out the door. "I'm fresh enough," she said over her shoulder. Good grief, she sounded like an idiot. "That is . . . I'm fine."

Minutes later, Amber exhaled in relief when the hostess led them to a deserted section of the restaurant. While she didn't want to linger in a bedroom with Luke and his sexuality, she also didn't want to face curious eyes, especially when she couldn't seem to control the heat that kept rising in her cheeks. She shouldn't have been that warm since the windowless tropical room felt as cool as a cave.

The hostess stopped and gestured to a booth. When Amber slid into it, Luke followed. Her startled gaze met his. "This way, we can read the journal together," he drawled

She nodded, wishing her heart wouldn't race every time he came near. She looked away. A soft roar echoed from a recirculating waterfall that fed into a stone pool. A gentle mist coated stalks of the leafy exotic plants at the water's edge. The cooling moisture swirled around them like a cocoon, making her feel even more vulnerable to the romantic setting. She fanned herself with the menu, then set it aside without reading it. She ordered the special the waitress, Sandy, recommended—Virginia ham with raisin sauce.

"Make it two," Luke said in a husky voice that hummed through Amber like low saxophone tones. *Journal! Concentrate on the journal!*

A rustic candelabra in the center of the room and a wall sconce just above their heads provided barely sufficient light, but reading here was better than the distraction of two beds and a very masculine cowboy. Fighting his untamed sexuality with steely determination, she fixed her gaze on the page. An intriguing seven-figure number grabbed her attention. "Looks like a partial set of books for the plastics firm Mr. Rhoades wanted to buy," she said, amazed at the steadiness in her voice. "Look at this. There's a strange entry for two hundred thousand dollars labeled other income."

Luke pointed to a pencil notation in the margin that read "revenue from explosives." "I don't like this," he said. "Let's take a squint at the maps at the back." He moved closer; pressed his thigh against hers, which sent a warmth through her; and flipped through the pages.

"What do you make of these maps?" Her voice came out in a squeak.

"Not sure," he said as though he hadn't noticed. "One is in an unpopulated area of Nevada near the nuclear test site." He tapped one of the construction layouts. "This must be the plastics plant."

Amber narrowed her focus to the drawing and shivered. "Plastics firm. Explosives. Remote nuclear test site. I don't like what I'm thinking."

"Good Lord!" Luke said, yanking the journal closer. "I expected this to be about casinos and gambling, but it's looking a helluva lot more sinister."

When Sandy brought the steaming baked potatoes and ham, Amber pushed it aside. Wild scenarios chased one another in her head. "What if this is about espionage . . . or terrorism?"

Luke took a deep breath and met her gaze. “Whatever it is, we can’t sit on it.”

He gestured to Sandy, who hurried to the table and frowned at their untouched plates. “Something wrong, sir?”

“Not with the food or service. Where’s the nearest copy shop?”

“At the strip mall on Peach Blossom Avenue, ’bout two blocks south.” She paused and glanced at her watch. “Closes in a half hour, though.”

Grabbing Amber’s hand, Luke told Sandy, “There’s an extra ten in it for you if you package this food up to go and keep it warm until we get back.”

* * * *

On the way to the copy shop Luke explained his plan, certain Amber wasn’t going to like it. But if the security of the country was at stake . . . “We’ll fax a copy of the suspicious pages to Matt. If he agrees with our assessment, he can forward them to the FBI. I’ll take a full hard copy to him, too. He’ll want to see the whole thing and probably send it on too.” Luke darted a sideways glance at Amber. “Here’s the part you might balk at. We gotta make a copy for the local cops, in case there’s a clue in there to help them find Coco.”

“And help them find me.” Her voice was soft, resigned.

“I’ll figure out a way to get a copy to them without involving you.”

“It doesn’t matter. This is bigger than me. Bigger than my amnesia, bigger than a murder charge.”

Luke reached over and patted Amber’s icy hand. He wanted to stop the car and kiss her, let her know how proud he was of her, but they had to get to the copy shop before it closed.

The minute the shop manager laid eyes on Amber, he was all smiles. He was a surfer-blond jerk with a John Wayne swagger. “Do you plan to copy that whole journal?” he asked with his smile still in place.

“I know it’s almost closing.” Amber’s voice was soft, fetching. “So we’ll hurry like the wind. But if we’re in the middle of our project when you’re ready to lock the doors, you aren’t going to kick us out, are you?”

He assured her with a wink that, for her, he would be happy to stay as long as she needed. Luke frowned. The smiling jerk was looking at Amber like she was the latest model copier with all the bells and whistles.

“Got a spine remover to detach this cover?” Amber asked.

Surfer Dude pointed to a gadget on an assembling table.

“Thanks.” Amber slid the coiled spine into the machine and slammed the handle down. The coil opened, and she lifted the pages free.

Impressed, Luke shook his head. He had never seen a gadget like that. He would have just ripped the cover off. This was much neater. Quicker.

She handed him half of the pages. “We’ll use two machines and split the work for teamwork and speed.”

The manager was still ogling Amber. Luke grabbed her arm and ushered her to the back. It wasn’t like she was dressed fancy. She was still in her traveling duds. But her Levi’s fit across her hips and over her cute little butt like a tight leather glove, and the green tank top that barely captured the swell of her breasts revealed a deep shadow that a man could get lost in. Luke had an urge to take off his shirt, wrap it around her, and secure all the snaps from high on her neck to below her hips.

Amber finished copying before he did and took additional pages. It felt right working with her. Even though he was a bit slower, they made a damned good team. By the time they had made the hard copies and had faxed the disturbing pages to Matt, they had stayed twenty minutes past closing. Luke tipped the manager two tens for being so accommodating. Of course, he knew it was only because the guy got an itch for Amber that they hadn’t been kicked out.

The manager looked straight at Amber and pressed a card into her hand. “Come again soon. We’ll work out a generous discount next time.”

As they left the shop, Luke glanced back, then possessively wrapped his arm around Amber’s shoulders.

* * * *

Amber looked up at Luke, puzzled. He was touching her again—a very possessive touch that sent flames coursing through her. He certainly knew how to keep her off balance.

Minutes later, as though on a holiday instead of on the fringes of something very scary, they cruised down the street in their Mercury Mystique, windows open, wind blowing her hair, with the radio playing “Let Me Into Your Heart” by Mary Chapin Carpenter.

Amber forced herself to relax into the seat. “Now what?”

“Police department. We’ll drop off the copy, then go eat. A ten-minute detour at the most.”

She laughed and shook her head. “You make things sound so simple.”

“Most things are easy if you think them through. Police stations are probably a lot like the pokey in the sheriff’s office, where I spent many unlucky nights sobering up. If you pick the right hour, when things are hectic, a guy can be darn right invisible.”

“I wonder if you ever drank as much as you think you did?”

He let out a long exhale. “Probably more.”

She reached over and touched his hand. “If you were as wild as you’ve led me to believe, I’d say you’ve come a long way.”

“It’s a stupid man who forgets his past and fails to learn from it.”

“What about a woman who closes out her past?”

“It’ll all come back. I have an idea that might help speed up the process. We’ll talk about it over dinner.”

He pulled into a parking space about a block from the police department. “I’d feel better if you came with me.”

She shook her head vehemently. “I’m allergic to cops and afraid of Murphy’s Law.”

Luke hesitated. Amber gave him a little push and was taken aback at how solid his shoulder was. “Go. The sooner you leave, the sooner we’ll get to eat. And believe it or not, I’m getting hungry.”

“Okay. Keep the doors locked and wait here.” He left on the run with a copy of the journal under his arm and disappeared into the darkness.

Darkness was good, she told herself. A leafy elm closed out most of the light from the nearby street lamp. No one would be able to see her waiting here. So why did she feel like a sitting duck? She chalked it up to nerves. Who was she worried about? There wasn’t a soul around. Unusual. Where were all the people, anyway? As the silence wrapped around her, her own breathing thundered in her ears.

Sweat formed on her upper lip and she wiped it off with the back of her hand. She rolled down the passenger window. She would be safe enough as long as she left the others up. Amber sighed as the hint of a warm breeze caressed her face. She glanced at the ignition. Darn. Luke had taken the keys. She couldn’t even start the car to check the clock. He had promised a ten-minute detour. Hadn’t it been at least that already? What if the cops arrested him—held him as a material witness or something?

A big, dark vehicle turned the corner and moved slowly down the street toward her. The headlights were bright, blinding. The vehicle could be black—could be a van—could be the 4Runner! She yanked open her purse, unzipped the pouch where she kept the bullets, and with a trembling hand, loaded her .38.

* * * *

Leaving a copy of the journal at the P.D. was trickier than Luke expected and took longer. Afterward, he slipped into the nearby phone booth and called the desk sergeant. “The papers on your desk are copies of a journal that might apply to the Rhoades kidnapping.”

Before the sergeant could trace the number, Luke hung up.

Staying in the shadows, he headed for the car. He felt like clicking his heels. He'd pulled off the drop without getting stopped and without having to answer a bunch of questions. He was only a half a block from where he'd parked when he heard a bang and a crunch of metal—followed by what could've been a car backfiring—or a bullet discharging . . .

Amber! He poured on the speed. He shouldn't have left her alone. He had believed she was safe locked in the car. It was stupid! Stupid. She wasn't safe anywhere alone.

Luke saw a black van disappear around the corner. He ran to their car. Amber just sat in the middle of the seat, looking out the window. "Amber, are you all right?" She looked at him blankly, not moving. He tapped on the window. "Amber, let me in." Luke fumbled for his keys, and swore when he dropped them. He retrieved them and unlocked the door. Fighting the tightness in his chest, he slid into the car. She was holding her gun limply in her lap. He took it from her, engaged the safety, and shoved it into the glove compartment. Then, he gathered her trembling body into his arms. "Honey, what happened?"

She drew back a little and focused on his face. Then, like a dam had burst, she began to explain in gasps. "Van made a U-turn . . . slammed into my door . . . a black 4Runner. Driver got out and rushed toward me. I aimed at his head. Told him to stop, or he was a dead man."

Amber was shaking uncontrollably. Luke drew her close again and stroked her back to calm her. "Was the guy alone?"

"There were three of them. When I pointed my gun at the driver, the other two backed off." A muffled sob escaped her lips, and she withdrew a little again. "Oh, Luke. Until I heard the bang, I didn't realize I'd squeezed the trigger."

"You did great. You scared them off."

"It was awful. The masked guy stood frozen for a moment, apparently as shocked as I was that I'd fired. I think we were both even more surprised that I'd missed at such close range." She paused for a shaky breath. "Then, he scrambled back into the van and took off."

Luke remained silent, cursing himself.

Amber shook her head. "The other guys had guns, but they didn't shoot. Why?"

"They must've had orders to take you alive."

"Luke," Amber said with a trembling voice, "I knew how to load and aim, but I think this was the first time I've ever actually shot a gun—and it was by accident." Her throat was dry. "I was shaking. I almost killed a man—almost blew a hole in his head."

Luke kissed her forehead. "If you hadn't shot at him, you might be dead."

"You don't understand. I wouldn't have had any qualms about killing him if he didn't back off, but I wasn't in control of my weapon." She shuddered. "The thought of taking a life by accident . . ."

Luke wanted to hold her longer, but those guys could come back. A gun shot less than a block from a police station was probably what had scared them off.

Amber's breath caught. "Luke! Cops are heading this way with their guns drawn."

"Duck." He didn't want to get trapped explaining things. He hoped the cops wouldn't notice the bashed in passenger door. He covered Amber's body with his and buried his face in her silky hair, inhaling the scent of flowers and gunpowder.

They lay still, bodies pressed close, his humming with arousal. Their breathing echoed through the car hard and heavy. Luke couldn't ignore Amber's soft, warm body beneath his.

He counted minutes. After five had passed, he rose enough to see without being seen and scanned the area. "It's clear," he said huskily. "You can get up." He started the car and eased out of the parking space. "Those men didn't find you by chance. They had to have a description of our car."

"Evie was the only one who saw it."

"It's risky, I know, but we should swing by her place and see who she talked to. Are you game?"

"Sure. Maybe she's heard something about Coco, too."

Luke suspected that any news about Coco would be tragic, but he remained silent. No sense upsetting Amber. She'd already been through too much today. Luke raked his hair. God, he'd almost lost this brave woman tonight. If she hadn't had the gun . . .

He had no idea how she could go on, pushing herself armed only with sketchy memories. But he was damned proud of her.

Luke drove on automatic pilot, his mind skipping back and forth from Amber to the journal. Whatever was going on, it wasn't small potatoes. The way things were coming down, he suspected that the men after Amber didn't know she had amnesia and they were afraid she knew something to derail them.

Luke was relieved that their exit came up quickly. Calmer now, he began organizing the questions he wanted to ask Evie. His stomach knotted when he turned the corner of her street and saw two police cars parked askew in front of her house. An ambulance was in the driveway. He slowed to a crawl. He pulled up to a group of neighbors, stuck his head out the window, and addressed a white-haired man. "Pardon me, sir, but what happened here?"

"Someone cut up my neighbor, then beat her to death." The old man's voice was thick with emotion.

Luke heard Amber gasp. He tightened his jaw and kept his attention on the man. "Do the cops know who did it?"

“If they do, they’re not saying. I don’t know what this neighborhood has come to. We had a kidnapping earlier this evening, too. Another neighbor, Coco.” The man shook his head. “And people wonder why I keep a shotgun next to my bed.”

Luke nodded in commiseration, then backed up and made a U-turn. He glanced at Amber. “The sooner we get away from here the better. I’m taking the Merc back to the rental place. Now that the killers have a make on it, we can’t chance keeping it overnight.”

After filling out the damage report and exchanging cars, they drove back to the motel in silence, both deep in their own thoughts. They picked up the food and took it to the room. Luke knew food was the last thing on Amber’s mind, but they hadn’t eaten all day, and they needed to keep up their strength.

Rubbing her arms, Amber paced in front of the beds. “That poor woman. What do you suppose happened?”

“My guess is that the kidnappers knew Evie saw them grab Coco and went back to silence her,” Luke said. “They must’ve questioned her first, and somehow got the description of our car. Maybe she even told them she gave us the journal.”

Amber closed her eyes a moment. “You think Coco’s dead, too, don’t you?”

“You want it straight?”

She nodded.

“They’ve killed everyone who got in their way. Coco fits that category.”

Amber trembled. “And I fit that category, too.”

Luke couldn’t deny it. How could he make her feel safe?

She began to pace again. “I can’t stand this. They know what I look like, but I don’t know them.” Luke gripped her shoulders. “There’s nothing more we can do tonight. So, we’re going to eat and calm down.” He lifted Amber’s chin and looked into her eyes. “Deal?”

Thoughts of the last time they had kissed consumed him, stole the air from his lungs. But if she gave the slightest encouragement, he knew he wouldn’t stop at kisses. She moistened her lips, which tempted him beyond what any man should have to endure.

“Deal,” she said softly.

He grasped her arms, sat her down on the bed farthest from the entry, and handed her one of the cartons of food. He sat across from her on his bed. They ate in silence for a few minutes, and then he shoved his half-empty carton aside. “We’re going to get through this.”

“Thanks for being here for me.”

He grabbed his Stetson from the center of the bed and tipped it to her. “My pleasure, ma’am.”

A small smile curved her lips. He knew that halfhearted gesture was difficult for her, and he could see from the brightness in her eyes that she was trying not to cry. He joined her on her bed, and slipped his arm around her shoulders.

“I keep thinking about all the people who have died,” Amber said, “Mr. Rhoades, Elmer, and now Evie. It seems everyone who helps me”—Luke touched her lips with the tip of his finger to silence her, but she defiantly finished her sentence—“dies. And I couldn’t live with myself if—”

He brought his lips down on hers to cut off her words. The moment their lips met, flames leaped between them. Her eyes revealed that she felt the heat, too. She stilled for a moment, and then her warm hands slid up his chest, snaked over his shoulders, circling the back of his neck, and drew him closer. Her lips went all soft and pliable, and her mouth opened to him. He tasted her sweetness with his tongue, and she met his exploration with an urgency that surprised him. Like a Texas wildfire, the rising heat ignited their world with something so wide sweeping and all-powerful that, if he didn’t pull away, their lives would be changed forever. Even if he could handle that, what about Amber? De La Fuente’s words whispered at the back of Luke’s mind with the subtlety of a jackhammer. Luke frowned. At stake were his honor and Amber’s well-being. He untangled himself from her arms. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have taken advantage of you. I want you to feel safe here. Safe with me.”

She closed her eyes a moment as though to regain her composure. When she spoke, her words came out softly. “Then help me block out my waking nightmares for a little while, my fear, so I can feel normal again.” She moved close and dipped her hand inside the opening of his shirt, which heated his blood to the boiling point. Amber’s fragrance wafted around him. Her skin still flushed from their kiss, carried an enticing musky scent, uniquely Amber.

Luke swallowed. He wanted to say something, but the words wouldn’t come. The walls seemed to close in, swaddle them in a flame of intimacy.

“Help me forget, please, Luke, just for tonight.” Her hand slid over his chest, warm and restless as a hot Texas wind. Her voice deepened to something sultry, smoky. “No commitments, no complications, just us connecting this one time.” Her eyes were unfathomable green pools. They darkened, softened, daring him to surrender. She lifted her lips to his, waiting for his answer.

His throat constricted. He gripped her shoulders, drinking in her loveliness like a thirsty man lost in the desert. A pulse throbbed in her throat. He longed to touch the pulsing point and match his heartbeat to hers. Sweat broke out between his thighs just thinking about what she was offering.

Chapter Ten

Amber could scarcely breathe. A smoldering look flickered in Luke's eyes, and he gripped her shoulders like a lifeline, his fingers sending tiny flames coursing through her body. His hesitancy lashed the air like a whip.

He swallowed. "Not now." The anguish in his tone hit her with the force of a right cross. She expected him to release her, but he hung on fiercely. It was as though he needed the contact as much as she did.

"Are you locked into an honor-bound vow with yourself, or is Matt behind this?"

"Matt? Hell, no." Luke's voice was ragged. His sultry once-over sent a tremor through her. "I told you. It's those drugs the doc gave you. He said it takes seven days to get them out of your system. And I won't take advantage of you."

She would tell him to go to hell, but she knew he wanted her as much as she wanted him. "Misguided chivalry. Drugs aren't controlling me. Fear is."

His gaze never left her eyes, making her squirm. "So, it's all right for me to take advantage of you since it's just fear," he said with a hard edge to his voice. "Right?"

A distant siren wailing pierced the walls of their sanctuary and screamed that big-city dangers lurked somewhere beyond the motel door. Amber grabbed two handfuls of his shirtfront to keep from falling apart. "Wrong. We can use each other. Tonight I don't want to think. I just want to feel emotions strong enough to block out everything else. I know you want that, too. I see it in your eyes."

"Your recovery is too important to mess up. It's just a few more days."

She heard the we're-not-discussing-this-anymore finality to his tone. He was the most stubborn man she'd ever met. She might not win this clash of wills, but the challenge pushed the fear to the back of her mind. It was a good sign that Luke was still holding her.

Music came from the adjoining room—"This Could Take All Night" by Amanda Marshall. Amber was learning she wasn't a patient woman. She stroked Luke's shirtsleeve and felt a hard muscle flex beneath her fingers. "You had an idea to help me remember faster. What was that about? I thought—"

"What? No. No." He slid his hands from her shoulders, but he didn't step away. "I meant we could do some free association exercises. The doc suggested it."

She'd learned something else about herself. She made her own rules. "I'm game. What's the start word?"

He studied her suspiciously. "Childhood."

"Virgin," she quipped.

He frowned. "Play fair."

"Why? You don't. Suppose making love is the key to opening the rest of my memory cells, and you deny me that? Maybe if I remembered everything, I would know exactly what's going on, and who's behind it all. Imagine. This all could be over."

He groaned. "If I believed that . . ."

Another tiny push and she'd have him. "I could have been mangled or died today when those guys hit our car. They could have put a bullet through me. How would you like to die and never know if you'd ever made love?"

He shook his head. "Good shots, Amber. Right to the heart. But I'm not folding. Determination is all that holds me together."

She knew that. Determination to not drink, determination to be a good dad, and now, determination not to make love to her. But his steadfastness only heightened her resolve. Amber smiled when she remembered something Mr. Rhoades used to say a lot. To make a deal, both people had to perceive that they had won on some level. Remembered! She'd remembered! Every small memory was so sweet. "Okay," she said, trying to tamp down the excitement in her voice. "I get it. You can't make love to me—it's an honor thing. I can respect that."

He looked at her skeptically. "You can?"

"Of course. But I didn't take any vow." She moved very close to him and stroked his chest. "So let me love you. You don't have to do anything but hold me. How's that?"

"A test of wills." He laughed hollowly. "It won't work, Amber. Once I make up my mind to something, I'll stick with it even if it tears my guts out. And I reckon this will."

"You don't know the half of it, cowboy. You've already kissed me, so I assume kissing is permitted, right?"

He groaned. "I won't take part in this insanity." But he didn't move away.

She gave a saucy smile. "Play it your way." *And I'll play it my way*, she thought, drawing his head down and scattering little kisses around his mouth. She paused and looked up at him. "You know, it's unnerving for someone to know more about you than you know about yourself."

"Talking about you, or me?" His unrelenting gaze held hers.

She smiled. "Hmmm. Are you afraid I know more about you than you know about the wild and reckless Mr. Luke Ryan? Interesting."

He caressed her back absently. Warm feelings rippled throughout her. She traced his lips with her tongue and then, thrusting it into a mouth salty from ham and sweetened by raisin sauce, delved to the depths in a familiar, seductive way. Had she seduced a man before? It came so natural. She

shivered at the possible implications, and withdrew her lips from his long enough to whisper, "Maybe I'm not a virgin."

"Amber—"

She cut off his words with another probing kiss, and although he was holding back some, he was responding. "Just hold me," she murmured between kisses. She felt his heart beating like wild drums against her breasts. She stepped back a little, then lowered her head and feathered kisses down the opening in his shirt. The scent of his warm skin, so uniquely Luke, made her want more than that narrow path of salty skin. Amber yanked on his shirt. The snaps gave. She moved close again and continued her open mouth kisses and flicks of tongue downward from his solid chest along the narrow line of fine, dark hair down the center of his bare abdomen. His breath thickened as she dipped her hand below his belt and stroked his lower belly. Her blood boiled as her hand inched to his maleness.

"You're really enjoying putting me through hell, aren't you? That alone proves drugs are still in your system." He grabbed her by the arms and held her away. "We'll finish this in a couple of days," he growled. "No sooner."

The anguish, the utter suffering, in his husky tone cut through her. She wasn't being fair, trying to make him break a vow just to ease her fears. "Forget it, cowboy." Her voice cracked like a breaking plastic heart. "This was a bad idea, anyway."

She raced into the bathroom and slammed the door. She leaned against the cool wood surface, and closed her eyes tightly, refusing to let the tears come. Her face flamed thinking of her failed seduction. Luke had stuck to his principles. After her temptress act, he probably wondered if she had any principles at all. She groaned. How ironic. Now he thought less of her, and she admired him more than ever. Her heart was getting more entangled—a dangerous thing when she might have to leave any day and a risky thing when he wasn't free to love her the way she wanted to be loved.

Amber waited inside, busying herself with showering and washing her hair until she was sure he had gone to bed.

An hour later, when she slipped out into the darkness, she noticed that he had opened the drapes to light her way with silvery moonlight. When she stole into her bed, he went into the bathroom and eased the door closed. She heard the toilet flush, then the spray of the shower.

She could imagine him standing under cool needles of water, fighting his desire. The door didn't fit tight in the frame, and she smelled shampoo. Her fantasy deepened. Maybe the water wasn't cool at all. Maybe it was steamy. Very steamy. Was he massaging bubbles into his inky hair, kneading them into a crown of foam? After he rinsed his hair, he would raise his muscled arms and slick back his glistening mane. Now he was sliding his hands downward, stroking the bar of soap over his firm pecs, his washboard belly, and dropping to scrub his maleness until it rose with a powerful erection. She flushed. While she'd showered, had he thought of her as she was thinking of him? God, she was a mess. He had rejected her, and while she knew that he hadn't wanted to, his control was admirable, but so infuriating.

The door to the bathroom opened, and the light behind Luke spotlighted his wide-shouldered, lean silhouette. No Greek statue had ever been more elegant. His dark briefs clung like skin. Rustling the sheets, he slid into the other bed with the agility of a sleek panther. Luke lay still a few moments, as though listening to her breathing, and then he turned and faced the wall. It was only seconds before he moaned and turned back. He restlessly kicked at the cotton sheet and exposed his abdomen and thighs. Amber's heart did flip-flops, imagining those strong legs tangled with hers.

Luke took a deep breath, then exhaled heavily. He patted the place beside him. "Come here, Amber."

She stiffened and lay as still as possible.

When she didn't move, he shifted like the wind, propelled himself into her bed, and drew her into his arms. They felt so warm, so strong. "I'm here for you, Amber. Maybe not the way you want me. But I'm holding you all night. Think about that. I will be."

He smelled of soap and clean skin. She sighed and let herself relax into his hold. Neither of them would get much sleep, but he had given her something else to think about. She did feel safe now. Very safe.

* * * *

Luke had chosen the truck stop near the private airport for breakfast hoping the trucking atmosphere would jog Amber's memory. She hummed softly as she read the menu. It had been a night of torture for them, yet she seemed to have forgiven him. He was still trying to forgive himself. Had he been wrong to stick to his guns? Shoot, it was strictly for her sake. He wasn't trying to prove he was in control. Or was he? Blast it, what if he was more like Matt than he wanted to admit? The truth was that so far, he hadn't been able to control anything except his own actions. One thing was for sure. Somehow, he would make it up to Amber for denying her what she'd asked for—what they both wanted.

After they ordered pancake sandwiches and their hot drinks, black coffee for him and English Breakfast tea for Amber, Luke started the word association game. "Long-haul trucker," he said, expecting Amber to say Elmer.

She took a sip of tea and thought a moment. A wrinkle-faced man with a curved spine limped past their table. Amber followed him with her gaze all the way to the cashier counter.

"Grandpa," she said with surprise in her tone.

"Your grandpa was a trucker?"

Her eyes brightened. "Sometimes he took me with him—he said going from state to state was a great geography lesson, and meeting folks from other places was an eye-opening study of human nature. He claimed you could always count on truckers when you were in trouble."

Luke leaned forward and gripped her hand. "That's why you went to the truck stop when you were in trouble—why you trusted Elmer."

“It’s also probably why the traveling job appealed to me. I liked seeing places, meeting people. And once the house sold, I had no ties to Edinburg.”

“Edinburg, Texas?”

“Yes . . . Yes . . . Oh, my God! I’m from Edinburg! I have friends there. A bank account. Furniture in storage.”

Amber’s eyes glazed over as though she was caught somewhere in the past. She was silent a moment, then she said, “My best friend Ellen and I argued over my job. She thought the position with Mr. Rhoades was a sex setup and begged me not to go.”

Luke wanted to say she should have listened to her, but he held his tongue. Amber was remembering, and he didn’t want to say anything to stop her.

“But Ellen hadn’t met Mr. Rhoades. She didn’t understand that I needed to escape the small town and leave my memories of losing my family behind. Or my need to find out who I was deep inside.” Amber’s breath caught. Then, she gave a hollow laugh. “It seems even before I lost my memory I was searching desperately to find out exactly who I was.” She stared into her teacup as though the answer might be there.

Luke reached over and squeezed her hand. He wanted to promise her they would find out together, but not yet, not here. “Don’t stop now. Focus on your job with Rhoades—on the papers or documents you might’ve typed.”

She closed her eyes, her face tense. “Nothing’s coming.”

He felt the uncertainty he often felt when digging a well and finding a boulder. Should he go around, or blast through? This called for dynamite, he decided. “Think of the week before Rhoades was killed.” Luke was acutely aware of his heart throbbing in his ears—of the sweat soaking the underarms of his shirt. “Try names, companies.”

“Nothing. I’m sorry, Luke.”

The frustration in her tone knotted his stomach. He was pushing too hard, just what the doctor warned him not to do. He left his seat and slid into the booth beside her. “It’s okay, Amber,” he said drawing her into his arms. He kissed her temple. “Take a deep breath. We’ll forget this for now, and enjoy our breakfast.”

“Wait.” She looked up at him with bright eyes. “I’ve got something. Mr. Rhoades had repeated dealings with a man named Daniels.”

“I saw that name in the journal,” Luke said, fighting his mounting excitement.

“Me, too. And I know just where I saw it.” Amber grabbed the journal from the table and flipped through the pages until she came to one that listed names, dates, and document numbers. She ran her finger down the page until she found something familiar. “Here it is. Daniels held title to his

properties under The Risley Corporation umbrella. It's all coming clear now. On our anticipated trip to Las Vegas, Mr. Rhoades wanted me to look up a series of document transfers. He gave me a file that included a list that could've been a copy of this page."

"Matt can check out the company for us." He kissed her on the tip of her nose. "We're getting there, Amber."

"If Matt doesn't find out anything, I want to go to Vegas and check this out for myself."

"We'll do it together. But be forewarned, Matt could find out something crucial to send us in another direction."

"I'm worried, Luke. I know I've said this before, but bad things keep happening. People who get involved with me are dying. Maybe you should leave me here in Richmond."

"Not a chance. Everything is going forward. The cops have a copy of the journal. The FBI has a copy of the suspicious pages. Your memory is coming back. Giving the authorities time to check things out works in our favor, and in the long run, will save time."

Her green eyes flashed. "Waiting gives you time to ride in the rodeo tomorrow, right?"

"That's a low blow, Amber. We need the input from Matt and the authorities to check out leads safely."

"Sorry. I'm edgy. I just want this to be over." She looked up at him with serious eyes. "Have you ever broken your word?"

Was she talking about his vow to De La Fuente, or the vow to himself? He desperately wanted to tell her he had always been this stand up guy, but he'd been a rat, and part of his cure for that was telling the truth. "Not since I stopped drinking. My goal is to never break a promise again."

She touched his face. "I feel like the snake in the garden of Eden for trying to lead you astray."

Now he knew for sure that she had shifted focus and was talking about trying to seduce him last night.

"Friends should make people want to be better," she said softly, "not trip them up."

"Don't worry about it, li'l darlin', you can't corrupt me." He grinned and winked. "Unless I let you."

She gave a small smile and shook her head.

"Back to the Nevada connection," he said. "Don't think for a minute that this is something you can handle alone. I'm going to see you through this."

She nodded, but he didn't like the guarded look in her eyes.

* * * *

Holding Alicia's hand, Amber hurried across the grounds, past a parking area with a haphazard jumble of horse trailers, campers, pickups, recreation vehicles, to the rodeo entrance. Rodeo enthusiasts had transformed Buck's ranch into something big and overwhelming. Amber felt like running in the opposite direction. At the gate, she flipped open a small plastic case and showed her pass.

"Is Daddy really going to ride a bull?" Alicia asked, voice squeaking with trepidation. She wore a straw Texas hat, pink denim vest, blue jeans, and cowboy boots with pink trim. She clung to Amber's hand tighter than usual, looking like a little Shirley Temple cowgirl with her hair in curls and dimples that flashed even when her smile was less than enthusiastic.

Amber's heart warmed at the child's courage. "Sure is, Rosebud. But don't worry, everyone says he's great at it. Like a cowboy Superman."

Alicia gave another brave little smile and lifted her chin. "Course! I forgot—my dad's a Superman!"

Due to the time constraint, Amber squelched an urge to hug Alicia and, instead, merely gave her hand a squeeze. "Hurry, we don't want to be late." Luke had asked her not to bring Alicia out into the heat until just before his ride. Amber was happy to comply. With unknown killers tracking her, she was uncomfortable in crowds anyway.

She and Alicia climbed the bleachers, searching for the section reserved for special guests. Loud rodeo fans filled the stands wearing colorful western attire and cowboy hats. Over the aromas of hot dogs and popcorn, Amber smelled sweat, horses, cattle, and hay.

"There's Aunt Molly," Alicia shouted with glee.

"Good eyes, Rosebud."

"Glad you got here in time," Molly said, moving down and making room for them on the bench. "Luke's up next."

Clowns began to shovel manure to prepare the arena for his event. Wanda and Suzy greeted Amber with big smiles, then returned their attention to the arena. Amber's skin prickled. She felt eyes on her again and glanced around. The only person looking in her direction was the woman sitting two rows back behind Alicia. There was nothing menacing about her. She was about Amber's age and wore no makeup, which understated her otherwise striking bone structure. She was tall—maybe a famous model playing down her good looks to avoid unwanted attention. Amber forced herself to return the woman's wide, engaging smile, and then scanned the crowd again in search for the cause of her uneasiness.

Molly searched her face. "Something wrong?"

Amber hesitated, then said, "Just excited."

"Have you ever seen a bull riding competition?" Suzy asked.

Amber shook her head. If she hadn't been so worried, she would have enjoyed the prospect.

Suzy winked mischievously and lowered her voice so Alicia wouldn't hear. "It's the wildest, most dangerous event." She had a horror-storyteller's eeriness to her young voice. "At the rodeo in Reno, one of the top riders was gored to death."

Amber stomach knotted. "Who thought up this so-called sport? A guy with a death wish?"

"Cut it out, Suzy," Wanda said, sharply. "You know that seldom happens."

"Well, I just hope Luke's medical and dental plans are paid up," Suzy persisted. "Remember what happened to Matt a couple of years ago."

Amber's heart pounded. She darted a look at Molly. "What?"

"He got hooked up on the rope, but he got loose. Suzy just likes to scare first-timers."

Suzy laughed. "The Devil made me do it. Shoot, by the time I was six I'd already been dumped in the dirt by sheep and calves. And I've been training on my dad's mechanical bull practically forever." She lowered her sunglasses with strong-looking fingers and looked slyly over the top. "Riding a big, bad bull is the natural next step. Next year you'll see me out there. It's no biggie." Amber shook her head. "I wish I had your guts."

Suzy winked. "Luke says you do. And I think he's plumb right. Now, get ready for Luke to show you his stuff. Although an eight-second timer is used, bull riding isn't a timed thing. It's a scored event. Which means he's gotta look good, too."

Amber smiled. She couldn't imagine Luke not looking good in anything he tried.

The PA system screeched again and the announcer said, "Our last rider is a champion we haven't seen around for a spell, folks, Luke Ryan."

Luke, perched on the top of a chute fence, was looking like the king of the cowboys in tight jeans and protective black leather chaps.

The announcer's voice boomed again. "You gonna show up your brother, Luke? He's top man so far today."

Luke gave a tight smile, then like a trooper, he saluted with his black Stetson.

"Westley shouldn't tease the brothers like that," Wanda said. "Good thing Luke can take it."

Amber frowned. Luke had admitted he hadn't ridden in a long time. She hoped all went smoothly for Alicia's sake. The tale about the cowboy gored to death by a bull echoed in her head.

In the grandstands around Amber, people were getting restless, some stretching. The PA system screeched, and then a voice announced that Luke was getting into position. The crowd settled down immediately, as though the main reason they were here was to watch Luke ride.

* * * *

The five-o'clock sun scorched the rodeo arena like the fires of Hades. Livestock stench hung in the dead, sweltering air. Luke scratched his head. Something didn't feel right. *Just nerves*, he told himself. He took a deep, fortifying breath. Although his driving need to prove himself had lost importance in the last few days, he was still primed to do this. He couldn't let jittery nerves mess him up. It had been a couple of years since he'd jockeyed a bull in public, but the rules came as second nature to him. Grab the rope with one hand. Keep his free hand away from the bull and the rope no matter what—or he'd be disqualified. And stay on the snorting critter for the eight-count.

He'd damned well better put on a good show. He glanced toward the reserved section of the stands where Amber and Alicia sat watching with the other female members of the George and Ryan families. He didn't want to disappoint his two girls. He wasn't sure why that mattered so much. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his sleeve. The sun bore down harder. Beneath his black leather protective vest, sweat soaked the back of his denim shirt. His vest, or flak jacket as he called it, was hot as hell, but it could save his life if the bull tried to gore or trample him.

His neck prickled not from fear of the bull, but from a rising foreboding. He glanced around. Was his instinct real or a backlash from Amber's uneasiness? Damn it. It was too late to abort this. With all the mental strength he could muster, he cleared his mind for the ride—split attention meant disaster.

His gut tightened as the dark-skinned *vaquero* dropped the gate behind the bull he'd drawn. The Brahma bull was kicking the hell out of the chute below. Luke rubbed his championship belt buckle for luck, then swung his leg over the top of the iron fence, clearing his mind of everything except the snorting black bull who'd earned the name Stomper.

Luke inhaled, eased down, and centered himself on the two thousand pounds of stomping fury. He checked his bull rope of braided leather tied around the bull's middle, just behind the strongly muscled shoulders, then plowed his glove into the strap. Beneath the leather, a film of sweat coated his hands. Damn. He readjusted his hold—it had to be right. He flexed his hand and settled his grip into its spot. He felt the familiar adrenaline charge. He dug in his muted spurs and nodded to the chute keeper. "Ready!"

With a clunk, the chute gate opened and the Brahma bolted into the arena. Stomper bucked and twisted under Luke, doing his damndest to catapult him to the hard ground.

Luke hung on. The bull whirled and kicked. The weighted cowbell hanging from the bottom of the bull rope clanged loudly—Luke's basic lifeline—a weight to help the rope slide off the bull when he was ready to dismount.

Luke saw flashes of fencing, colors. The crowd roared. He was in sync with the moment, merged with the snorting, thrashing power, counting the eight seconds in his head. Anything longer increased his chance of getting tossed—trampled. He wouldn't risk the added danger with Alicia watching.

A blaring horn declared the end of the eight seconds. He leaped. Midair, something tore into his thigh. It burned like a bullet. His leg gave as he landed. He went down inches from the stomping hooves. The crowd gasped and shot to their feet.

* * * *

“No!” Amber screamed. Her hand jerked to her throat, and her breath froze. Luke struggled to scramble out of harm’s way. The bull crushed Luke’s black Stetson and twisted to stomp him. Red seeped through Luke’s Levi’s. Blood! He was hurt!

“Daddy!” Alicia cried out. Her scream turned to wracking sobs.

Luke could be stomped to death right before his daughter’s eyes. Hugging Alicia close, she obstructed the child’s view with her body. She wanted to squeeze her own lids closed to block the horror, but she locked her gaze on Luke as if her riveted focus would protect him.

Terrified shrieks and murmurs rippled through the crowd.

Amber clung to the weeping Alicia and prayed with all her might, while promising anything, everything. As though God had answered her prayers, clowns distracted the bull, and the stomping devil charged toward the exit gate. Amid the crowd’s gasps, bullfighting clowns herded and blocked the bull’s return. Luke glanced at his flattened hat, but left it. Then, he limped briskly toward the fence with an eye on the snorting fury.

“Look, Rosebud, your daddy is going to be all right.” *Please don’t let Alicia notice the tremors in my voice.*

Alicia pulled away from Amber and stood on the seat behind them, a level higher, to see for herself. Amber glanced back to be sure she was okay, then returned her attention to Luke. Just as he got to the barricade, he crumpled and fell to the ground. He didn’t move. Amber gasped, her outcry joining those of the crowd. *Oh, God. Luke, I’m coming.*

“Get a medic to that cowboy,” the announcer boomed over the tense murmurs.

Amber turned to Molly. “I have to go to Luke. Can you watch Alicia for me?”

Molly glanced around. “Where is she?”

Amber looked where the child had been, then scanned the stands. She was nowhere in sight. It was as though the crowd had swallowed her. Panic constricted Amber’s throat. *Please, no.* “Dear God, she’s gone! Molly! Wanda! Suzy! Quick, fan out and help me find her.” They all dashed up and down the grandstand steps, calling Alicia’s name, asking if anyone had seen her.

This couldn’t be happening! Alicia was gone!

A hot, clammy sweat coated Amber’s skin and plastered her clothes to her body. From her purse, she dug out one of the pictures Luke had taken of her and Alicia at the Mexican ruins. Over and over Amber repeated to anyone in her path, “Please, have you seen her?”

People glanced briefly at the photo and shook their heads—their gazes once again riveted to what was going on in the arena, and the downed cowboy. Oh, God. Luke was hurt. Amber wanted to go to him, but she had to find Alicia first. Panic tightened like a taut lasso around her chest, making it hard to breathe. She pressed her fingers to her lips to stop a scream of agony.

Wanda notified Buck's security men and they formed a search party. Buck called the sheriff. Seconds later, the announcer said, "We have a missing three-year-old girl. Alicia Ryan. If anyone finds the child, please bring her to the announcer's booth so I can notify her parents and security."

The announcer's worried tone brought forth the tears Amber had been fighting to hold back. She swiped at one that rolled down her cheek. Luke must have heard his daughter's name. Amber's insides churned. She needed to tell him what was being done to get his daughter back and find out what else he wanted done. And she needed to keep looking for Alicia. She raked her hair as indecision played tug-of-war in her aching head. She couldn't wait. Luke had a right to know immediately. She raced down the grandstand steps to find him.

Medics had moved Luke out of the arena on a stretcher. Now, two of them dressed in western wear with Rodeo Medic signs pasted on the backs of their shirts bent over him. They had cut away the denim and were examining his wound. Amber swallowed her panic and rushed up to Luke. She dropped to her knees, and bent over him. Luke smelled earthy, a mixture of sweat and leather. And whiskey! It didn't make sense. He was determined not to drink. And she knew firsthand that his determination was unshakable. Someone must have poured it down his throat while he was dazed.

"Are you all right?" she asked, unable to control her trembling voice.

As though her expression had transmitted her fear, Luke stiffened. "Where's Alicia?"

Amber's heart beat a deafening roar in her ears. She forced herself to meet Luke's gaze. "She's disappeared."

Chapter Eleven

“For crissakes, Amber!” Luke’s face twisted with anger. With surprising strength, he shoved away the two medics treating him and hobbled to his feet. Blood ran down his leg.

Amber took a step toward him. *Luke was hurt!*

His accusing eyes stopped her. “How could you let this happen?”

Heat scorched Amber’s cheeks. “I don’t know. It’s tearing me apart.” But there was no excuse.

A medic grabbed Luke by the arm. “Where the hell ya going? That bullet’s gotta come out.”

Amber’s knees went weak. Her gaze flew to Luke’s. “Bullet?”

“In the thigh,” the medic said.

Amber had to force herself to breathe. A sniper? She hadn’t heard a gunshot. Had the roar of the crowd drowned the sound, or had the shooter used a silencer? Amber closed her eyes, trying to piece things together. Someone had shot Luke and then Alicia was kidnapped, both incidents within seconds of each other. Oh, God. Was the shooting a distracting tactic? Or attempted murder? She stepped forward again, wanting to touch him. He stepped back. “Luke, I’m so sorry. About Alicia—about you—” Amber’s throat constricted and she couldn’t go on.

Luke glared at her, then turned and limped toward the exit gate. After a half dozen steps, he crumpled and collapsed into an unconscious heap. With her heart pounding crazily, Amber rushed to Luke and knelt by his side. As she bent over him, their thighs touched, and his blood seeped into her jeans, making two burgundy splotches. A medic lifted her out of the way. He checked Luke’s pulse, applied pressure, and then, with his partner’s help, quickly hoisted Luke back onto the stretcher.

Matt came running from the holding pens. He fell to his knees and bent over Luke. He sniffed, then frowned. “Has my brother been drinking?” His angry glance at Amber made it clear that he blamed her for that, too.

She met his sharp look with one just as unyielding, feeling it unnecessary to defend Luke to his brother. “Drinking is the least of his problems right now.”

Before she could explain about the shooting, Matt turned to the medic. “Is he going to be all right?”

“Gotta get him to a hospital to get that bullet out,” the medic said.

“Bullet?” Matt looked stunned, but didn’t waste time asking for explanations. “Get him to my chopper! I’ll fly him to Saint Mary’s.”

Amber wanted to go with Luke and stay with him until he was out of danger, but she had to find Alicia. “Tell Luke that I—”

“No time, Amber,” Matt growled.

He and the medics rushed past Amber with Luke strapped to the stretcher.

* * * *

Her stomach knotted. In spite of his tan, Luke looked pale. She wanted to run after them. *Hang on, Luke.* She squared her shoulders. She had to stay strong and do what he would do if he wasn’t wounded—find his daughter.

Amber searched the arena several more times. Both the Ryan and George families fanned out and helped her. To their credit, everyone was supportive, and no one blamed her to her face. They didn’t need to—she blamed herself.

Luke’s bull riding event had been the last for the day, and folks were leaving. Amber wanted to shout, “Freeze,” and make everyone stay put, but it wouldn’t have done any good. They were rushing from the stands like stampeding cattle. Feeling a rising panic, Amber weaved through the crowd until she found the ranch security boss. “Have you found Alicia?” Amber’s throat was dry.

“We’ve closed off the ranch, searched vehicles, but no sign of her.”

“Is the sheriff on his way?”

A deep voice came from behind her. “Better than that. I’m here. Never miss Buck’s charity rodeo.” She turned and faced a man with a black patch over one eye and a star pinned to his khaki shirt. “Curt Davis, ma’am,” he drawled. “And you are?”

Davis was a lawman. He could lock her up. Amber took a deep breath and stuck out her hand. “Amber Miles.”

He wrinkled his forehead and looked at her long and hard before he finally closed his hand over hers in a firm grip. “Have we met before, ma’am?”

“Probably seen each other around. I’m Alicia’s nanny.” Her mouth tasted metallic. “Glad you’re here,” she said, hurrying on. “It’s important for you to understand this isn’t a case of a child wandering off.” She explained that Luke had been shot and that she thought the shooting must have been a distracting tactic. “There was a woman two rows behind us who could be the kidnapper.”

The sheriff shifted on his scuffed boots and listened with a masked expression. He seemed to be memorizing her face. “Why?” she asked.

“Because she disappeared at the same time.”

The sheriff withdrew a small pad and the stub of a pencil from his pocket. “Description?”

“She’s at least six feet tall and long-legged like a Vegas showgirl.” *A Nevada connection fit.*

After telling him everything she knew, Amber combed the arena again, calling first Alicia, then Rosebud. The sweet little pixie wasn't anywhere.

Next Amber and the family checked the barns. On the hay-strewn floor of one of the stalls, Amber found a smashed Mickey Mouse watch. With shallow breath, she turned it over and read the inscription. *To Alicia. Love, Dad.* Amber bit her lip, promising herself she wouldn't cry. Oh, God, what would those monsters do to a child? They had tortured and killed people. Amber tightened her grip on the watch, unaware that the broken glass was cutting into her palm, dripping more blood onto her jeans, soaking into the spots made by Luke's blood. Luke must be going through hell—carried away against his will when all he wanted was to stay and find his daughter.

With the watch here and two horses missing, it looked likely that the woman kidnapper with Alicia and the shooter had escaped the net and left by horseback. Amber heard the roar of a helicopter in the distance. It was too early to be Luke and Matt. She prayed it was a police chopper and not the escaping kidnappers. If the kidnappers got Alicia off the ground, they could take her anywhere. Amber drew in a deep breath. She couldn't let panic take over. She headed for the sheriff to see if he could confirm if it was a police chopper. It wasn't. Too early. He made a call to identify the craft and its pilot, but the helicopter had disappeared.

The sun inched lower in the sky and shadows gobbled up the ranch. Amber went from command post to command post, praying for good news. Buck had enlisted the help of his vaqueros. Every able bodied person was out looking. Darkness fell on the ranch, and Alicia still hadn't been found.

When Amber checked the main command post, which had been set up in Buck's living room, Molly rushed up to her and gave her a hug. "I heard from Matt," she said. "Luke's okay. Just worried, and mad as hell."

Amber felt a surge of relief. He was all right! Her elation faded as quickly as it had come when Luke's words, "How could you let this happen?" echoed in her head.

"The bullet's out," Molly continued. "It went into the fleshy part of his leg. No bone or vein damage. Since his daughter's missing, they're going to let him come home. Our men are on their way back to the ranch. It seems a phony medic drugged Luke with a knockout pill and used whiskey to wash it down."

So that was why he blacked out, Amber thought. She'd feared it was from loss of blood. Matt had told Luke that Alicia was still missing. Luke had to be crazed with worry. Amber rubbed her aching head. How would she face him? She'd rather be trampled by stampeding cattle.

The sheriff came by with an update. "We've checked every inch of the ranch and blocked the roads leading away," he drawled. "We're widening the search, but the longer the child's missing . . ." His voice trailed away. The defeat in his tone deepened Amber's anguish.

* * * *

Their helicopter eased through the sky like a damned coasting bird. Luke frowned. If he were at the controls instead of Matt, he'd open her up full speed. Instead, he was stuck lying in the back on a stretcher with his bandaged leg propped up like some cripple. He'd told Matt and the rodeo medics

that he was fine. But they'd ganged up on him and insisted that he follow the doc's orders. Luke shook his head. It wasn't like him to let his brother or anyone else hog-tie him. He wasn't sure why he'd knuckled under. He felt so plastic. Detached calmness and bridled pressure simmered inside him as though he were watching all the horror from outside his body. He figured his numbed state was the result of the drugs they'd pumped into him during surgery, likely made more potent by the alcohol and knockout pill in his system.

Damn. It felt inhuman to be so coldly rational with his daughter in the hands of those merciless bastards. He closed his fists. It was dark as hell, and Alicia still hadn't been found. *Alicia, baby, hang on. Daddy's coming.*

He vowed that the minute he got outta this damned whirling heap of metal, the convalescence would be over! Damn Matt for taking him away when his daughter needed him. But how could he have looked for his daughter with a bullet in his thigh and knockout drugs in his system? His mouth tasted foul. He would like to smash the fake medic who'd poured whiskey down his throat. The rodeo medics said Buck had hired the newcomer just for the charity event. The newcomer and one of the clowns had moved Luke out of the arena to safety. When the other two medics had arrived on the scene and saw the phony medic pouring whiskey down Luke's throat, they told the guy to report to Buck. They described the bogus medical man as tall, lean, and dark skinned—a description that matched at least a dozen of the vaqueros on Buck's ranch. Luke had been too dazed from his fall from the bull to describe the guy any better.

Matt had apologized for thinking the worst. Luke understood. His past was something he battled every day, and sometimes he doubted himself. Molly had told Matt the whole story behind the kidnapping—that it was timed to take place at the precise moment Luke was shot.

Damn, he'd been a heel for yelling at Amber. She loved Alicia, too. She must be going crazy.

Matt checked with Molly every half hour. He promised they would find Alicia. Luke knew his brother couldn't keep a promise like that. But Luke vowed to find her, or die trying. He would chuck his crutches by tomorrow. He refused to be relegated to manning the phones while others did the legwork. *Holy Mary, mother of God, just keep her safe and alive, and I'll do the rest.*

* * * *

Family and friends charged forward when the chopper set down. Luke knew he should've known they'd be there and prepared himself for the rush of confusing emotions. He wanted to talk to them, question them—and he wanted to avoid them until he could pull himself together. He bristled when Matt and the rodeo medics helped him climb down from the craft. Once they ducked beyond the circling propellers, he squared his shoulders and shrugged them away. He knew they meant well, but damned if he'd let them treat him like a cripple when his daughter needed him to be strong.

Amber stood in the back, her eyes filled with misery. He wanted to head straight for her and take her in his arms. He limped through the group of loved ones and accepted hugs and supportive comments. "Don't worry," they said, "we won't stop looking until Alicia's back home."

Empty words, but said with love. He nodded and thanked them in a husky, constricted voice that sounded foreign to him.

He stepped in front of Amber and paused for a pulse-stopping, heart-piercing eternity. Amber's eyes were swollen, and her hair was an uncombed tangle of auburn flowing about her shoulders. Her expression was the saddest he'd ever seen, and mirrored what he felt. Had it only been hours since he'd last seen her?

His throat felt tight. "There's dried blood on the legs of your pants" God, that wasn't what he wanted to say.

"It's yours," she said, without breaking eye contact.

She'd been through hell, and he'd made it worse. Why couldn't he think of the right words? His mind churned with excruciating worry and he ached all over from his fall from the Brahman, but the sight of Amber shot painkilling endorphins through his veins.

"Luke," she said softly. "There are no words . . ." Her voice broke, and she took a breath to regain her composure. "But I'm so deeply, deeply sorry."

Balancing his weight between Amber and his crutches, he drew her into his arms. "We'll get Alicia back." It frightened him how empty the words sounded. He held Amber close until her trembling stopped. When he released her, she walked beside him as he limped toward the ranch house. He had wanted to kiss her so damned bad, but it seemed wrong with his daughter missing. "I need a briefing of what's been done."

* * * *

Amber poured herself a mug of morning coffee and slipped into a straight-back chair next to Luke. Silence hung in the air between them. She closed her eyes. She'd let Luke down and now a child's life hung in the balance. Nothing would ever be the same. "Luke, I—"

"Matt called in the FBI," he interrupted. "Authorities across the U.S. are on alert with special attention given to Nevada and Virginia due to the possible connections there. Worldwide news is carrying Alicia's picture—her face will be everywhere, newspapers, TV." Luke paused, his look almost a caress before it hardened again. "We'll be getting a flood of calls. I've ordered extra temporary phone lines."

Amber's stomach knotted. The whirl of activity made her feel more guilty, more helpless.

"I want you to stay by the phones," Luke said.

"Please, no. There's a houseful of people to do that. I need to do more. I can identify the woman who took Alicia, and the sheriff said—"

"Damn it. For once in your life, just do what I ask." The desperation in his tone shouted that he needed to be in control on some level. She bit back her retort, willing to give him whatever helped him to get through this—even an illusion.

His gaze softened. "I'll check with you later, okay?"

She nodded.

Then, like a man possessed, he thrust away his crutches.

She covered her mouth to hold back a small gasp and helplessly watched him head out the door to join the search. Damn him. She was in better shape to join the search party than he was. He could have manned the phones for a few days, let that leg heal. But not Mr. Macho. Didn't he understand? Now was the time to join forces. Looking for Alicia was something they could have done together. But, no—he wanted her here—out of his sight.

He was gone around the clock. The next morning, he stayed less than five minutes, and while he quickly reviewed the telephone messages with her, he avoided her eyes. He handed her a newspaper. "Thought you might want to see this," he said and headed out the door again.

Her heart sank. It was clear—he hated her. He couldn't even stand to look at her.

After he left, Amber glanced at the headlines. She hoped the San Antonio police didn't make the connection between the nanny mentioned in the newspapers and Mr. Rhoades's missing secretary. She had been thinking of turning herself in. But the shadowy physical descriptions of the masked men who broke in, and the big man who fired the shot that killed Mr. Rhoades wasn't enough to help. She needed names and a concrete motive. But digging out more information would have to wait until Alicia was safe.

Days crawled by without any sign of her. Matt came into the kitchen looking like he hadn't slept in days either. They had never hit it off, but she'd come to admire his unwavering devotion to the family, and she was grateful for his FBI connections.

She handed him a cup of coffee. Then, she began to pace. "Why no word from the kidnappers? What are they waiting for?" She didn't even try to hide the frustration in her voice.

"It's not a good sign," he said. "The earlier the demand comes in, the better Alicia's chances. On the positive side, sometimes kidnappers like to play mind games with the family to wear them down before they make contact."

Before Amber could ask more questions, Matt fled the kitchen, taking his coffee with him. That's how it had been—no one talking much—everyone too submerged in his or her own pain, their own fears.

Hers were growing by the hour. Were the kidnappers giving Alicia enough to eat? Keeping her clean and safe? Was she frightened? *Dear, God, what if they molested her?*

Amber rubbed her aching head. The questions hammered at her mercilessly, and she knew they must be tearing at Luke as well.

Another day passed. The charity rodeo was over, and the family and Buck's security people had searched every inch of the ranch. There was no reason to accept Buck's hospitality any longer. Luke and Matt decided to establish a command center on the Ryan ranch. Wanda promised to relay all the

calls about Alicia. Amber's stomach knotted tighter when it was time to board the Cessna. Everything in her resisted leaving the place where Alicia had disappeared, but she knew the child could be hundreds of miles away by now.

Rather than returning to Luke's house, he insisted in a low drawl that she stay at Matt's place. "With me gone all the time chasing leads," he said, without meeting her eyes, "it's safer for you. And Molly and Mom can use your help to man the phones."

Amber nodded. Without Alicia to care for, she didn't belong in Luke's house or even on the ranch, but she couldn't leave—not until Alicia was back with her daddy where she belonged.

Amber wished Alicia could belong with her, too. She didn't expect anyone to understand what she was going through. Alicia was like her own daughter. Amber fought the surge of pain.—she'd lost Alicia and Luke in the same horrifying instant. She could face losing Luke, but not Alicia. *Please, God, don't let Rosebud pay for my moment of distraction.*

Luke grabbed up the phone and explained to her that the Ryan spread was in a different county than the abduction site, so he also had to clue in the local sheriff. When the sheriff came on the line, Luke gave him the details of Alicia's disappearance. Tears came to his eyes, and he cleared his voice. It was obvious how much it hurt him to repeat the story.

The days passed. Because of all the media coverage, they received more calls at the Ryan ranch than they had at Buck's place. There were sightings of Alicia first in one state and then another—all turned out to be false leads. Amber screened leads for duplicates and fed the new ones to Luke. He ran all the clues by the sheriff. Those the lawman considered a waste of time, Luke chased down himself, hoping one would pan out.

When Molly and Virginia insisted that Amber get out of the house for a while in the evenings, she practiced her roping with Roberto. She couldn't swing the lasso without thinking of Alicia and how good the little pixie had gotten for her size. A regular little cowgirl.

A week passed, and it was getting harder for everyone to cling to hope. People had their own way of coping. Virginia buried herself in the kitchen—hanging on by keeping everyone fed. Molly had gone upstairs to rest a while. Amber's way was to stay busy. She worked between command centers, correlated data, answered calls of people who claimed to have seen Alicia. The news media, hovering around like vultures, caught everything on tape. Everyone in the family hated them but used the press to get messages to the kidnappers.

"Tell us what you want," the family said repeatedly into the cameras shoved in their faces.

Unsatisfied with those comments, the reporters pushed emotional buttons. "How do you feel about losing the child?" they asked Amber. Then to Luke, they asked, "Do you blame the nanny?"

Neither Luke nor Amber answered questions like that, but Amber feared his answer if he were to expose his true feelings. He had to blame her—she blamed herself.

* * * *

Amber heard booted steps coming from the entry hall toward her. From the desk in the sunken living room, she looked up, surprised to see Luke. The dark circles under his eyes showed that, like her, he hadn't slept for days. He was running himself into the ground. It seemed he'd aged a year. She had the urge to touch the shadowy stubble on his face. The sadness in his eyes made her want to cry. They'd spoken of nothing but the search. It hurt that he hadn't touched her. Amber's face flushed as she remembered the night she had tried to seduce him. That night, he had vowed to count the days until he could finish what she'd started. She had looked forward to it. Needed it. That seemed like such a long time ago. Now the passion that consumed them was all about getting Alicia back.

In spite of their single-minded drive, every time he was near, she wanted to reach out and touch him, to soothe his overwhelming pain, and to have him soothe hers. She needed him now more than ever and hated herself for those needs.

"Have you eaten today?" she asked, her voice barely a whisper. Virginia said he hadn't sat down to a meal since Alicia had disappeared. Amber hadn't eaten much herself, but she could go on less fuel than a man.

"Not hungry," he snapped. "I want to bring you up to date on what's going on." He gestured to the couch. His words were all business, but there was a longing in his eyes. He still wanted her—and hated himself for it.

When she sat down, he joined her without getting too close.

"It sounds serious." She welcomed whatever he had to say. They had talked so little since the kidnapping. She was hungry for any sharing, and exchanging information was better than nothing.

"We have more now than the sketchy descriptions of the false medic and the tall woman with high cheekbones and long legs," he said in a husky voice. "The same day Alicia disappeared, so did two of Buck's new hires."

"Do you know who they are?" she asked, trying to keep the tremor out of her voice. It would help if he would put his arms around her . . . if only for a moment.

"We've got photos of both men, but the application data was false. The FBI lab lifted a partial print from one of the forms. With the print and picture, the Feds identified Pedro Montoya, a suspected hit man from the Nevada area."

Amber swallowed. "A hit man?" A hit man had their Alicia!

"Yeah. Feds got an APB out on him. The Vegas police are preparing a list of his known associates. I flew to Vegas, hoping to uncover something the police had overlooked. But I ended up chasing my tail."

"Maybe if you'd taken me with you . . ."

Tightly controlled anger simmered in his probing stare. After a moment of heart-stopping silence, he said in a tired voice, "I need you here. I thought if you knew the Feds had a positive ID on Montoya, it might give you some hope."

She met his gaze. "Thank you for that."

He rose and grabbed his Stetson off the hook. "I gotta go now. But I want you to know I don't blame you for any of this. When I shot my mouth off, it wasn't me. It was a man crazed with worry."

She nodded. The ache in her throat kept her from speaking. As he left, he touched her shoulder so lightly she wasn't sure if she'd imagined it. She bit her lower lip, fighting tears. She didn't believe for a moment that Luke didn't blame her. He had avoided her like the plague. Still, she appreciated that he had tried to make her feel better. He was a good, caring man who didn't deserve this agony. If they didn't get Alicia back, it would destroy him. And her, as well. No! She wouldn't think of failure.

The phone jangled loudly. As she curled her fingers around the receiver, the ringing stopped. She withdrew her hand and looked at the receiver. Some sixth sense told her it was going to ring again. When it did, Amber grabbed the receiver. *Let this be the lead that brings Alicia's home.* No one responded to her hello. The line was open—the breathing at the other end even. "What do you want?" she asked, trying to hold her voice steady. Matt had installed tracing devices on the phones. No matter how much she wanted to slam the receiver down, she had to keep the line open as long as possible.

Finally, a low voice said, "You."

* * * *

Rational deductions and a quickness to react to every lead failed to bring Luke any closer to finding his daughter. He hated the kidnappers' waiting game. He had expected a demand for the journal or for ransom by now. Hell, they could have whatever they wanted. As far as the journal was concerned, copies were already in the hands of authorities, and as soon as the FBI unraveled the underlying plot, they would round up the players.

He had seen Amber trembling before and had wanted to take her in his arms and comfort her, but he feared that if he let his guard down, he would fall to pieces. It had been hard enough to back away the one time he had dared to hold her. He wanted to share their sorrow, but couldn't. What kind of man was he to hunger for comfort while his daughter was in danger?

To sidestep trouble, he had avoided talking to Amber as much as possible. He had wanted to take her with him to Vegas, but with the tempestuous risk of spending a night in a Vegas hotel together, and the very deadly danger of exposing her to a possible hit, he couldn't chance it. It gave him peace of mind to know she was safe with his family.

* * * *

Amber wasn't sure she could saddle a horse herself, but she'd seen Luke do it. *Please, let me be a quick study.* With effort, she had gathered what she needed from the tack room. After bribing Firebrand with a few sugar cubes, Amber threw a pad and blanket onto the horse, then standing on an upside-

down bucket, she struggled to get the saddle in place. Her hands shook as she hooked the stirrups on the horn and buckled the cinch. "Be a good horse and let me ride you, okay?" she said, speaking softly and patting the quarter horse's neck. Firebrand licked his lips, and his ears swiveled back at the sound of her voice. "I'll take that as a yes," Amber said to keep her spirits up.

The man on the phone had said to ride out toward Verde Creek and a helicopter would meet her somewhere between the ranch and the creek. She was to come alone. If she failed to come, or brought anyone with her, or if anyone followed her, he would kill Alicia. But if she cooperated and gave him the journal, he would give her Alicia.

Amber didn't believe him, but if they wanted her dead they would already have killed her. Besides, this was the first real break toward getting Alicia back, and she had to play it out. She slipped the journal and her loaded gun into a saddlebag along with a canteen of water. Next, she looped a lasso over her saddle horn. This was crazy. She was riding into the unknown like a lamb to the slaughter. But who else could save Alicia? Was she thinking right? With the up-and-down emotions she had fought since the day she'd woken next to the dead body, she didn't know. But with Alicia's life in the balance, what choice did she have?

Amber jammed her Stetson low on her forehead. She drew the horse close to the side of the stall and climbed the fence to mount. She grabbed the saddle horn, leaned forward, threw her leg over, and heard the groan of leather as she slid into the saddle with ease.

Several stalls down, Amber heard a high-pitched whinny. She let out a small yelp when Firebrand shifted and danced a sidestepping jig. It was ridiculous. She was as frightened of the horse as the men she was going to meet. But she had to do this. "Please, Firebrand, this ride's important. Maybe the most important ride I'll ever make."

As though he understood, he calmed down and stopped moving nervously beneath her. *Thank you, Lord.* She squeezed lightly with her legs to urge him forward out the open barn door. The late-afternoon sun slanted rays across the compound and toasted the buildings with a brilliant bronze glaze.

Roberto was heading for one of the corrals. She passed a vaquero walking his horse toward the barn. He tipped his straw hat. She returned the courtesy, hoping that she would get away before Matt or Luke showed up.

* * * *

Luke was on his way to meet with the sheriff when his cell phone rang. It was Molly. "Amber left the house without telling anyone she was leaving," she said. "She's never done that before. Something's up. Mama Virginia told me Amber left right after she got a phone call."

All calls were taped, Luke thought, so he could find out straight away if the two things were connected. "I'll be right there. Call Matt and the sheriff. I was supposed to meet them in the barn office. Tell them to come to your place instead."

Within ten minutes, the three men, Molly, and Virginia had gathered in the living room. With a grim face, Matt played the phone tape that had sent Amber racing out the door. A man claiming to have

Alicia told Amber to bring the journal and ride toward Verde Creek. He would meet her along the way and make the exchange. Then, he said in a deadly low voice, "If you tell anyone about this call, or if anyone follows you, I'll kill Alicia."

Chapter Twelve

Several miles outside the ranch compound, Firebrand settled into a smooth gait, his muscles working easily beneath his sand-colored coat, his mane ruffling in the hot, sultry breeze. Amber shaded her aching eyes from the late-afternoon sun. Where along the path would the killer show himself? He'd said a helicopter would set down somewhere between the ranch and Verde Creek. Amber looked up into the cloudless blue sky and listened for the whir of rotating propellers, but there was only the soft hum of the breeze. She was still too close to the ranch. The killer would probably wait until she had put more distance between herself and help.

Firebrand nickered softly, and his ears perked as though he'd heard something. To calm herself, Amber inhaled air heavy with the scent of mesquite and focused on the path that wound through flat land, covered with scrub oak and cactus, and hoped that she remembered the way to Verde Creek. The distant haze of rocky, purple mountains and wide, arid landscape emphasized how small and vulnerable she was. Knowing she was about to meet with a killer made the barren land seem even more hostile, more separate from the ranch and the rest of the world. The serene scattering of bluebonnets and Indian paintbrush did nothing to stem her rising fear.

She heard a whinny. Her neck prickled. Was one of the kidnappers already nearby watching her? There were plenty of places along the way for someone to hide. *Oh my God!* It hit her with a crushing blow. As long as she stayed on the path, she was as exposed as a turtle without its shell. Well, there was nothing she could do about that—she didn't know the area well enough to deviate from the route.

What if someone rode out this way and the kidnappers thought the person was with her? Amber's mouth went as dry as dust. God, she'd acted with her heart, not her brain. She hadn't stopped to think this through. She prayed her actions wouldn't lead Luke into danger, too. No, he should be safe. Matt had bugged the phone, but unless he had a specific reason, he wouldn't check it until tomorrow morning. He usually listened to the tape after his morning coffee. That meant Luke wouldn't know where she'd gone until tomorrow. By then, good outcome or bad, this should be over. The sad part was that he would go to bed thinking she had deserted him when he needed her most. She would never do that, not while Alicia was missing. But after her failure to protect his daughter, his opinion of her would be lower than bog slime.

Amber pulled her Stetson low on her forehead. She needed a plan, but how could she anticipate the unknown? Her loaded gun was hidden in the saddlebag—not at all handy in case she needed it. She didn't want to advertise she was armed. She glanced down at her rope looped over her saddle horn. She had gotten good at lassoing fixed objects like posts, but she still had trouble with moving targets.

What was she thinking? None of that mattered. Elmer had been a strong giant of a man and the killer had taken him down. Was that high-pitched howl merely the wind, or a child sobbing? *Alicia, I'm coming.*

She couldn't think of failure. Somehow, she would find a way to rescue Alicia—and a way to survive. Exchanging the reins from one hand to the other, she wiped her damp hands on her jeans. Endless Cave, the halfway point between the ranch house and Verde Creek, had to be coming up soon.

God, she hated caves. She winced at a flash of memory. She was about four years old. The family had traveled to Southern California to see her aunt Hazel. They had hiked into the foothills that bordered the north line of San Bernardino. When they had stopped for a picnic, she followed her new puppy, Nosy, as he sniffed about. He romped ahead up a small incline and disappeared into a dark cave, which she later learned was the entrance to an old mine shaft. Amber broke out in a sweat as she relived the horror.

She took an unsure step forward, calling her puppy's name. The ground gave way. She screamed as she fell into a pit of blackness. When she hit bottom, a sharp pain cut through her. Then, a spooky, chilling quiet closed in on her. She clawed at the blackness, calling her mama, fighting a terror like she'd never known before.

Later, her grandma told her it had taken two days to find her. It had seemed like forever. Amber's stomach knotted. She had only faced the cold, darkness, and hunger—not ruthless men. Alicia's fear must be a hundred times worse. *Please, Lord, don't let them hurt my little Rosebud.*

Amber's nerves twitched beneath her skin. How many people were involved with the kidnapping? If one of them was watching her, he could see that, as instructed, she was alone.

God, she was going to meet the men who had killed Mr. Rhoades! Amber trembled, remembering the shouted orders—the violence—the sudden and painful darkness. Sweat trickled down her back. With damp palms, she clutched the reins tighter. If only she had dared to tell someone about the call. Doubt sliced at Amber's heart like the killer's razor blade. With all that had happened, she knew the guy who had called wouldn't really exchange Alicia for the journal and let them go. But if he took her to the child . . . Okay, she was counting on a miracle.

* * * *

Luke paced, aching to race out the door and stop Amber from this insanity. She knew the danger, yet to save Alicia, she was risking her life. He'd never known anyone more courageous, more selfless. He understood why she hadn't told him about the call. But she should have. He could have made special arrangements to protect her. An ache twisted Luke's gut. The two people he cared most about were in deadly danger. Every fiber of his soul wanted to run to the rescue. The killer's cold, emotionless words played in his head. *"If anyone follows you, I'll kill Alicia."* Damn, he had to consider the fallout from any action.

Matt and the sheriff watched him with sympathy on their faces. Luke stopped pacing and glared at them. "Okay men, I need some ideas here. Now."

"We can't let that SOB call the shots," the sheriff said. "I'll send some men to Verde Creek by way of Deadman's Hill on horseback. They can backtrack toward the ranch. We'll close in from two directions and intercept the exchange."

Matt shook his head. "This isn't about any exchange. I don't think it's even about the journal. The head guy wants Amber for what he thinks she knows."

"Save the damned FBI theories," Luke said, feeling boxed in. "I need foolproof direction."

“Doesn’t exist,” Matt said, “and you know it. But the sheriff’s suggestion about going in the back way around the hill could work. But not by horseback. By chopper.”

“And how quiet is a chopper, big brother?” Luke said, his voice dripping with sarcasm. He wiped his hand across his face. “If they see us, or hear us, Alicia’s dead.”

“If we do nothing,” Matt said, “they’re both dead.”

Luke darted a sharp look at Matt. “Doing nothing’s not an option.”

* * * *

Minutes ticked off like hours. Amber shook her head. The irony of riding into the clutches of killers when all she wanted was to run away terrified her as much as the bitter taste of her own fear. The breeze died down, and heat rose in waves from the dry earth and radiated across the horizon. Everything went still. Amber’s neck prickled at the sense of not being alone. A shaft of icy fear sliced through her bone-deep as she reined in Firebrand and scanned the dry, purple flatness behind her. Was that the sound of hooves again? Firebrand’s ears lay back as if he heard someone, too.

Amber tensed, her gaze flicking to the stand of mesquite that bordered the well-beaten path. Nothing moved. Not the spindly, dark branches. Not a leaf. Heat swirled around her, oppressive, unsafe. The taste, smell, and feel of fear pressed against her. She listened intently. If there was more than one rider following her, she’d hear more horses. She looked ahead. The path would lead her and the rider under a leafy elm buried in a cluster of mesquite. She dismounted with more guts than skill and drew her horse out of sight. “Don’t make a sound, boy. I’m counting on you.”

Amber grabbed her rope and gun. She tucked the gun in her waistband, looped the rope over her shoulder, and headed for the elm beside the path. It took three tries to swing herself up into the branches. She gasped for breath, her heart lunging in her chest. Climbing trees had been a heck of a lot easier when she had been a tomboy kid. She straddled a thick branch and secured one end of her rope to the trunk. The other end she got ready to drop on her mark. *Okay, shadow, I’m ready for you. Let’s get this show on the road.* Precious minutes ticked by. Where was he?

She exhaled in relief when the clomp of hooves announced his approach. The dark-skinned man looked like a typical vaquero. Straw hat, usual ranch duds. What if she was wrong about him? He was passing right under her now. No time for uncertainty.

She dropped the rope around his arms, yanked with all her might, and pulled him from the horse. It helped that he was a lightweight. His straw hat went flying. He cursed in Spanish as he swung, dangling like a puppet, about six inches off the ground. He began to yell.

Amber drew her gun and glared down at him. “Shut up. A bullet in the skull could ruin your day.” She was amazed at how steady her voice was, how steady her gun hand.

He went silent and squinted up at her, measuring the threat. He was trying to move his arms, but the rope was too tight. Struggling made his body jerk. Too much jerking about might loosen the rope. “Freeze!” Amber said.

Keeping the gun more or less aimed in his direction, she lowered herself to the lowest branch and jumped.

“You’ve made a mistake, you stupid bitch,” he said.

His response and the hatred in his eyes told her there was no mistake. She pointed her gun at his crotch. “What part of ‘shut up’ don’t you understand?”

He glared down at her. His tough, obstinate expression told that her questioning him would only bring lies and waste precious time. Now that she could see him more closely, she realized she’d seen him at Buck’s ranch.

Amber turned her attention to his horse. It stood about twenty feet away, munching on grass. She took the man’s rope from the saddle horn and hogtied him, using Girl Scout knots that were so tight he would have to get help to cut them off. Sweat dripped from her face. Her shirt clung to her back. “I’m sorry about this,” she said, as she worked. In case someone found him and freed him, she had to pretend she believed he was just a vaquero who happened upon her by accident. “You see, it can’t even look like you’re following me.”

Once she was sure he couldn’t get loose, she reclinced the tree. Using leverage, she eased his bound body to the ground, and then released her rope from above. Amber untied his neckerchief and stuffed it in his mouth. She slipped her rope from his arms, rolled his body into a ditch, and covered him loosely with a mesquite branch. She looked down at him as she relooped her rope. “When this is over, I’ll come back and free you. And if I don’t come back . . .”

Sweat rolled from Amber’s face. She grabbed her canteen from her saddlebag and took a long swig to fight dehydration. She needed to stay fit for whatever came next.

Amber hid her shadow’s horse in a tangle of mesquite and tied the animal securely. “I’m sorry about tying you up, boy. Really sorry.” She didn’t want him showing up somewhere without a rider.

One down, she thought as she remounted Firebrand. She was getting better at climbing on and dismounting. “I couldn’t manage, pal, if you didn’t cooperate,” she said as she reined him toward Verde Creek.

Another wave of doubt hit her. She knew the man she’d tied up was one of the bad guys. Could she have forced him to lead her to Alicia? No. She had done the right thing. It was one less bad guy to deal with.

How many others were there? And how the devil would she deal with them? First, she had to see what she was up against, then improvise. She groaned. After the guy who’d called her showed up, any action could be too late. *I will survive*. She repeated the mantra to herself. Amber closed her eyes and brought forth a cherished image of the man she’d come to love. She’d had dreams of after this was over, impossible dreams that included making a life with Luke and Alicia. But she had failed him. He would never trust her with his daughter again. “Luke,” she whispered to the breeze. “I’m so sorry I brought all this misery to you.”

He'd been through so much already, losing his brother, Parker, his dad and his wife. If he lost his daughter, too . . . She couldn't let that happen. "God, I need you now like I've never needed you before. Help me save this spunky little girl."

The sun slipped behind the hills, shadows deepening. Amber recognized the rise in land. Endless Cave was just ahead. The shadowy mouth looked dark and menacing. Caves and mining shafts had a lot in common. Thank goodness this wasn't her destination. Anything could be inside, unstable ground, wolves, snakes. She reined Firebrand to the left away from the entrance.

A hawk flew up, wildly flapping its wings as it deserted a twisted mesquite growing near the cave entrance. Startled, Amber jerked the reins, making Firebrand jump to the side. "Sorry, Firebrand," she said, steadying the horse.

"That's far enough," a man shouted as he stepped from behind a boulder with a rifle aimed at her heart. "What took you so long?"

His coal-black hair had a streak of platinum in the deep wave combed back from his forehead. He was over six feet tall with a wrestler's body and a lean, angular face with deep-set, icy black eyes. A straw hat dangled down his back from its chinstrap. Always before, there had been stocking masks. Now he flaunted his features. Not a good sign.

Amber felt the blood drain from her face. Her trembling fingers tightened on the reins as she brought Firebrand to a halt. She got a glimpse of the top of a helicopter behind the tangle of mesquite.

"Get down, nice and slow," the guy with the platinum streak said in a gravelly monotone. The up-and-down once-over he gave her made her skin crawl.

Behind him, a big guy with massive arms and black stubble on his face and the tall blonde with the Las Vegas showgirl figure backed him up with rifles. All three were darkly tanned and wore typical ranch clothes—blue denim shirts, worn jeans, and straw hats—pushed back off their faces. They'd dressed the part, even down to the worn jeans, to blend in with the other ranch workers. Probably spoke Spanish, too. The men would pass scrutiny—the woman wouldn't.

"Where's Alicia?" Amber was surprised at the steadiness in her voice.

"Where's the journal?" The guy with the platinum streak looked toward her horse. His gaze zeroed in on her saddlebag.

"You guessed it," she said, putting sass into her retort to buoy up her courage.

He grabbed the saddlebag and dumped the contents on the ground. Good thing she'd had the forethought to tuck her gun inside the blanket. He cut her triumph short when he shook the blanket, too, and the gun fell to the dirt.

He gestured with his head toward her, and the guy with the five-o'clock shadow did a thorough body search.

“Watch your hands, Big Guy,” she snapped as he invaded her private creases and hollows.

In retaliation for speaking up, Big Buy pinched her hard on the bottom. She bit back a yelp and glared at him. He laughed. “She’s clean, Ricardo,” he said.

Ricardo. Amber remembered hearing the name Ricardo Carrillo and had seen it in the journal. Because his name was on some of the documents, she’d assumed he was a partner in the plastic firm.

“Look, we had a deal, Mr. Carrillo.” His head jerked back and his eyes narrowed at her use of his last name. “Now that you’re sure I’m harmless, I want to see Alicia.”

Carrillo glared at her a moment, then thumbed through the journal. “Where’re the pages with the account numbers?”

Had Mr. Rhoades held back pages? Why? And where were they now? If she admitted she didn’t know about any missing pages, Carrillo would kill her on the spot. “You didn’t think I’d come here without a couple of aces in the hole, did you?” She wished she were as clever as she sounded. “Give me Alicia and you can have them.”

“You don’t have them on you. So where are they?”

“I hid them on the trail.”

He laughed smugly. “My man will know where you stopped along the way. Probably saw you stash them.”

She lifted her chin. “Don’t count on it. Believe me, no one knows where I put my insurance. No one.” *Not even me.*

Carrillo looked over her shoulder as though he expected the rider who had tailed her to show up any minute. “Nina,” he told the woman, “take the lady’s horse and find Pedro.”

Amber remembered that Pedro Montoya had been one of the confirmed new hires at Buck’s ranch. Was Big Guy the other new hire—Angel Garcia?

She was matching names with faces, but what good would that do her if she were dead? “I hate to be a broken record, but I want Alicia. How do I know you even have her?”

“You have no leverage to make demands,” Carrillo said. “But I’ll let you see the brat. In case you forgot, her life is in your hands.”

* * * *

In the fading light of the bronze sunset, Luke and Matt loaded their gear into the ranch chopper. The sheriff and his men would follow in the sheriff’s helicopter. Luke frowned. He was setting out on a blind man’s journey. But he had one chance—find the secret passage on the far side of the hill

that cut through the bowels of Endless Cave, then follow it to the west bank of Verde Creek. No one had ever made it through that part of the cave and lived to tell about it.

A truck sped across the tarmac and skidded to a stop in front of him. He was surprised to see his mother behind the wheel. The lines in her face looked deeper, her gaze more intense. The last time he'd seen her distressed like this had been just before Dad died. He stiffened. "Do you have news?" he asked as she leaned her head out the window.

"No, but—" She pressed two rosaries with silver crosses into his hand. "Give one to Matt." She gestured toward his brother, who looked up and waved, but continued loading emergency supplies. "Molly said you men were going into the lost passages of Endless Cave. Please, keep the rosaries close to your hearts."

Luke forced his thanks past the constriction in his throat. The kidnapping and everything connected to it had been hard on his mom. And she'd come to love Amber like her own daughter. If that wasn't enough, now she had to worry about her only remaining sons going into the inky passages of hell. He had to succeed, or the whole family would never be the same.

Minutes later, with Matt at the controls, the brothers were airborne, heading for Endless Cave with the whir of the propellers pounding in their ears. With the threat against Alicia's life, Luke hadn't dared to follow Amber in a more direct way, although every fiber of him wanted to. She'd raced into danger, gambling her life for Alicia's, showing a love as great as any mother's. She'd taken a tremendous risk. And it might be for nothing. There was no proof that Alicia was even in the state.

Luke touched the rosary. His gut wrenched. The world was closing in on him, and his mind exploded with an emotion so crushing, so devastating that it was beyond anything he'd ever felt before. Amber may have already sacrificed her life for Alicia. Holy Mother of God, he could lose both Amber and his darling little Rosebud.

As though sensing Luke's agony, Matt reached over and touched his arm. "Hang on, bro." He cleared his throat. "I was wrong about Amber. She's an emotional wildcard, but sometimes it's good to have one of those in your hands."

Luke nodded. That was as close as Matt would come to saying he liked Amber—that he trusted her. But his remark was too much like a eulogy for Luke to draw much satisfaction from it.

An image of Amber's heart-shaped face with those huge green eyes lifted his sagging spirits. In spite of her amnesia and fears, she had always put his daughter first. He'd been right about her from the beginning. She was all heart, all about giving. He'd been a fool not to let her know that he loved her more than any woman, anywhere, living or dead. Without Amber, he'd be a shell of a man going through the motions, with no zest for life. He had to save Amber to save himself.

Why did the kidnappers want her? Did she know something deep in her subconscious? Those bastards had used razor blades on their other victims. Would they cut Amber trying to find out things she couldn't possibly tell them because she couldn't remember? Or had never known? Luke's stomach knotted. If she couldn't tell the kidnappers what they wanted to know, they wouldn't need her anymore. They'd already killed a passel of innocent people. If he didn't find Amber first, it

would be over for her. His heart thundered in his ears. He couldn't let her die without knowing the depth of his love—a silent cry tore at his throat—couldn't let her die period!

He should have made love to Amber. The memory of their last kiss twisted his heart. In that moment, he had forgotten everything but how much he wanted her—the texture of her lips as familiar as his own, and the taste of her rushed through him with the force of floodwaters and threatened to sweep him away on raging currents of passion.

Hellfire. He mustn't regret not making love to her! He had done the right thing. They would have the rest of their lives to make love. His thoughts forced heat to pool low in his belly. Damn it. He hated himself for thinking about lovemaking when lives were at stake. But he couldn't help it. Tension charged his nerve endings. When he had Amber in his arms again, there would be no holding back. And she would be in his arms again.

* * * *

As Carrillo roughly pushed Amber ahead into the dank cave, a wave of anxiety flooded her. She was caught in darkness, afraid her next step would be on unstable ground and she would fall into a pit like when she had been a child.

Carrillo flicked on a heavy-duty flashlight. "Stay to the right. There's a crevasse to the left. Someone your size could easily slip through. When we dropped rocks inside, we never heard them hit bottom."

Amber shuddered. "You left Alicia in this cave alone?" Amber remembered the two days she had spent in total blackness. It was like being buried alive.

"Nina was with her most of the time," Carrillo said. "She left her a flashlight."

Carrillo shoved Amber into a stone room with camping supplies and packaged food scattered recklessly about. He and Big Guy followed.

Alicia was nowhere in sight. "Where is she?" A long rope tied to a boulder had an empty loop. Amber's stomach knotted. "You tied her up like a dog?"

Carrillo frowned. "Should've hog-tied her. It was Nina's damned idea to give the kid some freedom to move around. Looks like the brat got into the supplies, made a mess of them. Hey, kid. Where are you?" He flashed the light around. "Looks like the brat's playing hide and seek. She couldn't have gone far."

Panic gripped Amber. "What if she fell into that crevasse?"

"She should've stayed put," Carrillo growled. "When we find her, she'll wish she did."

Oh, God. Amber wanted to find Alicia, but she didn't want to return her to the clutches of these horrible people. Yet the thought of her falling into a bottomless pit was worse. "We have to look for her. She must be terrified."

“Angel,” Carrillo said, lighting a small lantern, “see if you can find the brat.”

Now, Amber was sure. Big guy was Angel Garcia. He let loose with a string of profanity.

“Let’s all go,” Amber said. “She knows my voice. We’ll find her faster.”

Carrillo shoved Amber backward. “Forget it. You stay.”

Garcia left, grumbling, leaving Amber alone with Carrillo. He was as dangerous as a rattler, but he was only one man. She would never get a better chance to escape. But she couldn’t go without Alicia.

Although she could identify the players now, she still didn’t know what was going on. Amber had a hunch Carrillo wanted more from her than the missing pages, or she’d already be dead. Did she ever know the details of Mr. Rhoades’s Las Vegas deal? If only she could remember.

“I’d like to clarify something,” Amber said as she eased away from him. “I understand about the plastics firm and the nuclear test site, but what’s with the explosives?” She almost choked on her bold-faced lie. She didn’t understand any of it, but her immediate goal was to get him talking.

He put his rifle down next to him, and rested his hand on the gun handle of the weapon holstered at his side. “M-o-n-e-y,” he said, spelling it out. “Lots of money. The plastics firm is a front for making explosives. Stored them at an underground shelter at the edge of the nuclear test site, a place where no one would come nosing around.”

Amber shuddered. His loose tongue confirmed that he planned to kill her. She spied Alicia’s Barbie doll behind a boulder. She started to pick it up. Carrillo grabbed it before she had the chance. He smoothed the doll’s hair in slow strokes that sent chills down Amber’s spine.

“What did Senator Whitmore have to do with this?” Amber fought to hold her voice steady.

“When Rhoades got suspicious,” Carrillo said, “he asked Whitmore about the government contracts. If he’d just backed out of the deal instead of digging around and stirring things up, he’d still be alive.”

“Was anyone in the government involved?”

“Yes and no. The government paid us inflated prices for the plastic parts we made by daylight, but they had no idea what we produced on the late shift. We combined ammonium nitrate, and crystal zinc—a byproduct of plastic production—and nuclear dust to produce untraceable dirty bombs for Ram Sandhi.”

Amber had heard the name. Reports claimed they were a fringe terrorist cell hiding out somewhere in the Vegas desert. But something didn’t add up. “So why did you put the plastics firm up for sale? That brought attention to you.”

“After Nine-Eleven, my partner, Morris, got scared and wanted out. He contacted Rhoades on the QT to buy the business. Morris, the stupid bastard that he was, turned his books over to Rhoades

for review. Rhoades got suspicious of the other income and the maps of the nuclear site. That's when he contacted Senator Whitmore."

"Morris tried to market an underground business?" Amber couldn't believe it.

"Like I said, he wasn't the brightest neon sign in Vegas."

"Does Morris know you kidnapped Alicia?"

"He doesn't know anything anymore. He's dead."

Amber forced herself to breathe. "You're as hard on your friends as your enemies."

Carrillo held her gaze with icy eyes and yanked off the Barbie doll's head. "I assure you I'm harder on enemies."

With effort, Amber squelched a shiver. *Show no fear*, she repeated to herself. "You're not going to let us go, even if I give you the missing pages, are you?" She knew the answer, but stalling gave her time to think.

He stared at her. Deep furrows formed above the bridge of his nose. "If? There is no if. Only when." Slowly, he removed his skintight leather gloves. Then, he pulled a pack of razor blades from his Levi's pocket and withdrew one. It glinted in the yellowy light of the lantern. He shoved the blade into a metal holder that looked like an old-time shaving implement. "And I'm not a patient man."

* * * *

Alicia rubbed her eyes, trying to wake up. She'd dreamed that she'd heard a woman talking in a familiar tone, strong, but not mean. Comforting, like a mother's voice—not a bit like Nina's angry words. As mean as Nina was, Alicia feared the three men ten-gazillion times more. The man with the white skunk-stripe shook her really hard—said he'd kill her. She hadn't even done anything bad, 'cept cry to go home. When they left her alone, she'd climbed up on this ledge so the bad men couldn't find her. She lifted her chin. Her daddy would come soon. He wouldn't leave her with these bad people.

She knew this part of the cave well. Her daddy had brought her here lots a times. They'd climbed this wall and crawled into the mini cave that was just big enough for her and her daddy if he scrunched up like a pretzel. He had shown her the funny stick pictures on the wall and told her a story about the buffalo in the drawing. Hairy beast, her daddy had called him. Alicia eased a little way out of her hiding place and looked down from the high ledge above the stone room.

Amber! Alicia wanted to scream her nanny's name in delight, but she didn't want to give away her hiding place. She would wait until the bad man left. Instead of leaving, he grabbed Amber's wrist and jabbed her finger with something. Amber winced and cried out. Alicia forgot her wish to stay invisible and threw her flashlight at the man and shouted, "Don't hurt Amber!"

* * * *

Amber and Carrillo looked up. A thrill surged through Amber at the sound of the furious little voice. Carrillo ducked and the projectile missed his head and crashed into the wall. Amber used the moment of distraction to grab the nearby lantern by the handle and swing it into Carrillo's face. He shouted in pain. As the glass broke, kerosene splashed over him, and his hair caught on fire. Carrillo dropped the razor blade and hopped around in agony, slapping at the flames. His shirt caught fire. He dropped and rolled, cursing. The noise echoed through the cave.

Amber pressed the razor cut with her thumb to ease the pain and stem the flow of blood. They had to get out of there. Fast. She held out her arms. "Jump, Alicia. I'll catch you."

Alicia hesitated for only a moment, and then she leaped, warming Amber's heart with her trust. Amber's arms closed around the soft little form. The impact knocked Amber to the floor, but she protected Alicia with her body. In spite of the agonizing pain, she struggled to her feet, taking the child with her. She wanted to hug Alicia close and hold her for a long time. Instead, she grabbed the little hand and the dented flashlight, and together, she and Alicia ran from the stone room toward the entrance. She flicked on the light and guided Alicia away from the crevasse. Carrillo would be after them in seconds, as soon as he doused the flames.

The fading light of the setting sun sent a fuzzy glow into the cave, leading them to the entrance. Suddenly, two huge silhouettes blocked the way. Amber's breath caught in her throat. A gunshot rang out. A bullet zinged over her head. She flicked off the flashlight, plunging them into darkness.

Amber shuddered. She had no choice. They had to go back past Carrillo and deeper into the cave, without light, feeling their way. Her heart drummed so hard she could scarcely breathe. She gripped Alicia's hand tighter. Somehow, she found the breath to whisper, "Don't be afraid, Alicia, we'll make it."

Chapter Thirteen

With his sleeve, Luke wiped the sweat from his brow. None of their search party had ever been in this section of Endless Cave, and taking this uncharted route was risky. Matt, the sheriff, and four of his men following Luke's lead rushed to keep up. Luke watched for signs that he was heading the right way. The tunnels ranged from six to twelve feet wide with eighteen- to twenty-four-foot ceilings and twisted around in a tangled maze. He'd heard a lot of stories about them, but only put stock in what his grandfather said—there were tunnels with dead ends—and only one of the three main arteries led to Verde Creek. For all he knew, they could be going in circles. Damn it, if they got lost, they wouldn't make it to Verde Creek in time, and the kidnappers would grab Amber and disappear.

Luke flashed his light on something white in his path—crumbling human bones, the thin outer layer disintegrating into a powdery dust. At least he knew now they weren't chasing their tails. He would've remembered this guy. If he didn't find his way out of this maze of tunnels, that could be him about forty years from now—an unacceptable outcome for a man who had other plans for that fortieth anniversary—plans with his fiery-haired Amber.

A roar of pain, more animal than human, echoed through the tunnels, stopping Luke in his tracks and prickling the hairs at his nape.

Matt caught up with him. "What the hell was that?" he whispered.

"Damned if I know," Luke said in a barely audible voice.

When the tunnel narrowed, Luke moved ahead of his brother, straining his ears for signs of trouble. An injured animal could be dangerous. He wiped his palms on the side of his jeans. Every cell in his body charged to alert. He was like a barbed wire fence strung too tight, ready to snap. Three times he'd reached forks in the tunnel and had to choose. Using his compass and raw instinct, he hoped each time that he'd made the right choice.

Luke stiffened as a muffled bang bounced off the walls of the cave, echoing through the winding, damp, dark tunnels. "A gunshot," he whispered. In a trigger reaction, he drew his holstered gun. Matt caught up with him. He had drawn his gun, too. They exchanged looks, and laughed nervously. Then they eased their weapons back into place. Luke breathed deeply to calm himself. The shot had sounded distant, yet he couldn't be sure. Could be a half mile away—or around the next bend. "For sure, we're not alone in this cave."

"Has to be the kidnappers," Matt said.

Luke agreed. The cave was on Ryan land, and none of the vaqueros came in here without telling Alfonso or someone in the family.

The sheriff and his men caught up with Luke and his brother. "We'd better stay quiet from here on in," the sheriff whispered. "Keep your flashlights aimed down. I'd like to check out that gunplay, but I can't tell if the shot came from ahead or behind. Better stick close and not scatter our force."

Luke and Matt nodded and moved ahead, not talking but knowing—like the gunshot they’d heard—the slightest sound could give them away and ruin the chance of an ambush. The lawmen followed stealthily, like well-trained commandos.

Luke tightened his jaw, thinking about what the gunshots could mean. *Not Amber—not Alicia*, his soul cried. Where was Alicia? The kidnappers could’ve stashed her anywhere. Or she could be . . . No! Not dead. Luke touched the cross of the rosary he now wore over his heart. He had to believe the kidnappers had Alicia with them—had to believe she was safe, and had to believe he had a chance to find her. And he had to believe he could save both Alicia and Amber.

Matt patted Luke on the back and whispered, “We’ll find them.”

* * * *

Holding Alicia’s hand and keeping the child behind her, Amber felt her way through the darkness, along the cold, damp walls with uncertain fingers while she slid a tentative toe forward, feeling for holes and crevasses. She longed to turn on her flashlight. But that would give them away. Nothing but a life or death situation could have sent her deeper into this cave. Memories of the two days she’d spent trapped in a cave long ago closed in on her like an endless night—the black emptiness, the fear. Amber shook her head to clear the rising panic. *Focus only on Alicia and survival*. She had warned Alicia not to speak, and she was proud of her for staying silent. The little pixie was doing an excellent job of keeping up, too. But she was just a child and would tire quickly. Amber wanted to carry her, but it was safer to keep her slightly behind in case she, herself, fell into a crevasse.

Amber wanted to hug Alicia so desperately. The moment she’d spied her hiding up on that ledge—face and clothes dirty but looking unharmed and full of spirit—Amber’s heart had actually sung with joy. With her uninjured hand, Amber gave Alicia’s fingers a gentle squeeze. How she loved this spunky little girl.

Alicia had saved her from a great deal of pain. She could still visualize Carrillo’s narrowed eyes and sneering mouth as he’d jabbed her finger with the razor blade. The pain had been so excruciating she had actually seen a flash of white light. If Alicia hadn’t distracted Ricardo, he wouldn’t have stopped with one jab. Amber could still see the lantern breaking, the hot kerosene splashing over Carrillo and catching his hair on fire. She’d seen his rage. If he caught them now, he would kill them both.

Shouted curses, labored breathing, and thuds of heavy boots and crunching rocks echoed behind them. The kidnappers were getting closer.

A gunshot rang out, the bullet hitting the top of the cave over their heads, raining small stones down on them. They had to go faster. Amber lifted Alicia into her arms, shifted the child to her right side, and used her left hand to feel her way. Soft little arms encircled Amber’s neck like a lasso of trust, strengthening her determination to keep the sweet angel safe.

Alicia wasn’t terribly heavy, yet the extra weight pulled on Amber. Breath burned in her lungs. She tripped over large stones. Instinct, the need to protect Alicia, and self-preservation kept her legs moving.

Rocks crunched behind them.

Amber didn't want to die. She knew clearly what she wanted now. She wanted Luke and Alicia. An impossible dream, but the meager hope gave her strength.

Gliding her fingers along the wall as her compass, Amber ran faster, stumbling, putting a distance between them and their pursuers. The inky unknown stretched ahead. At her speed, she could step out into nothingness before she knew it. The wall seemed to be curving. Amber had to risk turning on her flashlight. She strained to focus her eyes. Ahead, the cave split. A break! The kidnappers wouldn't know which fork they took. She had to help them go wrong. She placed Alicia on her feet, grabbed the edge of her own shirt, ripped a piece off the bottom, and stuck it on a protruding rock at the entrance of the tunnel. A bullet zinged past her head. She cut the light, dropped to the cave floor, and crawled on her belly to Alicia. Together, they scurried ahead on their hands and knees.

When Amber felt it was safe, she staggered to her feet, bringing Alicia up with her. Their labored breathing echoed around them. She gave Alicia a reassuring hug, and scrambled on. She flicked on the light briefly to get her bearings. Ahead, the tunnel split again. She and Alicia veered left. Minutes later, she heard the kidnappers' thundering boot steps go right. Amber almost laughed out loud. They had a chance! They had a chance!

She turned on the flashlight. The bright beam made it safe to pick up their pace. They swallowed cool, dank air in agonizing gulps. The cave floor was rougher now, more stones and more dust. Footsteps echoed behind them again. Oh, no. The kidnappers had backtracked to this fork. It was okay . . . it was okay . . . she and Alicia had a good head start. They still had a chance.

They turned at a bend in the tunnel. The space narrowed. Suddenly, a rock wall blocked their path. God, no. It was a dead end!

* * * *

Luke spied a familiar piece of cloth caught on a protruding rock. Amber's shirt? He sniffed it—definitely her fragrance. This confirmed it. Amber wasn't at Verde Creek—she was somewhere in this cave! Could that mean Alicia was with her? Hope rose in such a rush that for a moment, he couldn't breathe.

"What've you got there?" Matt asked.

The sheriff and his men moved in for a look, too. Luke and Matt spoke only in low whispers.

"It's Amber's," Luke said. "Verde Creek is no longer our destination."

Luke shined the flashlight on the cave floor, which at this point was mostly rock. Nothing he saw gave him a clue. "She could be with the kidnappers or alone—running for her life." *God, let her be all right.*

Matt scratched his head and looked from the cloth to the protruding rock where Luke had found it. "Something's phony about this. Tear's too precise. Cloth's from the bottom edge of a shirt. Rock height's wrong to catch the hem."

Adrenaline jazzed Luke. “She purposely put it there! That’s why we didn’t meet her along the way. And whoever she was trying to fool must’ve realized it was a decoy, too, and that’s why we didn’t meet them along the way, either.” *Good try, babe.* If they were right, it could mean the kidnappers didn’t have her. Yet.

Luke stepped into the other fork in the tunnel and flashed a big circle of light onto the cave floor that was less rock and more dirt. Footprints might show how many kidnappers were on her tail. Luke’s breathing turned shallow. He could hardly believe his eyes. Near the wall was a tiny boot print. . . . Alicia was with her! With his heart thundering with happiness, Luke gestured to the print. Matt nodded and gave a thumbs-up sign.

They scanned the confusion of prints on the path. Matt held up four fingers. Luke figured the guess was about right. They probably had the kidnappers outnumbered, but if those bastards caught Alicia and Amber, numbers wouldn’t count.

Luke and his search party continued on to the next fork in the tunnel. Matt grabbed Luke’s arm and pointed to a faded drawing over the top of the entrance. It looked like a flat hand with a fist against it. Matt and Luke decoded the warning at the same time, and together whispered, “Dead end.”

Amber and Alicia are trapped! Luke’s heart beat wildly.

And he had the kidnappers trapped!

His gut knotted. Cornered men were the most dangerous.

* * * *

Amber took a deep breath and, holding Alicia’s hand tightly, headed back toward men who wanted to kill them. She frantically flashed the light around, looking for a place to hide. The tunnel widened between a smooth, slate-like facade on one side, and a ragged wall on the other. About ten feet up, Amber spied an indentation in the wall deep enough to hide Alicia. How would she get her up there?

Amber bent and put her mouth against Alicia’s ear. “Hang onto my neck and clamp your legs around my waist. We’re climbing this wall.”

Alicia looked up the rough surface and shook her head.

Amber didn’t blame her. It wasn’t a great plan. When the kidnappers didn’t find them at the dead end, they would search every cubbyhole along the passageway. Unless, she drew them away. Buying time was all she and Alicia had going for them. “Please, Rosebud, it’s our only chance. All you have to do is hang on.”

Alicia’s lip jutted out in a pout, and her wide blue eyes looked wary. Amber shoved the flashlight into Alicia’s hands. “Do you think you can hold this, too? I’ll need light.”

Alicia shook her head again.

“Honey, you can do this—we both can. We have to!”

Amber bit her lip, and looked up. Easier said than done. She didn’t have cleats, ropes, gloves, or any kind of equipment. All she had was a strong body and determination. And an ardent belief in her maker. *Please, let that be enough to keep Alicia out of the killer’s hands.* Amber squatted. “Put your arms around my neck, hold the flashlight in your right hand, grip your right wrist with your left hand, and hang on no matter what.”

Alicia still hesitated. The shouts coming from the tunnel got louder. Alicia quickly clamped her arms around Amber’s neck, putting pressure on her windpipe. Amber readjusted the hold so she could breathe, then wiped her hands on her jeans, and hoisted herself and her precious cargo to the first level of toeholds.

Her long-sleeved shirt protected her arms from scrapes and scratches, but the rocks cut into her fingers. The razor cut began to bleed, and her blood smeared across the rocks. It hurt something fierce. *Concentrate on the goal,* she repeated like a mantra. Sweat dripped from her face—rivulets trickled down her back. She envisioned Carrillo charging from the darkness and lunging for her, grabbing her ankle. Amber scrambled higher.

Luke, if only you were here. Thinking about his happiness when she returned his beloved daughter gave Amber a new blast of energy. He would never forgive her for failing to protect Alicia from the kidnapers, but his happiness when he got her back would be all Amber dared to hope for.

She teetered on a narrow toehold, then regained her balance. After climbing about seven feet, she couldn’t stop herself from looking down. The shadows below made the cave floor look ominous. Once she hid Alicia, how would she ever climb down? Maybe there would be enough room for both of them.

The next toehold crumbled, and Alicia whimpered as loosened rocks rained to the cave floor. Amber paused, stiff with fear. She blinked and inhaled deeply to hold back a wave of dizziness. She closed her eyes and willed away a rising panic, then crept upward again. Only another foot . . .

With supreme effort, she hoisted herself and Alicia onto the ledge. She tucked the child into the back of the indentation, then tried to curl herself within the remaining space. No matter how she scrunched up, she hung over the edge.

Since she couldn’t fold herself out of sight, she had to draw the kidnapers away. If they ever got their hands on Alicia, they would hurt her to make Amber talk. She’d be glad to tell them everything, but she didn’t know anything to tell.

Amber kissed Alicia’s forehead and told her to stay put and not make a sound. “I’ll leave this flashlight with you,” she whispered. “Point it down the wall so I can see to climb down. Then turn it off and leave it off. Only turn it on in an emergency.” God, she was leaving a child not yet four years old in the dark, alone, terrified. If Alicia moved close to the edge, she could fall. *Please, Lord, protect her.*

“I’ll be back to get you when it’s safe,” Amber whispered into Alicia’s ear. “The kidnappers may try to trick you. Don’t answer, even if I call to you, unless you’re absolutely sure I’m alone. I’ll call you, Rosebud. Otherwise, be quiet and stay hidden.”

Alicia’s face scrunched up like she might cry.

Amber fought her own tears. She fished in her pocket to find something comforting to give the child. Her pockets were empty. She took off her gold bracelet and pressed it into Alicia’s hands. “Hold tight to this. And remember I love you.”

As Amber climbed down, the full impact hit her—dehydration—starvation. Without her, the child would die. She had to return to Alicia.

Heading toward the main tunnel, Amber felt her way in the darkness. If only she could see. Without a hiding place, she would run right into the clutches of killers.

“There she is,” Ricardo growled, flashing a large circle of light on her.

She froze. Running back the way she’d come would lead them toward Alicia. And she’d be trapped by the dead end anyway. Amber lowered her head and tried to barrel past him. Carrillo grabbed a fist full of hair and swung her against the tunnel wall. Lightning pain zigzagged into her skull and shoulder. Her knees buckled, and as she slid down the wall, he lifted her by the throat, cutting off her air.

She couldn’t die. Alicia was counting on her!

Amber brought her knee up and jammed it into Carrillo’s groin. He doubled up in pain. When he let go, she scrambled to her feet. He recovered fast and reached for her. She darted past him and right into the muzzle of Angel Garcia’s gun. “Gotcha,” he shouted.

With a sinking heart, she glanced back at Carrillo. Sneering, he withdrew the folded razor blade holder from his pocket and flicked it open. The exposed, sharp edge reflected against the ceiling of the cave. Her mouth went dry. “You won’t need that,” she said as he came toward her. He smelled of kerosene and burnt hair. The singed tufts and blistered skin made him look fierce, grotesque. “I’ll tell you everything you want to know.”

“You’re right about that,” he said as grabbed her hand in a steely grip and jabbed the blade under the same fingernail as before. White hot pain shot through her. She couldn’t hold back her scream.

* * * *

As Amber’s scream echoed through the tunnel, the agony behind it stabbed into Luke’s heart like a thousand knives. Hot crimson anger, overwhelmed and consumed him with its power. He ran like the wind, no longer worried about stealth. He would kill the bastard who had hurt her. *Please, don’t let her be dead.*

Matt, the sheriff, and his men followed on Luke’s heels, guns at ready.

Ahead, a man's voice shouted, "Get up, slut."

Relief that Amber was still alive came first. Then, rage twisted in Luke. He would tear the guy limb from limb.

The tunnel curved—and there they were—Amber on the ground surrounded by a very tall woman and three armed men. She rubbed her head, then grabbed onto the cave wall, and tried to stand. When her knees buckled, the woman put her hands under Amber's armpits and hauled her to her feet.

Blood flowed from Amber's hand. "Now I won't tell you a damned thing!" she shouted, as tears ran down her cheeks. Her voice wavered as though she was scared to death, but her chin shot up.

Too gutsy for her own good.. The glint of the razor blade reflected on the wall. As the man lunged toward Amber's face, Luke leaped and took him down.

"Luke!" Amber's voice rang with surprise.

The man rolled and maneuvered Luke under him. The bastard was as strong as a bull and it was taking all of Luke's strength to hold off the blade from inching to his throat.

The tall gal shouted, "Freeze!" then stooped and poked the muzzle of a gun to Luke's head. He ignored her—he was too busy keeping the knife from cutting his jugular.

Amber jumped the woman and struggled to get her gun.

Shots rang out.

"Amber!" Luke fought his panic.

"She's okay," Matt said as he bent and jabbed a gun to the knife-wielder's head. The guy stopped fighting and dropped the razor blade. Matt hauled him off Luke and cuffed him.

The sheriff's men had already disarmed and cuffed the woman and the other kidnappers. Luke realized then that the shots had been the sheriff's. He'd winged the guy they called Garcia.

Luke sprang to his feet and raced to Amber. He put his arms around her, then pulled back, not knowing how badly she might be hurt. He grabbed her wrist, examined her hand—there was so much blood.

"It looks worse than it is. Just razor cuts under my fingernail."

He winced. "Where's Alicia?"

Amber struggled to pull away. "Safe. But we have to get to her quickly."

The urgency in Amber's voice sent his heartbeat into double time, and he wanted to race to his daughter, but he forced himself to hold Amber fast until he stemmed the flow of blood and wrapped her hand with his handkerchief. "Are you sure you can make it?"

She darted him a quelling look. "This way." Amber grabbed a flashlight from the cave floor. "Follow me."

Luke grabbed another flashlight.

Beaming big circles of light ahead of them, they raced through the darkness toward the dead end. Amber was breathing hard. Suddenly, she stopped and grabbed onto the wall as though she might collapse.

"You okay?" Concern gripped Luke in a stranglehold, making his voice husky.

She nodded, but looked pale, drained. How much blood had she lost?

He swept Amber from her feet. Mingled with her scent, even cave musk and dust smelled terrific. She took a couple of deep breaths and her breasts rose and fell against his chest. He frowned. His untimely surge of desire disgusted him.

"Put me down, Luke. This isn't necessary." She wasn't heavy, but even her lightweight made his leg throb. He felt a coolness at his bullet wound. Damn. He was bleeding again.

He carried her to a point where the tunnel widened.

"This is it," she said. Then, in an insistent tone, she demanded, "Put me down." He stood her on her feet. She called out, using the nickname Rosebud, and flashed her light on the wall.

Silence hung in the dank air.

Amber's eyes were wide, frightened. Her voice rose in panic. "Rosebud, answer me."

Luke's neck prickled. He trained a beam of light on the wall. "Rosebud, this is Daddy. Speak to me, honey."

"Is that really you, Daddy?" a trembling little voice asked.

Luke's throat constricted and he flashed the light on his face. "It's really me, see."

Overhead, a flashlight flicked on, and beamed downward. "Get me down. I want to go home."

Luke, eager to see his baby, sent his ray of light toward the sound of the demanding little voice to be sure she was really all right. He laughed with joy. With her dirty, tear-streaked face, and endearing pout, she'd never looked more beautiful.

Luke scratched his head and studied the wall. "How the hell did you get her up there?"

“One toehold at a time,” Amber said as though it were nothing. He knew better. It had taken tremendous determination and love.

“Well, I think we’ll try a quicker way to get her down.” He looked up. “Alicia, baby, sit on the edge and scoot off. I’ll catch you.”

Without the least hesitation, Alicia jumped and launched herself into his arms. Her weight hit him like a sack of feed, but he didn’t drop her or lose his balance. He closed his arms tightly around her, and she clung to his neck as if she would never let go—and that would suit him just fine.

“I was so scared, Daddy. I didn’t think you’d find us. Amber tol’ me I shouldn’t call out if she wasn’t alone. But you didn’t mean my daddy, did you, Amber?”

“No,” Amber said with a choked voice. “You did everything just right.”

Luke’s heart swelled like a flooding creek. “I’m proud of you, Rosebud.” He noticed, then, that Alicia was holding tightly to Amber’s gold bracelet. Bless Amber. She had left it with his baby for comfort. How like her.

“And you’re proud of Amber, too, right, Daddy?”

Amber stood close by. He drew her into the fold. Alicia was safe because Amber loved her as if she were her own, and was willing to trade her life for his daughter’s. But his throat was so tight all he could say was, “Yeah.”

Chapter Fourteen

Amber winced at Luke's tight tone. He'd answered like a man who couldn't wait to get rid of her. She darted a look up into his face. He didn't meet her gaze. He was staring down at Alicia. Like magic, his expression changed and his lips turned up in a smile as bright as the Texas sun. His happiness at getting his daughter back was as satisfying as Amber had hoped. So why did she feel so empty? As much as it hurt, she had to accept that he would never forgive her for failing to protect Alicia from kidnappers. Never. When he withdrew his hand from around her shoulder, a nearly devastating wave of loss consumed her.

They headed back through the tunnel toward the rest of the rescue group. Luke was limping. To lead the search for his daughter, he had discarded his crutches too soon. Now he was paying for it. Amber wanted to touch him, soothe him, but that would only slow them down. The sooner they got out of the cave, the better.

Luke glanced down. "How's the hand?"

It throbbed something fierce. "Some antibiotics and a tetanus shot and I'll be like new," she quipped.

He shook his head. "You're a tough cookie. I have a first aid kit in the chopper. We'll clean the wound and get you to a doc."

If only the warm concern in his voice meant more.

Luke pulled a couple of squashed peanut butter power bars from his pocket and handed them to Alicia and Amber. "This should hold you ladies until we can get some real chow."

Alicia tore at the wrapper like a starving chipmunk. After a bite, she made a little *mmm* sound of contentment as though the nut bar were a gourmet meal. Amber wasn't hungry. She stuck the extra bar in her pocket in case Alicia wanted it later.

Fighting a second wave of dizziness, Amber rubbed her head and staggered against Luke. With his free hand, he steadied her. "You need to stop a minute?"

"No, I'm fine, really." Was she? When Carrillo slammed her into the wall, she'd hit her head and shoulder hard. Was it the lingering pain or loss of blood that made her head spin?

Alicia was chattering a mile a minute. In spite of Amber's throbbing pain and dizziness, she smiled. Her little Rosebud was back to her talkative self.

"How'd you know I was here, Daddy?" Alicia clung to Luke's neck as though afraid he'd disappear.

Amber longed to do a little clinging herself. Couldn't he tell how much she loved him? She wished things were different, that she hadn't lost his trust.

Luke kissed Alicia's dirt-streaked cheek. "I didn't know you were here for sure until I saw—" He cleared his throat. "Your little footprint."

Amber blinked back an unexpected rush of tears. She wouldn't let them see her cry. She gave Luke's arm a supportive squeeze. He glanced down at her. His face looked tense, pained. She lowered her eyes. It was then she saw the splotch of blood. "My God, Luke. You're bleeding." Blood soaked the upper pant leg of his Levi's. No wonder he was limping as though every step was torture.

"It's nothing. Damned bullet wound tore open during my fight with Carrillo. No biggie."

Amber stopped him with her touch and reached out. "Give me Alicia. I'll carry her."

Luke shook his head. "I can handle my own daughter."

* * * *

Luke met Amber's gaze and was rocked to his soul by the wounded look that darkened her eyes. Why had he snapped at her? The worst was over, yet he felt like he might explode. He took a deep breath to calm himself, and started walking again. In spite of the throbbing pain in his leg, Luke limped along faster.

Amber matched his pace, amazing him. He considered slowing down to make it easier on her, but they were both bleeding and needed first aid ASAP. He should say something to smooth things over. "I meant to say—you've got your own problems." Damn it. That didn't come out right either. He'd better shut up before he put both feet in his mouth.

What was wrong with him, anyway? Against all odds, they had made it. The love of his life and his daughter were alive, miraculously spared. Amber proved she was tough, smart, and incredibly brave. He had so much to say to her, but he couldn't seem to get it out. Although rocked with gratitude, he was raw, needy, and unable to say what was in his heart.

* * * *

When they trudged out of the cave, tired, dirty, and looking like war-torn soldiers, Amber sighed in relief. The sky was inky with only a scattering of stars. Compared to the blackness of the cave, with flashlights and lanterns, the brightness and rejuvenating fresh air was like walking from a tomb into the land of the living.

The sheriff and his men herded the handcuffed Carrillo and his gang into the sheriff's helicopter, and Luke helped Amber into the Ryan chopper. His touch was warm and the regret it stirred bittersweet. Her heart thundered against her ribs. She hadn't even left yet, and here she was missing him already.

"May I sit with Amber, Daddy?"

Amber's breath caught. Surely he wouldn't deny his daughter this small request after all she'd been through.

In answer, he swung Alicia into the chopper and she climbed into Amber's lap. "I love you, Amber," she said, looking up at her with wide blue eyes and a strangely shy pixie grin.

“Goes double for me, Rosebud.” A twinge of sadness slid through Amber, and she drew Alicia close, trying to store up her warm softness for when they had to part. But she knew she’d never get enough of her Rosebud. It was a miracle the child was unharmed.

Luke got the first aid kit. “Let’s see that hand, Amber,” he said in a low drawl.

She eased the handkerchief away and looked down at her trembling, throbbing fingers. He gently wiped away the blood. When he applied antibiotic ointment to her cuts, it brought him so close that she could feel his body heat. His nearness gave her something to think about besides pain. “Thanks,” she said softly.

Their gazes locked. “That should make you more comfortable,” he said in a husky voice.

Alicia watched the first aid procedure with big eyes. “Daddy’s a good fixer.”

Amber forced a smile for Alicia’s sake. Could he fix the mistakes destined to keep them apart?

After Matt herded everyone into the helicopters, he said, “I’m flying the three of you straight to Villa Rosa Emergency.” He gave Luke a hard look. “No argument from any of you. Got that?”

Amber sighed, relieved that Matt had taken charge. It was good to sit back and let someone uninjured take over. Luke must have agreed. He put his head back against the seat and closed his eyes. His skin was ashen, and she longed to smooth his brow. Even in pain, he looked ruggedly handsome. He would always be handsome to her—scars, clipped ear and all. He moaned and shifted his leg. He had tied a fresh bandage over his wound. But it might still be bleeding. Bless Matt for taking them to emergency. The doctor would stop the bleeding and treat Luke’s wound. And Alicia could be checked for dehydration and exposure. For herself, the last thing Amber wanted was to sit in a waiting room for God knows how long. What she really wanted was to lie down and rest her bruised and battered body.

Alicia patted Amber’s cheek. “The doctor will make you all better.” The child wriggled in Amber’s arms and gestured with the gold bracelet. “I held tight to this like you said, and I wasn’t scared . . . much. Now you take it an’ you won’t be scared.”

Amber gripped the gold loop and forced a smile. “Thanks, pal.” She was less afraid of her treatment than of what would happen after she left the hospital.

* * * *

Later, after X-rays, she was even more grateful to Matt for taking them to the ER. The persistent ache in her shoulder had been caused by a hairline fracture. She felt better after the doctor gave her a pain pill and put her arm in a sling. He gave her a tetanus shot and a prescription for more antibiotics and pain pills, then told her to take it easy. Taking it easy didn’t fit in with her plans, but what choice did she have?

Feeling a little spacey from the codeine, she headed for the room where everyone was waiting. Luke, with his leg sprawled out and hand resting on a cane, sat next to Matt on a green leather couch. Amber stopped dead in her tracks when she heard what he was saying.

“Alicia’s kidnapping made me rethink things,” he told Matt. “Just wanted you to know, I’m not hitting the rodeo circuit. I’m staying right here on the ranch.”

Amber’s heart sank as Luke’s words confirmed her fears—he wouldn’t need her anymore. She understood his change of mind. He would never again completely trust anyone with his daughter’s care. Her stomach knotted. She had ruined his plans to follow his dream. And ruined her own dream, as well.

On the flight back, Matt insisted that everyone stay at his house. “All you have to do is rest and heal.”

It was past midnight by the time they returned to the ranch. In spite of feeling doped up from pain pills, Amber didn’t want to go to bed. Too much needed to be said. And it seemed important that it be said tonight. She touched Luke’s arm. “Could we have a cup of tea and talk for a few minutes? Alone?” She had a driving need to get some things out in the open.

Luke shook his head. “The doc gave strict orders—you’re to go straight to bed.”

She wanted to protest, but her tongue felt swollen, unruly.

In spite of his cane, Luke took her good arm, ready to escort her upstairs. “As long as you’re dizzy and taking pain pills,” he said in a husky drawl, “I don’t want you to navigate the stairs alone.”

Matt exhaled heavily and gently moved Luke aside. “I think I’d better escort the lady to her room,” he said, taking her arm. “A man on a cane has no business on stairs.”

Amber rooted herself to the spot. “I don’t want to go upstairs, yet. Please, Luke, we need to talk.”

Matt hesitated, giving Luke a chance to respond.

Luke looked at her with tired, pained eyes. “It’s late. Too late for talking.”

Guilt washed over her. He was exhausted and she was pushing for more than he could give tonight. Or ever? Did his words and resolute tone express more than the late hour? Was it his way of saying it was too late for them?

* * * *

Early the next morning, Amber paced, fighting tormenting thoughts and the feeling that the walls were closing in on her. She didn’t want to go downstairs. She’d hoped to stall until everyone was finished eating. Activities started early on the ranch, so she shouldn’t have to wait long.

She jumped at the tapping on her door. “Yes?”

“Amber, it’s Matt. I’ve come to help you downstairs.”

“Good grief, I’m not an invalid.” She was tempted to shout, “Go away.” But she knew Luke was behind this. Would Matt notice the packed bags? She laughed nervously as she thrust open the door. “Really, Matt. I’m fine, and I don’t need help down the stairs.”

Matt chuckled. “Let’s humor Luke one more time, okay?”

“Why not?” Now wasn’t the time to make an issue of her independence. She took Matt’s arm and let him lead the way. As they entered the dining room, the Ryan family was at the breakfast table, talking and laughing. Luke stood, and like a dyed-in-the-wool, hospitable Texas gentleman, he limped over and pulled a chair out for her.

“How are you feeling?” he asked with concern in his eyes.

“Ready to take on the day,” she said in the strongest voice she could muster.

Matt laughed. “This lady’s got grit.”

Virginia poured tea for Amber. “I’ll second that. Alicia told us everything. We’re so grateful. If you need anything, dear, we’re all here to help.”

“Thanks,” Amber murmured. But no one could help. It wasn’t just her injuries that hurt—her heart was breaking. But darned if she’d wait for Luke to discharge her. It would be less painful to leave on her own. After all, she had a logical and truthful reason that defied any argument. She had to face the things she’d run from in her home town before facing the San Antonio police—and before making a fresh start. After she said good-bye to everyone, she would hitch a ride with one of the truckers to the nearest town, and then catch a bus to Edinburg.

The front door bell rang, followed by pounding. Everyone exchanged unsettled glances.

“I’ll get it,” Molly said. When she returned, two men in rumpled suits trailed her into the room. Molly was frowning. “Amber, these men are here to see you.”

The tallest guy flashed a badge. “San Antonio Police Department, ma’am. I’m Detective Reilly and this is Gomez. We have a warrant for your arrest.”

“What’s the charge?” She hated the tremor in her voice.

“Murder of Phillip Rhoades”

Amber’s heart sank. Her knees were shaking so badly she couldn’t stand. She took their cards, glanced at them, then placed them on the table. She picked up her mug of tea and took a long sip. Finally calmer, she lifted her chin. “May I see the warrant?”

Detective Reilly pulled the folded document from the inside pocket of his jacket and handed it to her. She unfolded it and tried to make out the words that seemed to be all jumbled together.

She'd known detectives from the SAPD would eventually find her. She was eager to get the interrogation over with, but today was too soon. She needed time with Alicia and Luke—time to say good-bye. And she needed to face the ghosts in Edinburg.

Luke stood to his full height, which was several inches taller than Reilly, and placed his hand on her uninjured shoulder. "The sheriff has the guys who killed Rhoades in jail. Amber had nothing to do with the murder."

Amber appreciated Luke's help, but she had to stand up for herself. "I didn't kill anyone. Can't we just handle this here?"

"You'll have to come with us, ma'am," Reilly said.

Matt shot to his feet and flipped open his FBI badge. "That won't work for the Bureau. She's in my custody. National security matter—until she's debriefed by the Feds, she stays with me. I'll bring her to San Antonio to answer your questions after we're through with her."

Through with her. Amber bristled at his choice of words. But, what did she expect? Matt never was the most tactful man in Texas. Apparently, he was authorized to use that badge.

She'd come to know that, like Luke, Matt was a highly honorable man, who'd said more than once, that the badge was something to live up to. Relief flitted through her, and she felt like a canary who'd escaped her cage. This could work out great—she wouldn't have to go with these men. That made Matt her number two hero. Suddenly, Amber wanted to hug him. He was in her corner—just like everyone said.

Her heart skipped a beat. Wait a minute. He'd just said that she was in his custody. No one had told her that. Was she a prisoner here?

This turn of events confused the police detectives as much as Amber, and they called their chief. He contacted the Feds to verify Matt's authority, then returned the investigator's call and gave them the okay to let Matt bring her in.

After they left, she turned to Matt. "Okay, what's the deal with the FBI? What does 'in your custody' mean?" She had to get this straight.

Matt's cell phone rang and he held up a hand. "Hold on a minute," he told her. "Matt here," he growled. He listened a few minutes, then said, "I'll be right there." He turned to Luke. "Emergency meeting with the sheriff. Take Amber into the library and explain the tricky situation to her."

What was it that the family couldn't hear?

Before Matt grabbed his Stetson, he leaned over, whispered something to Luke, and then raced out the door. Amber wanted to stop Matt and make him stay and clear things up, but the idea of talking to Luke alone kept her silent.

Luke stood and extended his hand. When she put her cool fingers into his warm grasp, he drew her to her feet. The momentum brought her so close that she connected with his solid chest and felt the

rapid beating of his heart. Their gazes met and held. She had an insane urge to pull his head down and kiss him breathless. Before she could weigh the consequences of doing something so brazen in front of his family, Luke took her arm and guided her to the library. She was as unnerved by Luke's warm touch and her own reaction as she was by Matt running off and leaving her with a slew of questions.

Luke released her arm, reluctantly, she thought. After drawing the wooden library sliders closed, he faced her. His presence filled the room, and he overwhelmed her with his masculinity—his sexuality. They were alone—totally alone. It was what she wanted. Was she strong enough to handle it? His eyes darkened, and she felt the clear and present danger down to her toes. She fought the intensity between them with all her might.

Only a surge of anger saved her from melting into his arms. “Okay, what do you know about this so called tricky situation?”

Using his cane, he limped over to the chair in front of the desk and eased down into the black leather. “All of it, I guess. Matt and I discussed it earlier this morning.” Luke's voice was tired. He'd gone through hell—so much pain, so much worry.

Amber fought her urge to go to him—to put her arms around him. She had to remember that when she was no longer in FBI custody, he would send her away. “Since it concerns me, I should've been invited to your powwow.”

He watched her, his gaze probing, making her heart thunder with desire. The intensity in his dark, smoldering eyes made it clear he still wanted her. That hadn't changed. His eyes narrowed. “You're here now,” he said in his low Texas drawl.

“Only because this was forced on you.” She didn't try to hide the resentment in her voice.

“It's my choice to stay in this until it's over. You should know that.”

His statement flowing out, so reasonable, so maddening, gave rise to more questions. She would get back to those after she cleared up the custody issue. “Okay. What's the deal?” She drew a shaky breath, and seeking support, she leaned her bottom against the edge of the mahogany desk directly in front of him.

“The Feds need to debrief you. They'll want your testimony. You're a key witness. Until we're sure we got all the players in this Nevada terrorist setup, you might still be in danger.”

That was it. That was why he hadn't told her to leave. He cared for her too much to send her away—until he was sure she would be safe. She loved him for that. Would always love him. “Carrillo admitted killing his partner—that makes him head honcho.”

“Of his crime ring, maybe. But as you know, there's more involved. We're lucky he didn't kill you on the spot.”

“That was his plan. But when he looked through the journal and found missing pages, he thought I hid them. He mumbled something about account numbers.”

“Might be for offshore bank accounts—payoffs for providing explosives to terrorists. Any idea where Rhoades stashed the pages?”

Memories, stunning in their clarity, swirled in Amber’s head. “Mr. Rhoades rented a safe deposit box in San Antonio two weeks before his murder.”

Luke went very still. “Where?”

“San Antonio Commercial Savings and Loan in Davy Crockett Plaza.”

“What about a key?”

She shrugged and winced from the jab of shoulder pain .

Concern deepened the brown in Luke’s eyes. “That’s okay. The Feds won’t need a key. They’ll get a locksmith and drill the thing open.”

Using his cane for support, Luke rose and sat down on the desk beside her. When he turned and faced her, it brought him startlingly close. He smelled like leather and coffee. Amber’s breath went shallow as sexual electricity in its most primitive form rocked her senses. He gently touched her shoulder. “Did you take the pain pills the doctor gave you?”

“They make me sleepy, and I have too much to do.”

“What’s so important it can’t wait a few days?”

Escaping your rejection and getting on with my life. With the new developments about the Feds, she decided to keep her sharp retort to herself. “Matt whispered something to you. What was that about?”

“The FBI raided the plastic factory. They wanted Matt to look at some documents and letters. They think they’ve got some kind of ticking clock by the ringer and—”

“Has anyone talked to Nina Carson?” The woman struck her as no dummy, the kind of person who would make it a point to know what was going on.

“Clammed up, same as the others.”

Amber thought of the horror of Nine-Eleven. She had to try to stop a repeat of the senseless killing. “I’d like to go to the sheriff’s office and talk to her.”

Luke stared at Amber as if she had completely lost her mind. “What the hell for? Questioning her is the FBI’s job!”

“But they haven’t gotten anything out of her, and I think I can. Nina has no stomach for all this.” Amber knew she had to convince herself that Nina wasn’t all bad, or she’d freeze. “Alicia would’ve been treated a lot worse without her help. I think on a woman-to-woman level I can get Nina to tell me what the terrorists are planning.”

Luke frowned. "I don't like it. But with the stakes so high . . . I'll call the sheriff and see if they'll go along with it." He grabbed the phone and dialed. Someone came on the line after only a few rings. From the conversation, Amber could tell that the sheriff was desperate enough to let her try. After hanging up, Luke said, "It's a go. Matt's at the sheriff's office with some Feds. He'll wait for us."

Luke stroked her back and shoulder. Instead of calming her, he'd stirred feelings that had been building for a long time. She ran the fingers of her good hand through his hair. The texture was thick, and as soft as Alicia's. "Thank you for supporting me on this."

"It's too important not to try." Their gazes met and held.

Possessed by an undeniable force, she drew his face down so close to hers that his breath tickled her nose.

He moved his head back a little. Now, he was looking at her lips. "Do you plan ahead to get the timing right, or does frustrating me come natural to you?" His voice was husky.

"Sorry, Luke," she whispered. "It's definitely the wrong time and the wrong place." *What if this moment is all we ever have? How much time can a few kisses take?* She stroked the strong column of his neck slowly. Good grief, what was she trying to prove with her brazen behavior? Was it that she could tantalize him, then walk away unscathed? Drat. Now she was lying to herself.

His mouth found her earlobe and she shivered at the delicious tingle. The effect was definitely better than any pain pill. To face Nina, she needed his kisses like a double shot of adrenaline. Luke slid kisses down her neck to the hollow, breathing fire onto her skin, stirring a savage fever. He crushed her lips, and his tongue slipped inside and ravaged her mouth. She matched his out-of-control hunger. Skimming his broad chest with her hand, she explored his hard, lean muscles, wanting to touch all of him. The tip of his arousal pressed into her thigh, the thrill of the contact sending flames of desire to her core, giving her a heady sense of power. When he drew her closer, excruciating pain pierced her shoulder. She stiffened. "I guess this wasn't such a good idea."

He swore and dropped his hands from her. "Sorry. I should have known better than this, but you have this persuasive way about you."

She gave a nervous laugh. "I hope my supposed convincing powers work on Nina," Amber said, as if getting Nina to talk was all that was on her mind. Too bad her damnable injuries had gotten in the way. She would have liked to have more than kisses to remember for the rest of her life.

* * * *

Fighting shivers of fear, Amber met with Nina in a room with one-way glass. Nina wore an orange jumpsuit and shackles. Her once beautiful blonde hair looked dull. She had pulled it back in a ponytail and secured it with a rubber band. She wore no makeup and had a black eye and a cut lip.

Amber slid into the chair across from her and cleared her throat. "What happened to you?" She hoped it wasn't the local law's way of interrogating a prisoner.

“What do you care?” Nina narrowed her eyes and glared at Amber.

If looks could kill, Amber figured she would be dead. “I do care. No one should hit you.” She wouldn’t wish a beating on anyone, even this vile kidnapper.

“Yeah? Well, the special welcome was compliments of cell mates who claimed I was too pretty.”

Amber wished her knees would stop shaking. “Probably beat up others because they weren’t pretty enough. Bullies always find an excuse to pound someone,” she said, hoping to establish some common ground.

“Cut the crap,” Nina said. “What the hell are you doing here? I’d think you wouldn’t want to come within a hundred miles of any of us.”

“I wanted to thank you for what you did for Alicia. She would’ve been treated worse without your help.”

Something unreadable flickered in Nina’s eyes. “It was a mistake,” she said. “Look how things turned out.”

“You protected a helpless little girl. That says something very good about you.”

Nina snickered. “Peddle your Mary Poppins’ drivelt to someone else. I’m not buying.”

Amber caught herself before she frowned. She was blowing this. Luke had warned her this could happen. Was he gloating behind the one-way glass? No, this was too important. Besides, he wasn’t the kind of man to take pleasure in her failure. Oh, God, she couldn’t fail. According to the documents the Feds had seized from the plastic factory, the clock was ticking toward disaster.

She wiped her hands on her Levi’s. “Okay. Forget the thanks and answer a woman-to-woman question for me. How did a talented and beautiful person like you get mixed up with the likes of Carrillo?”

Nina’s laugh was bitter. “Ain’t love a bitch?”

Beneath the toughness and defensiveness in Nina’s eyes, Amber saw a flicker of vulnerability. Not all was smooth sailing on the love boat. “Things could go easier for you. What do you owe Carrillo and the others, anyway? I saw how he ordered you around. You can’t be an equal partner in all this, so why take the fall for him?”

Nina’s body stiffened. “What do you mean, take the fall?”

“You think one of your buddies won’t sell you out to escape the death penalty?”

Nina swallowed. “Death penalty?”

“By lethal injection. It’ll be every man for himself. You knew they were dealing with terrorists, right?”

Nina's cheek twitched. "Terrorists? Everyone keeps talking about terrorists—"

"No one thinks you're part of that. But you know something. I see it in your eyes. This is your last chance to—"

Nina slammed her shackled fists onto the scarred table, making Amber flinch. "What do you want from me?" Nina shouted. "Your worries should be over. If there were terrorists, they wouldn't know, or even care, about you—their business is killing many, not one."

Amber struggled to calm her racing heart. "If you sit by and do nothing, you'll be as guilty as they are. Nina, children will die!"

Fear flickered in Nina's eyes. "Look, you gotta believe me. I didn't know Ricardo was dealing with those guys until yesterday when I heard him talking to Pedro about it. I thought the kidnapping was about a big-bucks land deal. No one was supposed to get hurt."

Amber found it hard to believe that Nina didn't know about Mr. Rhoades, Elmer, and the others, but she'd let the cops sort that out—the risk now was terrorists.

"If you don't tell what you know, no one will believe that. Prove that you care about innocent people, about your country."

Nina went silent a moment as if mulling that over. "Even if I wanted to help, it's too late. A terrorist cell led by a guy named Abu Binalshibh is going to blow up Boulder Dam at noon today."

Amber looked at her watch—ten a.m. That meant it was eight in Nevada. "Nevada time, right?"

Nina shrugged. "Wanta gamble on it?"

Amber heard a commotion behind the glass.

"Two way, right?" Nina said. "I figured that. Hey, guys. Get that all down? I want my deal whether you stop the fireworks or not."

Amber's stomach knotted. She could imagine busloads of tourists from Las Vegas arriving at the dam just in time to be blown to smithereens. Rigid with a rising panic, she thanked Nina for cooperating and, after motioning to the guard, hurried out to find Luke.

Chapter Fifteen

Amber paced, her stomach in knots. The tourists visiting the dam felt safe! But if the Feds didn't get there in time, unsuspecting mothers, fathers, and their innocent children would be lost forever!

Twenty minutes ago, Luke had told her the local FBI men had contacted ATF agent Carlos Brooks in Nevada. Luke was with the sheriff waiting for news. Would Brooks and his SWAT team stop the terrorists in time to avoid disaster?

God, what made humans want to harm each other? Luke had said the attacks were a reaction to the Persian Gulf War, the creation of Israel, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She'd read that the problem went deeper. It reflected an accumulation of deep-seated and widely felt humiliation and rage that had been brewing throughout the Islamic world for over a thousand years. Maybe one day some great mind would find a permanent solution. Right now, she and the authorities had today—and a chance to save lives. Prayer-like, Amber entwined her fingers. *"Please, God,"* she whispered. *"Don't let this horror happen."*

At the sound of boot steps, she looked up. Luke came out of the sheriff's private office, smiling. Taking her cold hands into his warm grasp, he said, "ATF got there in time."

"Thank God." Weak in the knees, she swayed toward Luke and gave a deep sigh.

He put his arm around her and drew her to a wooden bench. For a moment, they just sat there, staring at each other, neither of them able to shake the lingering fear. Not yet. What had almost happened was too horrible.

"You okay?" he asked finally.

She nodded and turned to face him. "The terrorists are in custody, right?"

"All five, locked up like mad dogs."

"Are the Feds sure they got them all?" She fought the tremor in her voice.

"Yeah. And to answer your next question," he said, grinning and looking ruggedly handsome, "they're certain they got the right guys. They carried C-4 plastic explosives, timers and detonators hidden in cameras and cell phones."

"Suicide mission?" she asked.

Luke shook his head. "They'd set their timers for twenty minutes to allow their escape. By getting Nina to open up, you saved a lot of lives, Amber."

The husky admiration in his voice meant a great deal, but she needed more. Her heart cried out, *Take me in your arms. Quiet my unrelenting shakes.*

"Getting Abu Binalshibh's name cinched it," Luke said. "The Feds knew Abu. They've been watching him since October Two Thousand One. He'd rented a shack on five acres between Vegas

and Boulder. At the same time ATF SWAT captured the terrorists at Boulder Dam, another team raided Abu's shack."

Amber struggled to absorb Luke's words while her heart kept thanking God. The people at the dam were alive!

"They seized forty weapons," Luke said, "including assault rifles, thirty explosive devices, thirty-five grenades, a satellite phone, and a computer. In one of the files, they discovered a damning schedule with minute by minute details for destruction, including what to wear and how to get rid of fingerprints." He paused and held her gaze. "You didn't just stop the disaster today—they had a list of other places they intended to hit, and the dates of attack."

Amber rubbed her arms. Would she ever stop trembling? "What if I'd failed?"

Luke drew her into the curve of his body, making her feel safe. "Some people never know why they're put on this earth." His drawl was deep, masterful. "You're lucky. You know."

To save people. True or not, it warmed her heart that Luke believed the beautiful concept . . . She blushed as a less noble faint hope sprang to mind—that she could also save Luke and Alicia from going on alone, wifeless, motherless.

A guy with a press badge and a camera rushed past them without looking in their direction and knocked on the sheriff's door.

A new realization hit Amber in a crushing blow. "Oh, God, Luke. This is a big news story. Please, you have to get the sheriff and the Feds to keep my name out of this!"

Luke's face darkened. "You're right. I'll talk to them. We sure as hell don't need more reporters trampling all over our land."

* * * *

When Amber and the Ryan brothers returned to the ranch, the men stayed outside talking. The grim looks on their faces told Amber they were discussing a strategy for if her name got leaked to the media. Amber stomped into the foyer and headed for the stairs. Drat. Guess an about-to-be-canned nanny had no say here. But no one understood the situation better. If it got out about her part in stopping the terrorists' attacks, the media would turn her into a heroine and the ranch into a zoo. The Ryan family had suffered through enough publicity to last a lifetime while Alicia had been missing. Maybe she should make it easy on them and leave right away. Could she? Or was she still in Matt's custody?

Amber met Roberto coming down the wide staircase. He had her suitcases in his hands. Just great! Did that mean Matt was through with her, as he'd not so delicately termed it? Was he taking her to San Antonio to get her out of here? Heat crawled up her cheeks. A moment ago she'd been ready to leave to save the ranch from a media invasion. But this was . . . insulting and just plain rude. Matt hadn't even talked to her about it.

She gestured toward the bags. "Who's behind this?" She fought to hold her voice steady.

“Luke. He called me from the sheriff’s office. He wanted it done before you got back, but—”

“Luke?” Her heart sank. “Please, put my bags down until I talk to him.”

Totally confused, she spun on her heels, and ignoring the pain in her shoulder, she ran from the house. Luke was talking to one of the vaqueros. Matt was nowhere in sight.

“I need to talk to you,” she said. “Alone.”

“Just a sec.” Luke’s innocent grin made her blood boil.

She leaned against the nearby railing and tapped her foot. She recognized the vaquero. He’d been one of the guys with Luke when he’d lassoed her. Amber rubbed her aching head. The sun bore down, frying her nerves. Luke’s *second* extended to minutes. Why did he always put her off when she had an urgent need to talk to him?

The vaquero handed Luke some invoices, and they huddled together, going over them with no sign of finishing soon. Amber glanced at Roberto’s horse. She spied the lasso secured on the saddle horn. An image of the day Luke had lassoed her flashed in her mind, the memory scalding her cheeks. If she had to leave today, this would be her last chance for a little harmless payback, and it would be a great attention getter. Besides, his rudeness made her want revenge.

Amber slipped her arm out of the sling and grabbed the lasso. In spite of the pain, she got the loop airborne and sent it flying. As it dropped over Luke’s head, she pulled the rope tight with her good arm.

“What the hell?” He whipped around, and went for his six-gun. Their gazes met.

Without breaking eye contact, she said, “Still a little high-strung, are we?”

He slid the weapon back into its holster. With enough satisfaction to override her pain, Amber reeled him in. She drew him close and tightened the rope until her fist pressed into the steely barrier of his chest. His heart raced wildly against her knuckles, matching her own out-of-control heartbeat.

Confusion and concern darkened his eyes. “Didn’t know you could rope so good.”

Amber shook back her hair and lifted her chin, wanting the act of defiance to wrap around him, shake him. “Probably lots about me you don’t know.”

“Even a strong lady like you shouldn’t be showing off with a fractured shoulder.”

“I wasn’t showing off. I was getting even.”

He laughed, amusement glinting in his eyes. “Oh, is that what this is about?”

“That and more. It’s about scoring two points with one rope—payback, and getting you to listen to me.”

He laughed again, turning up the flame in her belly another notch.

“Shucks, Amber,” he drawled. “You didn’t have to go to all this trouble. I’m willin’ to listen to anything you have to say.” His probing gaze sent mush to her knees. “Where do you want to talk, little darlin’?”

She tugged on the rope and tried not to grimace in pain. “Don’t call me that.” She gestured with her head. “Barn office.”

He started to lift the loop over his head. She tightened her hold and walked backward, pulling the rugged, wide-shouldered cowboy along like a balking calf.

“Come on, Amber,” he muttered. “It’s a little humiliating to—”

“Next time you lasso a woman, remember how this felt!”

He looked around, red creeping up his neck. “Hey, we don’t have to do this. I decided long ago that you were the last lady I’d ever lasso.”

“Just walk.”

“Realize, I’m cooperating, here.” His voice was low, sexy. “That should get me—”

She yanked the rope again. “Nothing. So save it, cowboy.”

He began to limp. She fought a wave of sympathy. Yanking the rope wasn’t good for either of them. She’d probably just doubled her healing time. She was too furious to care. Besides, seeing the look on his face made it all worthwhile.

They passed a vaquero loading a wagon. The man made no attempt to hide his amusement. Luke groaned. Crossing the compound with him in tow made her feel as ridiculous as he obviously felt. Of course, if he didn’t want to go along with this, she couldn’t make him. Why was he letting her get away with it? It didn’t matter—she would get her say and then leave. And everyone would be happy.

Liar. She wouldn’t be happy. Far from it.

They entered the barn office, and she slammed the door behind them, shutting out horse whinnies and the scent of fresh hay. She gestured for him to sit down. He sat on the edge of the desk. “This is damned silly, Amber.”

She eased down next to him, sitting sideways so they faced each other. She fidgeted with the rope, picking at the knot. “This isn’t easy for me, Luke.” She looked up at him. He just stared at her with eyes as dark as the richest earth. She had an urge to grab his hand and press it to her face, but if she did she would surely cry. “I’ve liked taking care of Alicia. More than that, I love her.”

“I know that.” His voice was low, gentle.

Amber felt tears pushing at the back of her eyes. She had to switch subjects for a moment, or she'd blubber like a baby. She shoved a wayward strand of hair behind her ear. "Who gave you permission to take my bags downstairs?"

His brow wrinkled in confusion. "Did I need permission? Alicia's been having nightmares since the kidnapping. I figured she should be home around her own things."

"No argument there," Amber muttered. They'd all been staying here at Matt's house, and the sooner Alicia got back into her normal routine, the sooner she could put the bad things behind her. "But what's that got to do with my bags?"

"Matt said you'd packed them. I guess I assumed too much. I thought you were ready to come with us."

Amber's face flamed, disappointed in herself for believing the worst. "But you told Matt you weren't going on the rodeo circuit, and I know you hired me specifically to be Alicia's nanny on the road."

Luke took her arm and gently slid the sling back over it. "So you packed your bags to leave us." He dropped his hands to his lap. The retreat was more than physical. She could feel him pulling away emotionally as well. The hurt in his voice reached inside of her and tore at the very fiber of her soul. "Where were you going, Amber?"

She looked down, unsure if it was wise to tell him, yet. "Away. But I wasn't leaving until tomorrow—after we had a chance to talk. Now with the media threat, I'm willing to go today—that is, if I'm free to go." She didn't know what her status was with the authorities. "But not until I've had my say."

"You may want to leave," he said in a flat tone, "but it would help Alicia if you'd spend a few days with her at home. Besides, the Feds want to keep you in protective custody for a while longer." He lifted Amber's chin and looked into her eyes with a hypnotic gaze that stilled everything within her. "Then there's the matter of your health. You hit your head again, and Dr. De La Fuente wants to examine you. He's on his way here. At least stay until he arrives."

She gave a small nervous laugh. "You got me with the plea for Alicia." Her words sounded husky, intimate. She mentally kicked herself for being such a fool. She'd jumped to conclusions about the bags. He wanted her to be with Alicia. Amber felt a surge of hope. Maybe she'd been wrong—perhaps he still trusted her with his daughter.

* * * *

Luke frowned, wondering how to make things right. Amber's lasso tantrum would have been funny except for two things. Her impulsive action proved she hadn't forgiven him for his first foul up, and she was furious enough to risk further injury. It was all his fault. He kept messing up. He had bawled her out for not watching his daughter more closely, then backed off from her advances, and hurt her more. He had to make it up to her. Amber was the woman he loved more than life itself and the woman he wanted to be Alicia's new mama. He couldn't let her walk out of his life, couldn't let his little girl lose someone she loved—not again.

He peeled off the rope and drew Amber into his arms. "I love you." His throat ached with an emotion as big as the Texas sky, and too profound for him to express. He'd never felt more tender, more moved, as he softly rained kisses on her mouth.

Between kisses, Amber said in a breathy voice, "I love you, too."

The office seemed to brighten at her words. "Did I hear you right?"

"Yes, but after those things you said to me the day Alicia was kidnapped, I'm not sure we can get passed resentment like that. What if it's buried inside you, just waiting for—"

"There's nothing buried within me except love, admiration and respect for you. Did I say love?"

Luke drew her closer, careful of her shoulder, and kissed her again. He groaned as the passion that always simmered between them raged hotly in his veins. In her ear, he whispered, "I'd like to sweep everything onto the floor and make love to you on this desk." He couldn't hold back his laugh. Neither of them were in shape for that. "But between your fractured shoulder and my bum leg, we couldn't do justice to the lovemaking." He'd waited a long time for her. He could wait a little longer. He touched her face gently, hoping he'd conveyed all of his pent-up love. "I promise you, when we do make love—"

She withdrew a little and stared up into his face. "I asked you to make love to me once," she said in a tentative tone that disturbed him. "But too much has happened, and just making love is no longer enough."

He lightly brushed the line of her cheekbones with his knuckles. "For me either, Amber. I want the wedding rings and the forever after."

Her eyes twinkled. "Let me get this straight. Is this a marriage proposal?"

He laughed and gently put his arm around her. "I reckon it is, li'l darlin'. Now let's get Alicia and go home."

"There's one more thing," Amber said. "I need to go to Edinburg for a few days to face old ghosts."

"Fine. But I'm going along. After almost losing you, I'm not ready to let you out of my sight." The green in her eyes deepened, and she smiled as though he'd said some magic words.

* * * *

Later, inside Luke's living room, he put down their bags and drew Amber into his arms. "It's good to be home." He felt something tugging on Amber's shirt and looked down.

"Are you really going to be my mommy?" Alicia asked.

"Yes, Rosebud, if you'll have me."

“Course I will, silly.” Alicia gave her foxy, tinkling laugh that never failed to touch Luke’s heart. “You like ’nilla ice cream jus’ like me,” she said, as if that were her yardstick for a mom.

Luke knew it wasn’t. He lifted Alicia up, bringing her into the hug.

“Kiss my new mommy,” she said, in her bossy little voice.

He did. It wasn’t the kiss he’d give Amber later, but definitely one full of promise.

* * * *

Amber couldn’t believe how quickly Luke arranged everything. They were married within the week in a simple ceremony with just family and a few friends in a garden he’d filled with sixteen huge pots of bougainvillea. When he brushed back her veil and brought his lips gently down on hers for the wedding kiss, it had been like coming home.

That night, wanting only to give pleasure, he was a tender lover. She’d never felt more cherished. She loved him even more, if possible, for how he orchestrated every agile move to protect her shoulder. In spite of her injuries, the lovemaking was so satisfying and beautiful that probably even the angels wept with joy.

A month later, Luke came into the kitchen where Amber was making Virginia’s recipe for Texas chili, a dish Luke called, bowl o’ red.

“Hear the news this morning?” he asked, kissing her temple.

“Something interesting?”

“You decide. Ricardo Carrillo was indicted for Rhoades’s and Elmer’s murders and four counts of kidnapping. He also got twenty-five counts for terrorist-conspiracy, and two counts for land fraud. He won’t breathe anything but stale prison air for the next fifty years.”

“What about Nina?”

“No mention of her. But she’ll get some kind of break for talking.”

Amber was glad. Without Nina’s help, people would have died.

* * * *

Luke and Amber had been married two months before Amber’s fracture had healed enough to allow a full range of movement. When she returned from the doctor, she raced into the house tell Luke the news. He no longer had to hold back, no longer had to treat her like she might shatter. “You can take off the kid gloves,” she said, beaming. “The doc gave his okay.”

Luke’s eyes lit up. “That calls for a celebration! Let me handle all the arrangements. I’ll make a candlelit dinner for just the two of us. Dress is optional. Lassos and trapezes allowed.”

She laughed in delight. “Sounds interesting.” To comply with the optional part, she’d wear nothing underneath her dress. But which dress? What could she wear that would knock the spurs right off his boots, and absolutely blow him away?

After her shower, she opened the closet and flicked her gaze over the rainbow of options. She decided on the fiery, long red number she’d bought during a moment of insanity on a shopping trip with Molly. It was slit up one side to the top of her thigh and was cool and slippery from bodice to ankle.

Later, stepping into the dining room, she felt like a seductress.

Luke whistled. “You’re sure all shimmery, darlin’.” Love danced in his eyes, revealing his heart, his soul, and making her the happiest woman in the world.

“It’s the candlelight.” She knew it was more than smoke and light. The thin silk clung to her just as she’d planned, giving him a preview of what waited for him beneath all the shimmer.

He hadn’t stopped looking at her, and she brazenly admired him back. He wore a pristine white shirt open to the waist, and black dress jeans that didn’t hide his arousal. Even the icy air flowing from the AC vents couldn’t cool the flames of expectation warming her bare shoulders.

Aromas of mesquite-grilled steak and baked rolls spiked the air. Although it smelled wonderful, she longed to forget the meal he’d placed before her and go to him. But after all his hard work, she wouldn’t rush the celebration.

After dinner, with the rich smell of coffee lingering in the air, Luke excused himself and disappeared. She assumed to set up phase two of their romantic night.

When he returned to the room looking pleased with himself, she cleared her throat and said, “This was easily the best meal I’ve ever had. I love that you prepared it yourself.” Then, arching an eyebrow, she said in her lowest breathy voice, “I wonder if the loving will be the best we’ve ever had.”

“It will be. That’s a promise, ma’am.” His low voice thrummed through her like a gentle drum roll. He chuckled. “We won’t stop until it is.” He bent and kissed her cheek, while sliding an envelope next to her plate. “For you.”

With butterflies in her stomach, she tore it open. She gasped in joy when two tickets to Paris slid out.

“You mentioned an interest in learning some French.” He smiled. “Our belated honeymoon. Two weeks in the most romantic city in the world.”

She shot to her feet, thrust herself into his arms, basking in the strength she always found there, and gave him a kiss. “This is wonderful!”

“Good. I’m on a roll.” He put his arm around her and led her to their haven, a room filled with yellow Texas roses. The heady smell was more intoxicating than champagne. He had turned down

the sheets and scattered rose petals on them. Heat washed over her in anticipation of crawling between those sheets with a husband whose every thought was to make her happy.

Luke turned the lights low. Every nerve in her body tightened. "I thought about having a picnic in the hayloft to celebrate," he said in a humorous tone, "but decided to save that for tomorrow night. His voice lowered to a husky drawl. "Tonight I want you to have all the comforts of our own room."

She trailed her fingers across the dresser. "I love our room." She glanced at the moonlight beaming through the balcony's sliding glass door, splaying like silver fingers across their bed. Luke wrapped his arms around her. His chest was warm and solid against her back. Reveling in how alive he made her feel, she leaned into the curve of his body.

"I thought we'd start with a massage." He applied pressure to her back with his palms, and she leaned forward, virtually purring. He began to knead her back, digging his fingers into her flesh, finding tense spots, and sending flames coursing through her. He touched the formerly injured area so lightly, that, had she not already been hopelessly in love with this incredibly strong man who could be as gentle as the faintest breeze, she would have fallen for him in that moment.

She felt his warm breath in her hair, his moist lips nibbling at the nape of her neck. Her knees felt weak. She turned in his arms and hugged him, loving him with everything that made her a woman. He kissed her deeply, and she felt herself sway against him. He swept her from her feet, carried her to the bed. The mattress gave slightly as he lowered her to the sheet.

Before Amber could catch her breath, Luke leaned over her and touched his lips to hers. The kiss caught fire as quickly as a flame in a hayloft. She wound her arms around his neck and drew him closer, inhaling the mingling of roses and their body scents. She teased his probing tongue. He lowered himself onto her, and his arousal pressed hard against her thigh. Need shot through her, and when she moaned, Luke slipped the straps of her gown off her shoulders and caressed her breasts with slow, warm hands. Her nipples hardened and a torrid fever rose within her. She stroked Luke's shoulders, his back. His skin felt as fiery as a Texas sunburn. She wanted their clothes off. Now!

Laughing at her own eagerness, she rolled away from him, and rising to her knees, she shimmied. Her gown slithered down her body and pooled on the bed. Luke got to his knees and waited, giving her a chance to be the aggressor.

She grabbed his open white shirt, and running her hands over his solid chest muscles, she quickly smoothed away the bothersome fabric. Seeking more of him, she lowered her hands and unzipped his black jeans. She shoved him backward onto the bed and yanked them off.

"So you want to play?" In a tackle move that amazed and thrilled her, he tumbled her to the sheet. They were both laughing now.

Suddenly, breathless and nude, their gazes met in a clash of electricity.

Slowly, he lowered his lips to hers. His kiss was that of a cowboy for his lady, full of respect, adulation, and just the right amount of raw lust. He slid a hand down her thigh and drifted to the

sensitive skin on the inner side of her leg. She gasped and took a deep breath, trying to hang on as he stroked her. The extra oxygen didn't slow the wildness rising within, the soaring fervor. Almost out of her mind with need, she arched, her core throbbing with arousal. "Now, Luke. Now!" The huskiness in her own voice heightened her out-of-control desire.

"We're going for a double silver buckle on this one," he murmured, extending the delicious pleasure, stretching it.

She was too intent on seeking fulfillment to smile. Although Amber felt sure she couldn't wait a second longer, he took her higher. "Luke!"

In answer to her cry of frustration, he slipped inside her. She closed her eyes as they began to move together. Faster and faster . . . Almost . . . then . . . silver moonbeams exploded in her head, and she cried out in ecstasy.

Luke collapsed beside her. They were glistening with sweat, and he held her tightly, as though he feared she'd disappear. She wasn't going anywhere. This was where she belonged, in his arms, floating in warm oneness.

Luke kissed her temple. "Hope you aren't plannin' to get up anytime soon,"

She laughed. "Couldn't if I had to."

He kissed her eyelids. Gently, she ran her fingers through his hair and tucked her head against his shoulder. She felt safe in his arms—safe, adored and wanted.

They stayed that way for a while before Luke said, "Ready to try something different?"

When she nodded, he led her into a marathon of fantasies beyond her wildest dreams. The man had the imagination of a romance writer and the energy of ten stallions. One more miracle in her life. She touched her belly. Dare she hope for another?

* * * *

The sun began its rise in the sky, sweeping away the darkness with golden-burnished brush strokes. The mockingbirds sang out, announcing the start of spring and a new day. With her short cotton nightgown rustling against her thighs, Amber leaned on the balcony railing of the now-completed second story of their ranch house and inhaled the animal smells, comforted by the familiarity and solidness of her new life. She looked out over the pastures with cattle grazing lazily. The beauty of it brought tears to her eyes. She wasn't sad. She just felt everything more deeply than ever before. She was grateful for so many things that the emotions just bubbled up inside her—her returned memory—her rugged Texas cowboy husband—her very own adopted daughter, Alicia—her new extended family, Matt, Molly and Mama Virginia, and Virginia's new fiancé, Dr. De La Fuente.

Behind Amber, the sliding screen door opened, and Luke encircled her with his arms like a warming cloak, smelling of hay and horses.

"How do you feel?" he asked, kissing the back of her hair.

“Great. I slept late.” She’d learned that on the ranch, late was anything after sunrise. Luke had been careful not to wake her when he got up at four a.m. He worried about her getting enough rest, and she let him pamper her a little. Soon, she’d be too busy with wee-hour feedings and changing diapers to loll around. She cuddled deeper into his arms.

“Took a break to have breakfast with you and Alicia.”

Amber turned in his arms and faced him. “Matt took her up to his house to eat with Sara Jane.”

Luke’s eyes lit up. “We’re alone?”

In answer, she smiled, knowing what came next.

He nuzzled her neck and patted her tummy, “How’s my son doing this morning?”

“Never better. Digging his heels into my side like a li’l bronc rider—eager to buck himself right outta the chute.”

Luke grinned at her in that sexy way that would forever send her heart racing, and ran his callused hand up her thigh. “Think a few kisses will settle him down?”

She laughed. “It’ll take more than a few.”

He winked. “I can handle that.”

Later, when they lay basking in the warm afterglow, Amber counted her blessings. She was lucky to have found Luke and Alicia. The bonus was the little son now resting quietly under her heart. It was strange that something as horrible as murder and amnesia had sent her running scared right into the arms of the only man she could ever love. It was fate, pure and simple. Wonderful, beautiful fate.

The End

About the Author

Lynde Lakes holds a master's degree from the University of California and is the author of eighteen novels, including: *Cowboy Lies* (part of a trilogy), *Billboard Cop*, and several novellas, including *Midnight Destiny*, with Amira Press. Her novels are mostly romantic intrigues with several paranormal and fantasy intrigues. Writing Matt and Molly's story brought back fond memories of the summer Lynde spent on a Texas cattle ranch in her teens. She is presently working on a romantic intrigue that promises to be an intense thriller. Her passions are her family and writing. She is an avid dancer, skater, and walker. And she wishes you lucky horseshoes in your life.