

ELLORA'S CAVE *Breathless*



Guardian Angel
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Guardian Angel

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GUARDIAN ANGEL

Lise Fuller

Cherished Reader ~

Long ago, in a life far, far away, I would travel to a small place named Fort Bridger for work. Nestled in the Bridger Valley of Wyoming, the old remains of what was once a major stop along the Oregon Trail stirred my feeble imagination. I was a budding writer then, and one night, after walking around the buildings on the silent post and feeling the contentment and refuge of the place that to this day remain, the story came to me. I went to my motel room and jotted down fifty pages that night—an accomplishment for any writer. Yes, the town of Fort Bridger and the remnants of the fort are real. Even the Mountain Man Rendezvous, which is held every Labor Day—a sight in itself to enjoy and appreciate because, as one walks around, one seems to have fallen through a doorway to the past. There is one thing to note, however, be it true or not, although the events at the rendezvous and elsewhere, and other people and places in this story are only those of my imagination, it is said by the locals that there is a ghost of an old infantryman that roams the fort at night...

Perhaps, it was he who used his ghostly skills to inspire me.

My greatest thanks go to Sue-Ellen Gower for her immense help in resurrecting this story and bringing it to fruition. As always, I bless my family for their support, especially my husband's for his insight. Additional thanks go to the people of Bridger Valley for their kindness, their comradeship for the many times I labored there and their unique view of the world; and especially, to Jim Bridger, his partner and the elders of the valley from so long ago for creating the wonder of the fort to begin with.

This story is for all of you, and all my readers. God bless.

~ Lise

P.S. If you are interested in learning more about Ft. Bridger and the rendezvous there, check out their website at: <http://www.fortbridgerrendezvous.net/>

Trademarks Acknowledgement

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Beretta: Fabbrica D'armi P. Beretta, S.P.A.

BMW: Bayerische Motoren Werke Aktiengesellschaft

Colt: Colt Industries, Inc.

ESPN: ESPN, Inc.

Mustang: Ford Motor Company

Stetson: John B. Stetson Company

Prologue

Headlights.

Beams from the other car cut through the night and skittered across Marie's misted windshield. Had they found her? Her heart pounded. Her clammy hands gripped the steering wheel of her parked BMW.

Her heavy breaths whispered in the otherwise silent interior.

She rubbed a small spot clean in the glass to peer through. The car sped closer. Marie sank deeper in the seat and grabbed the keys in the ignition, ready to run. She prayed no one would spot her beneath the leafy trees.

A red Mustang convertible cruised by. The occupants reeled with laughter and, she surmised, strong drink.

Relief flooded her. She sat a little higher as the car travelled down the parkway that paralleled the lazy, running Potomac. A zephyr wind whistled. She jumped before she realized the breeze came from the small round hole in the window behind her.

The lights from the other car shifted and were gone. The gust wailed once more. Goose bumps rose on her neck. She trembled, unsure if her shivers came from the cool wind or raw terror.

"Breathe, Marie. Breathe," she murmured. The sound of her own voice comforted her, let her know she was still alive. She rubbed a hand over the soft skin exposed above the low-cut bodice of her black silk dress. The effort failed to still the pulse that raced beneath its surface.

She cracked open the driver-side window. A draft wafted in and forced out the stale air that panic and the cool night had caused to fog on the glass. She gulped the moist evening breeze. The pungent scent of the polluted river came to her. Unbidden, the cicadas called in the quiet night.

She worked to clear her mind. How could she get out of this mess? The police were after her. They had to be. But the other men who tailed her were what caused her to fear.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Even now she could hear the angry voices, the footfalls in pursuit. Marie covered her ears to dispel the sounds, but she couldn't. The discharge of a gun, her rear window cracking—the thud as the slug hit the back of the driver's seat. She'd barely escaped her swank Georgetown apartment. If she went to the law, the others would kill her for sure.

Gingerly, she touched the welts on her neck. A gift given a few hours ago from her now-dead partner. *It happened so fast.* She choked at the memory. His viselike grip around her throat. His thumbs pressed against her windpipe. She couldn't breathe,

couldn't even gasp for air. He'd backed her up against the fireplace. Hit her head on the mantel. Unable to loosen his hold, she'd become frantic. The stand with the hearth tools clanged as they struggled. She'd reached behind her to grasp whatever she could to defend herself. Cold metal settled in her hand. Before she passed out, she'd lifted the poker and struck her wannabe lover.

Bill, how could you? I trusted you.

Her mind raced. The abruptness of her business partner's betrayal made her head throb, caused the cold terror that made her body shiver.

She ran. She had to. Her business associate lay dead. His dangerous friends were hot on her trail.

She rubbed her arms to ease her tremors and racked her brain for a place where she could be safe. Unlike most militia groups, the Back to America Movement had long arms. If she wasn't careful, they would find her through the maze of computer lines that hooked up the world.

She fortified her resolve. To save herself, she had to find somewhere to hide, someplace far away from here. She snapped the glove compartment open and took out a U.S. map then unfolded the chart across the steering wheel. She held the diagram to the faint moonlight, closed her eyes and jabbed a finger into the paper. Squinting, she eased her lids open, half in dread. Half in hope. Where would her next stop be?

West.

She smoothed the crinkled map with her free hand and leaned over to get a clearer view.

Wyoming.

With the meager light, she couldn't see any towns. The area appeared totally desolate. She lifted her finger and checked again.

Nothing.

She looked closer. In very small print was a dot and some letters but it was too hard to see in the dark. She sifted through her purse to find her penlight. When she felt the small cylinder, she pulled it out and covered most of the bulb with her hand. Then she snapped on the beam. The brightness blinded her. She blinked to focus then narrowed her eyes.

Fort Bridger.

She bit her lip and wondered if she shouldn't go to the police after all. She shook her head. *No, better not.* BAM's infiltration ran too deep in the local law enforcement and who knew what else? She couldn't risk trusting the law. She'd found that out the hard way.

She scanned the road then steeled herself and started her BMW. Would Fort Bridger be safe? She didn't know but it would be riskier to stay here. Besides, what else did she have to lose but her life?

She pressed her lips together and drove onto the empty parkway, determined to protect herself.

Go west, young woman. She inured herself to her apprehension.

Exiting onto the beltway, she mumbled, "Fort Bridger or bust."

Chapter One

"Wake up, boy."

Jake Colder felt the shove on his shoulder. He groaned. His body still ached from the rough night. He'd broken up a fight at the local bar and put the culprits in a cold jail cell to sleep it off. It'd been late when he arrived home.

The shove came again. Jake let out a mumbled curse and burrowed deeper into the cool sheets as he spread himself across the double bed. "Go away." He lifted an extra pillow and plopped it on his head.

"C'mon, soldier. Roll call. You're supposed to be dressed."

Jake sat up and jammed the surplus cushion against the bed sheet. "And you're supposed to be dead."

The old infantryman grinned. "I am dead, boy. You know it too. Died right here in Fort Bridger. At my post, I was. Run over by a Modoc chieftain."

His dress blues were as fresh as the day they'd buried him.

"Ugh." Jake flopped backward then dropped the spare pillow over his face. "Old man, I'm thirty-five years old." He lifted the pad off his head and looked at Gramps. "When will you leave me alone?"

The apparition spit a ghostly chaw of tobacco in a plant by the window and set his hands on his hips. "When I'm satisfied with your happiness. Hell, boy, yuh got a nine-year-old son who needs a mother and it's about damn time I had more grandchildren. How's the family line suppose' to continue?"

Jake looked at the green glop. The goop dripped off the plant. "Gramps, I've asked you not to do that."

The elderly ghost straightened and looked at the pot. His brows furrowed. "Er...sorry. Well hell, boy, you oughta have a decent spittoon."

"I told you, tobacco's bad for you. Most people don't chew anymore."

The old ghost spat again. "Dammit, son, t'ain't bad for me. I'm dead. Now don't change the subject. It's time you got a woman in this house and I don't mean one of those painted-up fly-by-night types."

Jake squinted from the sunlight that filtered through the window. "What the hell for? You never did. If I remember right, my family's from the wrong side of the sheets."

In a flash, Jake's tan pants lifted off the hook at the back of the door. The garment shot toward him and slapped him in the face. "Times were different then. I loved Josephine. Purtiest gal in all Wyomin'. Problem was, she married a sterile bastard and divorce was unheard of. Couldn't help myself, son. She wanted a kid."

Jake scowled as he pulled his pants off his face. "You gave her seven."

"Up." The old man rushed him with a frantic wave of his arms. "Git up and git dressed. Time's a wastin' and it's high time you grewed up. 'Sides," he said as his grin spread from one ruddy cheek to the other, "trouble's comin'." He leaned into Jake's face. "And in a right purty package too." He smacked his lips and disappeared in a puff of smoke.

Jake sighed and ran his hands through his hair. He'd had this argument with the undead man since he was a kid. "A woman..." He rubbed his neck. "Hell, old man, a lady is the last thing I need." He rose and pulled on his uniform pants then walked over to get his shirt. The golden glow from the morning sun settled on his badge. The light radiated in his face. He'd been the county sheriff for some time now, thank God. It helped pay the bills and the money he earned kept the ranch, his real love, going.

A soft knock sounded and a patch of tawny hair appeared around his bedroom door. His son took one look at him and frowned. "Aw, Dad, aren'tcha gonna wear your loincloth? The Rendezvous's started. The loincloth contest is today." The boy's eyebrows raised and lowered several times. "Katie says she and the other gals cain't wait."

Jake pressed the corners of his mouth downward. "Jesse, what makes you think I'm going to enter?"

"Shoot, you won last year and this year they're givin' two hundred bucks to the winner, donated by the ladies of Bridger Valley." The boy's grin broadened.

"Jesse, I did the show before because I owed Katie a debt. You could say she took that out in trade."

"Aw, Dad. The girls cheered hard for you last year." The boy slapped his leg then put his hands on his hips in mock seriousness. "You know, you shouldn't disappoint your adoring public. I'm tellin' ya, Dad, we take your naked butt to Hollywood and we'll make millions."

His son reminded Jake of his great-great grandfather, God rest his soul. Now if the old coot would *actually* rest...

Jake frowned. "You know I'm supposed to be there in an official capacity. You're nine years old. You're not supposed to pay attention to those women."

Jesse shrugged. "Gramps says it's all right."

"Gramps." Jake grimaced and rolled his eyes upward. "Gramps lived over a hundred years ago and stayed a confirmed bachelor."

"Yeah," the boy said, "but his being single didn't stop him from having fun."

"You don't know what you're talking about." Jake jerked his shirt off the iron hook. The badge banged on the metal peg. "Now get outta here and feed the horses."

The boy pulled his straw cowboy hat from around his back and plopped it on his head. "I already dun it, so hurry up. I'm hungry and Cal says there's a new dish down at the Chuck Wagon."

Jake half listened as he buttoned his shirt. "And what dish is that?"

The boy covered his mouth with his hand and stifled a giggle. "Her name's Marie." He shook his hips. "Long dark hair and skin like fresh cream." He winked. "According to Cal anyways."

"Boy," Jake grabbed his hat from the chair by the window, "you've been listening to too many old cowboys. No more hanging with them at night. Next thing you know, I'll get a call to pick you up for drunk and disorderly."

"Yeah? Then who are you gonna get to watch me on your night shifts?" Jesse sniggered. "They're the only ones not afraid of Gramps."

Jake looked up from threading his belt through his pant loops. His son's face crinkled with humor. Jake couldn't help but smile at him. "You think I'll win?"

"Heck yeah." The boy straightened as much as he could and threw his shoulders back.

Jake nodded. "Go on and get my buckskin." He cinched his belt. "You riding your horse to the diner?"

"Yep." Jesse tipped his hat.

Jake chuckled. "I'll meet you there."

The boy ran off. Jake shook his head. Jesse needed new jeans and two hundred bucks would come in handy. Still, when Jake put on his hat, he made a mental note to give Katie's big mouth a piece of his mind.

* * * * *

"But, Jake, I didn't mean anything bad by it." Katie rubbed her hands up his arms and snuggled next to him. He'd caught up with her around the back of the diner between serving omelets and dumping trash. She smelled of fried bacon and sweet perfume—a combination that would have made him lose his breakfast if he'd had any.

"Remember what I said," he warned.

She purred her ruby lips against his neck. "And if I don't, you gonna handcuff me?"

He grabbed her and held her at arm's length. "Katie, you're taken. You know attached women are out of bounds with me, especially when they're hitched to a miner with arms the size of tree trunks."

"But we're just dating." Her fleshy lips formed a pout. "Honey, he's never home. I need someone who can take care of business."

"Katie, I ain't your man. Now where's Jesse?"

She folded her arms and shrugged. "He ate and already run off to the games."

Jake gave her a curt nod and swung around to the front of the diner. The Mountain Man Rendezvous was an annual Labor Day event at the old fort and one of his biggest headaches. It brought over twenty-five thousand people to the small town of three-hundred-and-some, and a lot of them reminded him of things that crawled out of the

woodwork. He rubbed his jaw where he'd taken a punch the night before. Some of them should've stayed in the timber with the other termites.

He stopped and looked at the remains of the garrison across the street. The army had occupied the place before the turn of the century. His great-great grandfather had lived and died there.

Jake frowned, thinking the old man should have stayed dead.

He scanned the grounds. A couple milled about. Some of the small camps stirred. Jake knew he'd better eat fast before more folks were up. He turned toward the diner. The cowbell on the door jangled as he reached the entrance. A neighbor dressed in fringed leather exited. Jake nodded to him then grabbed the door before it closed and walked in.

The place reeked of grease but he liked his breakfast with a lot of butter. He slid into a booth and dropped his tan Stetson on the seat. When Katie threw him a kiss he scowled at her.

"Would you like coffee this morning?" A soft, prim voice floated to him.

"Yeah." Jake didn't look at the speaker but he registered an Eastern accent. Instead, he frowned at Katie who wiggled her fingers at him. Frustrated, he rolled his eyes and rubbed his hand across his face. He needed to get Katie off his back — fast.

He tossed the menu aside. The woman's hand jutted in front of him and snatched it. Her fingers were long, graceful and slender. He could fit his hand around her wrist, probably twice.

"Are you ready to order?"

He looked at her and paused, thunderstruck. *So this is Marie.* Blood rushed to his groin. His pulse picked up speed. He looked away to get a grip on himself. Cal was right. Her skin reminded a guy of fresh cream, soft and smooth. And her face, God, she looked like an angel. He cast a side glance a mite lower and took in the detail of her form. Her lush, well-proportioned body was made for a man to fuck.

He gulped to suppress his baser urges. When he managed to get control, he looked at her again. She'd tied her dark hair in a bun. Her high cheeks had a flush about them.

But her eyes were what held him. The gold flecks in those deep green pools could mesmerize a man, yet something more reflected in her gaze. Fear?

She ran her tongue across her full lips then nipped the flesh. Jake seriously wanted to ask her if she'd do that to him.

He cleared his throat and thought better of it. It'd been several years since he'd been wild and stupid. Besides, a question like that would be out of line for a man in his position. "You must be Marie."

Her hand jerked. Her eyes narrowed. She pressed her lips together as a flash of unease breezed across her face. "How did you know?"

"Honey, we don't get too many strangers—well, except for this time of year—but they wouldn't work in the diner. News of your arrival spread far and wide across the valley."

Her eyes clouded. The fear came back, Jake thought as he sipped his coffee. He wondered what had caused the dainty downturn of her mouth. "You got a last name?"

"Ah..." She stalled. "Taylor."

"Taylor. Well, welcome to Bridger Valley. You picked a hell of a time to come."

Her lips twitched. She allowed herself a small smile. The act brightened her whole face. "Yes, well, the tips are good and I need the money."

Nodding, he questioned if Taylor could be her real name. "I'll take my eggs over easy with toast. Tell Gus it's for Jake Colder. He'll know the rest."

She licked her lips again before she walked away. He watched. Her full hips swayed with every step. He liked that. Not too thin. Beautifully proportioned.

And probably not his type.

He bit his tongue and looked away. Jesse's mother had been like that. Lush body, well shaped...

And loved men.

Jake huffed and swigged some of the black brew. He'd been in the army then. His tours of duty had been long and he'd been gone most of the time. Jake ran his fingers along the hot cup, deep in thought. The army had been hard on both of them. When Jesse came along, it'd been even harder.

Jake had tried. He'd given up his special ops post to work as a military policeman. The change hadn't helped. Christy wanted out. She wanted opera, ballet...*life*.

On his pay, he could only offer love and a warm body to sleep next to.

Then she told him about the other men.

In the end, Jake and his bruised ego gave her everything she wanted. Everything.

He bowed his head and swallowed hard. He saw the pain again in Jesse's face. The boy knew she'd never be back. Her departure devastated his son, the fact she hadn't wanted him either.

"Here's your eggs, Sheriff." Katie bent low to expose her generous cleavage. "Special delivery." The corners of her mouth curved upward in a playful tease. She batted her eyes.

"Thanks, Katie."

"Sure thing, lover." She whispered the last word and winked at him.

He smirked. Better the devil you know than the one you don't. "Honey, it still won't get me anywhere near your place."

"Well, then maybe it'll get me near yours."

He picked up the toast and buttered it. "You're not afraid of Gramps? I've lost more than one housekeeper 'cause of him."

"Humph." She straightened. "Crazy people. I think it's a rumor but even if it isn't, I'm not afraid of an old ghost." Her eyes devoured every detail of Jake. "Sugar, if he's anything like you, we'll get along just fine."

Jake shook his head as he stabbed a bit of egg. He shot a glance at Marie. She walked around with a pot to warm up the customers' coffee. "So tell me about the new girl."

Katie shrugged. "Her name's Marie. Don't know much 'cept she's a nice girl. Good manners and such." She looked from the woman to him and arched her brows. "Drives an even nicer car." Katie pulled out her ordering pad when another customer walked in. "But I can tell you this..." Her mouth turned down, the lines tinged with worry. "She won't spend any money, even on a little makeup. She must really be hurtin' for cash."

To a woman like Katie, that kind of thriftiness said something. Jake took another bite and studied the unknown woman. "Where's she staying?"

"Right here in the motel. Gus is lettin' her sleep in one of the old rooms and takin' the charge out of her pay."

Jake lifted his brow. "The ones without a deadbolt?"

"Hey," Katie held up her hands, "she wanted something cheap. She got it. It's fine with her."

Jake scowled. "What kind of car does she drive?"

The waitress twisted her mouth as she thought. "Oh, one of them fancy ones. I cain't remember." A customer of Katie's waved her down. "Gotta go. Jesse left your loincloth with me. It's in my truck. You can get it when you're ready." She turned and moved on.

Jake drained his cup. He set it near the edge of the table as Marie approached. She reached for the mug, her eyes downcast.

"So what brings you to Fort Bridger?"

"Huh?" Her hand jerked the pot. Hot coffee spilled into his lap.

"Sh—" Jake sucked in a breath and jumped up. He brushed off his clothes before the coffee completely scalded him.

"Oh..." The woman set the pot on the table and wiped his stomach with her dishcloth. "I'm so sorry. I...you..." She lowered her hand to follow the wet stain and wiped his legs.

It took her two full seconds to realize what else she'd been rubbing. His throat went dry. His cock jumped in his pants.

Their eyes met. He felt the erotic tension tighten between them.

"Oh my God." She dropped the dishtowel on the table and slapped her hand over her face. Her cheeks flushed as she peeked through her fingers. "I'm sorry."

The room erupted. Jake even heard the cook heehaw in the back. He looked at Marie and gave her his sexiest come-on grin. "It's okay, honey. I'm sure everything still

works." The guffaws came louder. Jake would have given anything to ask her if she'd like to see for herself.

"Your clothes." She picked up the rag and wrung the cloth in her hands.

"Don't worry." He eyed Katie who stood in the back. "I need to change anyway." He covered the certain growing discomfort in his groin with his hand and sat down. "You know a lot of people come here from the big city. You don't have to be nervous about it." He didn't mention that after a few months of cowboy life, they didn't stay. "You are from the city, aren't you?"

Her hands trembled as she poured him a fresh cup and set the pot back down. "Yes." Her brows knitted as she wiped her palms on her apron.

Jake held off asking any more questions before she bolted and the whole carafe fell on his lap. He looked into her troubled eyes. This woman needed help and a place to stay. He made up his mind. "Marie, do you do windows?"

"What?"

"I live alone with a nine-year-old son. I need a housekeeper and a babysitter. I have an extra room in the back of the house. We could trade services. Cleaning for a room and board. Plus some babysitting from time to time. You keep spilling the coffee and it seems to me you might soon need another line of work."

Her lips thinned, he suspected with worry.

Jake lifted a brow. "It'd give you some extra money now and then and it's a free place to live. You can still work here if you want."

"But you don't know me."

Her voice wavered. He liked the soft feminine sound. "Nope. You don't know me either." He stood and threw a few dollars on the table then put on his hat. "Think about it." He swerved and left her and the coffeepot.

The screen door banged as he walked out. He sucked in a labored breath. Not so much from the hot coffee as from the surge that blistered through him when she'd rubbed his dick. He shook his leg to dry his pants, tried to ease his friend back down. He was glad the contest wasn't until the afternoon. It wouldn't do for his pecker to be standing in salute while wearing a loincloth.

Jake circled around back and went to Katie's pickup to pull out the skimpy leather. Glancing up, he spotted a black BMW by a small motel room. The mud-splattered car sported District of Columbia plates. "Nice," he whistled. The auto must be Marie's. How could a waitress afford something so rich?

He shut the creaky truck door and folded his arms as he leaned against the battered side. "Interesting." His brows knitted. At first, he hadn't seen the mark because of the thick mud. Now he stared and came closer. He ran his hand over the dirt on the back window behind the driver's seat. The cracked glass had a small hole drilled in the corner. He rubbed his chin then put his little finger through the puncture. He'd seen too many bullet holes not to recognize one.

Scowling, he made a mental note of the license plate number and remembered what Gramps had told him that morning. *Trouble's comin'. And in a right purty package too.*

Now he knew what Gramps meant.

Chapter Two

"Marie, come on. If you're gonna live with the guy you oughta know what he's like." Katie dragged Marie through the tepees and the bustling crowd full of weekend mountain men. Buckskinned hawkers called at them from the booths. Marie wanted to stop for a drink of water but Katie drove her forward.

"Katie, I will *not* live with him. He wants me to be his housekeeper." It was three o'clock and the lunch crowd had died. Gus, the cook and owner, had let them go to watch some contest Katie insisted on, but first Katie wanted Marie and Sheriff Colder to meet for *real*, whatever that meant. Marie wanted to tell her the farther she got from the sheriff, the better. The man made her nervous. Besides, Marie needed to keep a low profile from any law enforcement, stay away as much as possible—especially from a guy who looked like that. *God*. The morning's interlude had been enough contact with the sexy hunk of a sheriff, thank you very much. Her nerve endings were still singed from the carnal contact.

She felt the blush in her cheeks again—and the rush of hormones to her other parts. She snarled under her breath. Her body's reaction to the man was not welcomed by her common sense. She sure as hell didn't need some kind of domestic relationship with the guy. She sat in enough hot water as it was.

Or maybe she should say enough hot coffee...

Good lord... She sucked in a breath, reminded of how stiff the man's cock grew in her hand, how dark his blue eyes got when they drilled her with lust.

Her clit thrummed as she thought about it. She groaned to chastise herself. She needed to stay away from him. Jake Colder was the law in town. Who knew what connections he had? His presence *should* have made her nervous. He was the first police officer Marie had met since she'd been on the run. But hell, just the sight of the sheriff made her want.

She puffed her cheeks. She couldn't believe she'd spilled coffee on him, much less...

She squeezed her eyes shut, hoping to ease her embarrassment, her personal torment from the combination of sexual hunger and anxiety the man instilled. *Blast it*. Why was the yearning she had for the sheriff so strong? Yeah, he was a damned good-looking man, but Marie had been with handsome men before. She pressed her lips together. It was probably the fact she was horny as hell. She'd been damned busy the last several months. She hadn't found the time for a relationship where she could get laid—not by someone she wanted.

A shiver shot through her as she thought of Bill and his attempted rape, his thefts, why she was in Fort Bridger to begin with. It was bad enough he'd stolen from the

company. Why did he have to try to rape her? No way, no how would she have ever been interested in Bill. Never, ever.

She forced the thought of her dead partner away as Katie ducked into a throng. The crowd jostled them. Marie glanced at the faces that rushed by her as she analyzed herself. She wasn't wanton. Never had been. But Jake Colder fired her libido like no other. She screwed up her lips. Maybe it was some Freudian thing, something about having a strong man to protect her, especially when she was this deep in trouble. Yeah, that had to be it. She huffed, felt smug about her conclusion. But the torrid sense still nagged her because, given the opportunity, she wouldn't mind having Sheriff Colder's naked body next to hers.

"Besides, Marie, look at where you are," she muttered. With a body like Jake's, women all over the valley probably clamored for the man. Look at how Katie acted. Still, the sheriff's reaction to *her* had been quick *and* hard. "Forget it," she mumbled to herself. It would never happen.

"What did you say?" Katie commented over the noisy crowd as she nudged past a few men from the Sheriff's Department. Marie froze and stared at the men, relieved when she realized none of them had been the sheriff.

"Here we are." Katie squeezed her hand.

Several women gathered around a gray-haired, statuesque man in buckskin who stood in front of a tepee painted with handprints and buffalo. "Ladies and gentlemen." He cleared his throat. "Well, mostly the ladies." The crowd chuckled. He bent around to look into the entrance to the wigwam and shouted inside, "You guys will be glad to hear that."

"Get on with it, George," a deep voice from inside yelled. The ladies twittered. The sound reminded Marie of a bunch of birds.

The mountain man straightened and raised his hands. "Do we have our judges?"

"Here's one." Katie thrust Marie's arm into the air.

"No," Marie protested and struggled to free herself but Katie pushed her forward.

"Go on." Katie waved at her.

Marie rolled her eyes and stepped into the circle. The two deputies looked at her and Marie grew uneasy. One officer bent toward the other and whispered then they both broke out in gales of laughter. *Small town*. She was sure word had gotten around about her *faux pas* that morning. Blood rushed to Marie's cheeks.

Soon, two other women joined her and someone brought chairs for them all. The rest of the ladies made a wider berth as the mountain man, George, walked around and shooed them back. When he seemed satisfied, he cleared his throat again. "Judges, well, ladies, it's up to you to pick out the best, ah, er...loincloth."

Loincloth? Marie spun around to look at Katie. The waitress giggled behind her hand then whirled her finger in a circle to tell Marie to pay attention.

"Remember, study its construction, both natural and man-made." The crowd of women erupted with bawdy calls. "Our first contestant is Seth, all the way from Montana."

Marie gasped as a blond man with the body of Adonis walked out of the tepee clothed in nothing but the leather breechcloth. It didn't cover much, just the essentials. Marie covered her mouth as she watched him pose and flex. He turned around and lifted his back flap. His hard butt bulged in all the right places. What a terrific view.

She closed her eyes and got the first good laugh she'd had in weeks. Soon one man after the other left the tepee, each arrayed in different shades of leather. For once Marie enjoyed herself.

"And for our last contestant, we have one of our own." George winked. "Say howdy to Sheriff Jake Colder."

At this, the women screamed. Several in the back jumped around to get a better look. A few even whistled and shouted certain acts of love.

The tall dark man stepped out. "Oh no." Marie slid down the metal chair and wanted to crawl under the seat. The crowd went wilder. Even the deputies shouted. The sheriff turned toward his men and glared. With a brisk jerk of his head, he nodded at the uniformed officers, who doubled up and hooted in response.

His mouth pressed into a thin line. Ignoring his crew, Jake raised his hand and waved at the ladies. His pecs and abs tightened. *A six-pack*. Oh hell.

Lust zoomed along her raw nerves. Her insides screamed at her to look on. She eyed him, took in every detail she could. Her jaw dropped. Did her chin hit her chest? *Omigod*. She knew he was a big man—she'd felt that for herself. *Don't do this*. She grimaced and tried not to think of how well her hand fit against his hard penis.

She shook off her reaction then stared at him—and his fit body. God, the man was built. Talk about Adonis...

She gulped. Yeah, big, brawny. Wow. She'd known he stood a good head taller than her five feet six, but what she didn't realize until now was how much the uniform hid. "Oh. My. God." She covered her mouth as she stared at the rock-hard muscles that gleamed in the sunlight. From his shoulders to his calves, the man was sculpted like a statue. That uniform hid a lot.

"C'mon, Jake. Let's see 'em," Katie called over the rest.

Marie spread her hand over her face as he turned in her direction. For the second time that day, she stared through her fingers at the town's sheriff.

When he saw her, he put his hands on either side of his washboard waist and focused his blue eyes on her. The look he aimed could have seduced any woman. Marie licked her lips and rolled her eyes. Hell. A half-naked Casanova for a sheriff? Whatever happened to mother and apple pie?

The sheriff watched her as he stretched then flexed his muscles. He stood, curled his arms. The two boulder-like biceps peaked. Then he turned, grabbed his hands behind

him. As he tensed his triceps his whole backside—from his shoulders to his glutes, grew more pronounced.

Marie's mouth dried, her hormones flashed into hyperdrive.

He turned like a large cat—power, stealth in every move—and posed to emphasize the cut of either his chest or his legs. Marie choked. The man was sex in motion. When he waved to the women again, he circled and tucked the back flap into the waistband.

The cheers about broke her eardrums. "Heaven help me," she uttered. The drape over his backside hardly covered him. God, his ass was chiseled. Under a skilled hand, muscles like that could take care of a woman in need—like her.

Marie closed her eyes a moment and hoped she didn't drool.

"Okay, ladies. Time to choose."

Jake dropped the backflap. Marie watched him stop alongside the other contestants. He crossed his powerful arms over his broad muscular chest, an act that caused his pecs to jump and his nipples to jut from the dark hair that sprinkled down the front of him. She wondered what those small buds would feel like in her mouth.

Oh God. She squeezed her legs together and hoped she didn't cream her g-string. She sucked in a deep draught of air then controlled the exhale through her pursed lips to get her hormones back in line. The *last* thing she should think about was fucking the sheriff.

The man's gaze locked on hers. He arched a brow as if he could read her thoughts. The corners of his lips rose into a mocking grin—one that seemed to ask if she liked what she saw, if she'd like to get a closer inspection.

Hell yeah she would. The old Marie wouldn't back down from the unspoken challenge. She felt the urge. She rose to it. She let her eyes roam over him. Yeah, he was built, not with the bulky muscles of a body builder, but with a man used to hard labor.

A man who could take care of business.

Ouch. Her breath hitched at the thought of that hard body skin-to-skin with hers. She pressed her fingers to her temple, hoped to tamp down the libidinous thought then looked away. She conceded victory to the man. She had to. She shouldn't flirt with him. He was the law. If he found out what she'd done, he'd arrest her. The smart thing would be to stay as far away from him as she could. What was she thinking?

But Marie wanted him. Wanted his body at least. Hell, she could use the release from the tension she'd lived with of late. But with the sheriff? "Must be pheromones or something," she grumbled. That and the Freudian thing. Having a virile man who could protect her. Cripes, every pore of the man oozed "fuck me". She was a normal woman. Of course her body reacted. What else did she expect? Besides, the excuse was the only thing she could think of for her errant behavior. The normal, rational part of Marie would *never* be this stupid.

But God she couldn't help staring.

Someone put a pen and paper in her hand. The act took a few seconds to register. She still gawked at the sheriff then frowned as she questioned why he stood there looking at her the way he did.

She blinked to get her mind onto the immediate issue—her vote. She glanced at the blank page and swore that as soon as she gave the emcee the paper, she'd get away from Sheriff Colder as fast as she could. Still, heat formed deep in her belly. The antsy flutter of her libido stirred her sex. And the way he looked at her... Did he want her too?

She looked up from under her lashes. The sheriff still watched her. His eyes delved into her, as if they reached for something inside. Her nipples tingled. The heat in her spread lower. The tiny muscles around her pussy clenched. The man's look intensified, grew more carnal, more possessive. Did he know what he did to her?

She glanced away. Pressed her lips together and tried to concentrate on the blank page. Over the last few days she must have lost her mind because if she'd been in her right one, she'd never have been duped into this insanity. She scribbled a name and folded the note. Closing her eyes, she handed the paper to the master of ceremonies.

"It's unanimous," George shouted as he opened hers.

"Arg." Marie buried her head in her hands. The man would have to say that.

"Deputies, give Sheriff Colder the two hundred dollars."

The women went wild. A few of them rushed to the men. Marie ducked under their flailing arms to make her escape.

"Ladies, ladies, please don't attack the contestants. I'll have to get Sheriff Colder to drag you away," the announcer blathered.

"Have him take me away, George." Marie heard the thin, high-pitched voice of some woman over the crowd. Marie chuckled as she skirted around the tepee to make good her getaway. She needed to get her libido back under wraps.

From nowhere strong fingers closed around her arm. The velvet grip held her flesh like an iron vise.

"Hey, not so fast," the deep voice entreated.

She panicked. Marie swung around and fell face-first into the sheriff. Her cheek brushed the soft dark hair of his chest. Her hands fell against his granite biceps. His arm circled her waist and pulled her hips and torso snug against his. *God, did he feel good.*

Heat suffused her cheeks. She buried her face against him and inhaled. The musky combination of aftershave and clean sweat filled her. She breathed again, relished the smell of the man. He was all male.

"You okay?" He hooked his finger under her chin and lifted it off his chest. His eyes twinkled.

"Uh." She licked her lips. "Yes. Fine." Her hands slid across the sinewy brawn of his broad shoulders. She gulped. "I...uh..."

"I'm glad you came. I'm sure your vote swung the balance." His white teeth gleamed against his tanned skin. His hands eased down her back.

Her breaths came faster. The need to fuck the man built in her belly again. But she couldn't. She had to stop this. "I don't think my vote had anything to do with your winning."

"Sure it did. Now you know I can afford to pay you."

"You don't need to pay me." She pushed him away before she forgot she spoke to the law – and before she forgot herself in his arms.

"You mean you'll do it for free?"

"No, I mean I will not trade services with you." She swung around but he grasped her elbow.

"Why not? Don't you need a place to stay?"

She did but she hadn't told him that. "I have a place."

He turned her to him, put his other hand on her waist and frowned. "That motel room isn't a fit place to live."

She shrugged. The setup was better than living in the same house with the local law. How long would it be before she jumped his bones?

And would he let her?

Hell. She couldn't. No way. She needed her wits about her. "It'll do for now."

His eyes narrowed. The small lines around his mouth flattened. He stared at her a moment with a seriousness she hadn't seen in him as yet. "Look, wait here and let me get dressed. I'll be on duty but we could still talk."

She took a deep breath and forced herself to relax. Folding her arms across her chest, she raked her eyes over him. "You're working? Funny uniform. You undercover?"

He dropped the stern look and gazed at her with a sense of all-male pleasure. He bent toward her and whispered, "You like what you see?"

His nearness startled her. She answered him with another blush.

"Stay," he pleaded, his voice a low whisper. "I'll be right back."

She swallowed then nodded. *This isn't a good idea.* She watched his taut ass duck into the tepee. *Not a good idea at all.*

* * * * *

Jake swooped through the entrance and questioned what the hell he'd done. At first he'd thought his proposal a great idea, getting the unfamiliar woman to be his housekeeper. She needed money and he desperately needed help. Someone had to stay home with Jesse at night, and with his job he couldn't always do that. Shit, Gramps had scared off everyone else.

Had he been too impulsive? The woman was on the run and he didn't know how fast or how far. She didn't seem like the criminal type but one never knew. A bullet hole in the window wasn't a good calling card.

He slipped on his stained pants. Katie liked this woman. He could tell. His old friend was a good judge of character. He snorted as he put on his shirt. Katie might play the field but she had a heart of gold.

He stopped as another thought hit him. Maybe Marie had a jealous husband? That idea left him cold. He growled. She hadn't worn a ring but the absence of a band didn't mean anything. He'd known too many women who took their wedding bands off when it was convenient—like when they were around him.

He slipped on his shoes then buttoned his shirt and decided he wanted to get to know Ms. Marie Taylor better, a lot better. He grabbed his hat then ducked through the entrance and circled round the tepee. She was gone.

"Pat. Kyle." The two deputies had dispersed the rest of the crowd. Jake waved them over. "You see where that new waitress went?"

Pat Sawyer stuck out his bottom lip and shrugged. "She was here a minute ago." He squashed his grin and pushed his hat up an inch with his forefinger. "She sure is a pretty thing."

Kyle Thorsen slapped Pat's upper arm with the back of his hand. "Yeah, probably came to check Jake's parts out for herself. You know, make sure they're okay. It'd be a heartbreak to some of the women around here if he'd been permanently damaged."

Pat, the older of the two, snickered. "Guess she satisfied herself and moved on."

Jake hooked his thumbs behind his belt and glared. "Very funny." He scanned the area then exhaled through his parted lips. "If you see her, let me know."

Pat rubbed his chin. "You expectin' trouble?"

"Don't you always expect trouble when a woman has legs like that?" He pasted on a smile that looked more relaxed than he felt. "Circle the grounds. Radio me if you find her. Quietly."

Jake walked off as the men joked, saying it was about time Jake got laid. Until he knew more, Jake would let them think what they wanted.

He pulled his Stetson over his eyes to block the glare from the late afternoon sun. Something gnawed in his gut, told him to keep the woman nearby. If trouble came, keeping her close would be the quickest way to find it.

Of course, keeping an eye on those legs and the cute backside that swayed with them wouldn't be much of a bother. And if there were side benefits, he wouldn't mind those either.

Satisfied he'd found the problem Gramps warned him about, he lifted his chin. Whistling, he began his rounds.

* * * * *

Marie didn't think she'd ever get the smell of grease out of her hair. Gus needed a hand for the evening shift so she volunteered. She wanted the money. More importantly, she'd needed something to do. A life on the run made her lonely. At least this gave her some kind of companionship.

She glanced up and soaked in the vastness of the sky. Reddened clouds were feathered across it. The sun had dropped below the horizon but a bit of blue still rimmed the tops of the trees. The place was beautiful, peaceful, helped to ease her mind from her troubles.

A mild breeze blew against her face. The coolness of the night helped relax her tired bones. She looked around and thought a walk might do her good. Maybe the fresh air would help her to sleep for once.

She strolled from the diner and passed the entrance to the motel. The sign for the lodge sparked as it lit for the night. Per Gus, it was about time the thing read "No Vacancy". When she got to the edge of the lot, she glanced down the road. There was no sidewalk but she didn't let that deter her. She needed be alone with her thoughts.

Marie stayed on the shoulder and let her mind wander as she absorbed the placid sense the night brought her. Farther down, she could see the lights of the Slow Dog Saloon, hear a few raucous sounds from the customers that cut through the peaceful air. In a few of the scattered houses beyond the tavern, more lights burned. Otherwise darkness blanketed the ranches.

She stuffed her hands in her pants pockets. She'd heard Sheriff Colder had a spread out there. She thought about what it would be like to have a home like that, and the man to go with it.

She thinned her lips. It would never happen. Not now.

A melancholy sense took her. She glanced back at the restaurant. The sheriff had come to the diner for supper. He'd cornered her about the room. Prepared this time, she'd told him she'd think about his offer. Marie bit her lip. The man seemed like the persistent type. How long could she put him off? How long would she be able to stay in the small town?

The music from the saloon grew louder as she neared. Marie heard a door bang. She crossed the street to avoid the bar and sputtered as two women in Indian skirts tried to get their mountain men back to their teepees.

She inhaled, breathed deep the high plains air. It was fresh, clean. Something she could get used to. Marie stopped and scanned the countryside. It had always been her dream to live in the country. She shook her head. She'd never have guessed it would take a theft and a murder to get her here.

Marie rubbed her arms. The chill of the night air made goose bumps rise on her skin. She'd been gone long enough, she decided, and began the walk back. Wyoming was so rural, more so than she'd expected. As she'd traveled the highway, she'd gone for miles without seeing another sign of life. In fact, she'd seen more cows than people.

She thanked God Fort Bridger lay close to the interstate. At some point, she might need to make a quick getaway and the interstate could take her anywhere.

She jogged across the road to get out of the way of an oncoming pickup. The coins she'd earned jingled in her pocket. When she got to the other side, she pulled out her tip money and counted twenty-six dollars and fifty-five cents. She relished the hard-earned cash. Before this, she'd been an investor, slick and savvy with an eye for a buck. She'd been on her way up, enjoyed herself at the spas, the formal dinners, the ambiance of the *nouveau riche*. Now she rolled her stiff shoulders and thought she liked this work better. No pretenses, no lies. Just the simple life.

Unfortunately, the simple life didn't provide much cash. The change that tinkled in her pocket wasn't nearly enough to support her. She frowned as her fingers slid over the cool, smooth surface of a quarter. Before she'd fled, she had cleared out her savings account, a little over five thousand, but she realized the small amount wouldn't be enough, not for someone on the run.

Still, the papers she kept worried her the most. They were from Bill's offshore accounts and documented every cent Bill Martin had stolen, and every one of them listed the receiver as "Back to America".

She rubbed her temples. When she'd confronted Bill, he'd dropped his easygoing façade and told her the money would buy weapons for the organization. When the news shocked instead of pleased her, he attacked. She looked up and wondered what in God's name had happened to the country and why the hell those particular "patriots" chose to wreak their vengeance on her.

A thin dark cloud drifted high above her. She let her mind flow with it. Around the scant fluff, bright stars twinkled. She paused to stare at them. There had to be millions. She gaped. She'd never seen so many. She even recognized some of the constellations, ones she'd never be able to pick out in the skies over the Potomac.

The shuffle of feet broke her musing. A group of men had left the bar and swaggered along the road. She shoved her hands in her pockets and picked up her pace to the motel.

"Hey, la-ady," one of them yelled. "Yuh don't want to be alone tonight, do yuh?"

She heard his footsteps come closer.

"Hey," he slurred.

She heard a thud and a groan. Marie spun around. The man had tripped and lay sprawled on the ground.

Marie took advantage of his plight and ducked into the motel parking lot. She hurried to her room before he had any other ideas and slipped her key in the door. The men's rowdy voices called for her. She rushed to enter and slammed the door behind her. Marie didn't turn on the light until she'd assured herself she'd pressed the cheap lock in the handle.

The sound of feet rustled outside her window. A series of quiet taps echoed on the windowpane. "Hey, lady. C'mon out." The man tried to keep his voice to a whisper. "I'z in that soda ash mine for days now. C'mon out and give me some sugar."

His voice floated through the doorframe. Frightened, Marie leaned against the cheap wood. "Go away or I'll call the police." Her voice trembled. She would never call the cops, but he didn't need to know that.

The knob rattled. Without warning, the lock popped open. The door inched ajar before she could shove the thing closed. She pushed against the old wood but the man outside pushed harder. Her arms gave way. The man fell into her room. Wearing a toothless grin from ear to ear, he dropped on top of her.

Her head hit the hard floor. She groaned.

"Aw, thanks for letting me in. Yuh sure are purty." The miner grabbed her head and pulled her to him. The bristles on his chin scraped her face.

She turned her cheek in time to avoid the kiss he slobbered on her neck. She wanted to retch. "Leave me alone," she gritted out and tried to shove him away. Disgust and fear drove her, reminded her too much of an earlier night.

"Aw, c'mon, sugar. Give me one." His breath stank with the sickening sweet smell of whiskey. He slid his hands under her hips and groped her backside.

"Let her go, Mike," a deep voice commanded. Marie felt the man yanked off her. "Come on. You can sober up in the tank."

Jake Colder whirled the miner around and snapped his cuffs on him. "Sit down, and stay there." He shoved Mike onto the bed.

Relieved, Marie opened her eyes. Pain shot through her temples. She moaned as she pulled herself onto her elbows.

"You okay?" Jake bent over. He put his hands behind her neck and raked his fingers through her hair.

"Ow." She flinched and pulled back from him. "What are you doing?"

He stopped and looked at her. "Checking for lumps. I think I found one." With a softer touch, he fingered the swelling. She focused on his even, steady breaths.

When she placed her hands over his, he gazed at her. The dark blue in his eyes mesmerized her. She seemed to sink into their depths.

His rich full mouth was within inches of hers. She licked her lips, curious if he tasted as good as he looked.

The corners of his mouth twitched.

The movement shook Marie out of her lust-ridden state. "I-I'm fine." Marie attempted to sit but Jake slid his arms around her and pulled her to him.

"Look at me a second."

She swallowed to calm her jitters as Jake peered into her pupils. He held her head with one hand and put the thumb of his other on her temple then turned her head a few inches. "They're not dilated." He eased his arms behind her. "You sure you're okay?"

Marie nodded.

He stood and pulled her up with him. His palms rested on the small of her back. "You'll need to come with me to fill out a complaint."

"I don't want to. I want to be left alone." Panic set in. She pushed against his chest but he didn't budge.

Jake's eyes narrowed. "Marie, I'm not going to ask you why you won't come to the station. Just like I'm not going to ask you about the bullet hole in your car window, but you can't stay here."

"What do you mean? You-you want me to leave town?"

"No." He bit down a smile and shook his head. "I simply know if you're running from someone, you'd be safer with me. If trouble comes, I'll be the first one to find it."

Marie didn't doubt that.

"Get your things." He nodded at the small bag she'd left on the dresser. "You can stay at the ranch until you find something else. I'll be outside calling for someone to come get this guy." He released her and turned to go outside.

"Sheriff." She looked at the man who lay on the bed. The miner had fallen fast asleep. His snoring could have woken the dead. "What are you going to do?"

Jake's lips thinned. "Lock him up for drunk and disorderly."

She frowned.

"Don't worry," he sneered, "I don't need you for that."

She bit her nails when he marched out, a habit she hadn't practiced since high school. How did he know she was on the run?

Marie mumbled to herself and glanced around at the small, cramped room. Her eyes rested on the busted door. *Stay with the sheriff?*

She gulped. At this point, it didn't look as if she had much choice.

Chapter Three

Jake opened the driver-side window and let the cold night air hit him as he drove down the road. "You ever been in a police car?"

"No." Marie shook her head. She still shook from the attack.

"Well, that's a good sign. Maybe we should celebrate." He turned down the radio so they could speak without the dispatcher's voice interrupting them.

"Look, about the hole in my window. I..." She waved a hand in the air. "Well..." She licked her lips and the sensual act about sent Jake's testosterone through the roof. "Would you believe a rock made it?" A sarcastic tone underlined her words. She lifted her brows and bent her head as if to peek under them.

"Lady," he rubbed his temple to prevent his small migraine from growing, "if you don't want to tell me, don't. I'll find out sooner or later."

The way she looked at him, he figured she hoped for later. He sighed, resigned to her sudden silence, and watched the dark road. After he passed the last lit house along the way, he glanced at her. "Don't tell me it was a jealous husband."

She bit her lip to suppress a small smile. "I've never been married."

The sight of her wet mouth doing that made his dick itch. He cleared his throat and nodded with relief. "A jealous boyfriend?"

"No," she snapped. His effort to get her to talk vanished with her frown. She turned her head and looked out the window.

"Okay." He pulled onto the dirt road that led to the house. "We won't talk about it."

She looked at him, her eyes wide and glassy. She chewed her bottom lip again, an affectation that made him think more of the bedroom than her problem.

He pressed his lips together to halt the direction his mind took. She needed shelter. He could help her. That was enough, for now.

"How did you know I'd have a problem tonight?"

He shrugged and focused on the moment. "Common sense. A good-looking woman with all these loons around is bound to have some trouble."

"Is that why you stayed at the diner?"

"Partly. I still wanted to ask you about the housekeeping. Besides..." He arched an eyebrow. "I wanted to know why you left me in my leather diaper. Never got to ask about that."

She rolled her eyes upward and put her hand over her mouth in a failed attempt to cover her impish grin. "You know, I had no idea what kind of contest that was. Katie

pulled me along with her. Said I should get to know you better then tricked me into judging. I didn't know you'd be in it."

He laughed outright. Tilting his head, he rubbed his chin. "Leave it to Katie. Somebody should have warned you about her." He pulled into the drive and gazed at the old wood-frame house. It'd been part of the ranch for nearly a century. The place wasn't grandiose but his home had plenty of space. The room in back would be perfect for a woman willing to live in a motel.

Jake watched Marie's expression as he parked. She was still scared but at least she cooperated. He opened his car door and the horses whinnied from the corral. Ranger, his prize quarter horse, danced in the scant moonlight. The view welcomed him home.

Jake looked at Marie. Her face brightened as she gazed at the horses. "You ride?" he asked.

"No." She shook her head. "I wish I did."

"Well, you stay around long enough, you might learn."

Her eyes twinkled. Jake decided he liked the way they looked. Satisfied he'd done right by bringing her home, he stepped out and got her bag from the trunk. She followed him up the creaky stairs of the side porch and Jake heard the television through one of the two closed doors that led onto the deck. He turned the knob to the one on the right, which led to the family room, and opened it. His son sat on the couch, glued to the screen. "Jesse, this is Marie."

"Dad." It took the boy a second to realize that Jake had come home. When he saw Marie, Jesse grew wide-eyed. "Hi."

"Hi." She smiled back at him.

Jake tousled the boy's sandy hair. "This is Jesse." He looked at his son. "Marie will be with us a while, so be nice to her. I'm working to get her to stay and help us around the house."

"Aw, Dad. I'm always nice." He turned to Marie. His clear, blue eyes seemed to grow wider. "You still gonna work at the diner?"

Marie shot Jake a sideways glance. "Depends on whether I keep spilling the coffee, I guess."

"Hah. I saw you at the contest. Wasn't Dad awesome?"

She blushed.

Jake frowned. "Jesse, come get this bag and put it in the guest bedroom." The boy ran to take the satchel as Jake pushed up the brim of his hat and scanned the room. "Where's Cal?"

"He said he had a date and you'd be home soon. Didn't matter anyways. Gramps and I've been watching TV."

Jake mouthed the word "no" then pushed his hand downward and out of Marie's sight.

"Oh," Jesse whispered and cut his eyes to Marie. "Uh, I'll go put this in the back for you." He smiled a toothy grin then hurried down the hall as fast as the large bag would let him.

Marie giggled behind her hand. "Don't be upset with him. He's proud of you."

"Yeah." Jake grimaced. "Proud his dad has great buns."

She laughed. "If you were worried about what he thought, why'd you do it?"

He pulled off his hat and hooked the Stetson on the coat rack. "'Cause I wanted the prize money. Jesse needs some new clothes. Every one of his jeans has a hole in the knees."

"Well, I'm sure he thinks more of you than what your backside can buy him."

"I hope so." He shook his head. What she'd said made him sound like a street-corner hooker. "You want to see the rest of the house?"

"Sure, I'd love to."

He led her into the hall. "Front door's to the right." He pointed to it then hitched a thumb to his left. "The stairs lead to Jesse's room and the attic. The kitchen's the next opening down the hall. Through it is the other door that opens to the porch." Jake waved at the doorway across from the family room. "That's the parlor, my private retreat from the world." He stepped across the hall and flipped on the light.

Behind him, Marie sighed. "Look at all these antiques. They're beautiful." She entered after him and walked to the breakfront he used as a bar. Her fingers caressed the dark, aged wood. "You probably have a small fortune in furniture." She walked to the glassed gun case and peered at the contents. "These are antiques, too, aren't they?" She pointed to Gramps' pistol.

He nodded. "They were my great-great grandfather's. He was an officer at the fort."

"You're kidding?" Her eyes sparkled with pleasure.

Warmth emanated from her. The sense stirred something in him, something that yearned for more permanence. He wasn't certain what it was, but he was pretty sure right now he didn't want to know. Marie had issues. One screwed-up woman in a lifetime was enough.

"Your family's been here that long?"

He shook off the sensation. "Yep." He took pride in his heritage. He couldn't deny the fact that she'd been impressed had pleased him. "I keep most of the family heirlooms right here."

"I love old things," she said with a wisp of sadness. She held her hands behind her back as if to stop herself from touching the rich wood.

"Well then..." He put his hand on the small of her back, liking the feel of her, and guided her out. "You'll salivate over your bedroom. By the way, you have the run of the house so feel free to use this room anytime." He shut off the light and escorted her down the hall. He let his hand slide into the curve of her waist.

"Where's Gramps?"

Her question caught him off guard. "Ah..." Jake whistled through his teeth. "Well..." He looked into her unwary face and shifted his feet. "You see, Gramps is our..." He lifted his free hand to explain.

Her eyes burned bright with innocent curiosity.

"He's not here right now." Jake's breath whooshed between his parted lips and he dropped the hand he'd raised. That, at least, was the truth.

Jesse came out of the bedroom. The boy giggled at Jake's attempt to explain Gramps. Jake shot his son a black look as Jesse slid past them and hurried down the hall. Frowning, Jake ushered Marie onward. When they reached the bathroom, he flipped on the light. "We only have one of these, at least for now. I hope to build another on the back next year."

A sneeze came from the mirror. Jake did a double take when Gramps popped out of it. He took his hand off Marie. With his back to her, he barred the doorway. "Go away," he whispered through clenched teeth.

Marie's light footfalls shuffled closer. Jake whirled and spread his arms between the doorjamb to block her entry.

"She cain't see me, boy," the ghost said behind him. "One of the tricks of the trade."

"Thank God." His body sagged with relief.

"What did you say?" She peeked under Jake's arms. Her eyes scanned what had once been a large closet.

"Nothing." He shook his head and eyed Gramps over his shoulder, wishing the spirit would disappear.

"Oh, a claw-foot tub." She ducked underneath him and sauntered to the large bath.

Jake turned to watch her, took in the curve of her ass as she bent over to inspect the tub. Her slender fingers ran along the cool porcelain. The vision of her naked in the bath, her wet fingertips on his skin, flashed in his mind. His cock twitched. *God.*

"This is huge. I..." She looked at him. "You mind if I...?" She waved toward the tub.

"Ask her if she wants a bath." Gramps grinned as if he recognized the effect Marie had on Jake.

Jake growled low in his throat and swore he could smell his new cologne on the old coyote. Keeping his back to the specter, Jake stepped inside the room and leaned against the countertop, hoping Gramps would go away.

"I'm tellin' yuh, boy," Gramps whispered in his ear, "this one yuh gotta keep. Ask her if she wants a bath."

Jake twisted around and glared at the ghost. "Split," he mouthed. He didn't need any advice from a dead man on how to romance a woman.

The old man doffed his hat and took his time as he faded. "Hang on to her, boy. Yuh don't want to lose the gal." Then with a puff, he disappeared.

Jake scowled and looked at Marie.

She rubbed her arms and came to him. The nipples of her breasts peaked against the fabric of her blouse. "Is something wrong?" Her softened, airy tone could seduce a man, her voice purred like a woman who'd just been satisfied – in his bed.

He was sure she didn't mean it that way but between the sight of her taut nipples and the husky undertone in her voice, his cock hardened. He hoped she didn't notice. "No," he cleared his throat, wanting to crush the urge to take her there on the counter – as well as deny the black mood Gramps had put him in. "You cold?"

"A little." Her delicate brows knitted. He'd confused her with his terse reply.

"Uh..." He straightened, needing to correct the misunderstanding. "You want to take a bath?"

"I'd like to, yes." She lifted a lock of her hair and sniffed. "Do I smell bad?"

"No." He eased back on the counter. "I like the way you smell."

"Funny," she wrinkled her nose, "I thought I reeked of stale grease."

Jake picked up the lock and took a whiff. "Smells like fried bacon. I like fried bacon." He rubbed the soft strands between his fingers and let his fantasy of fucking her in the bath come into his mind again.

She frowned and pulled her hair away. "Thanks a lot."

He lifted a corner of his mouth and got a grip on himself. "I should warn you, I don't have any fancy soap."

"Plain soap will work."

"Well, that we have. Come on. I'll show you your room." He gave the bathroom a black look before he turned the light off and prayed Gramps wouldn't reappear.

What Jake deemed the guest room was larger than his. It had been his parents' and he'd decided long ago it was too big for him. Unless, of course, he had someone to share the large four-poster bed with. He cut a side glance at Marie, yearned to see for himself how soft her body was, how she would feel underneath him as they lay on the downy mattress.

He knocked the idea out of his head. Like she'd said, they barely knew each other. He let her walk to the doorway then stood to the side and watched. She paused when she saw the bed, her eyes wide with pleasure. He used her hesitation to his advantage and put his hand at the small of her back again to guide her in.

She smiled at him then stepped inside. Marie glanced around then strolled over to the high-platform bed and stroked the handmade quilt. "You want me to sleep here?" She turned to him all soft and doe-eyed.

"Yeah." His voice caught in his throat, a by-product of the strange effect she had on him.

"This is beautiful." She ran her hand along the oiled cherry wood.

He nodded. "It's the best room in the house."

She pushed over the bag Jesse had set on the covers and stepped on the short stool to climb onto the bed. "Has the bed been handed down, too?"

He nodded. "It was my mother's and her mother's before her."

She bent over and touched the lace that covered the end tables. "This too?"

"That too."

"This is...wonderful." She gingerly bounced on the mattress.

He leaned against the doorjamb, feeling warm inside.

She bounced again but hit sideways on her hip and fell back on the bed with a moan.

In two strides, he reached her. "You okay?" He worried that the bump on her head had been more serious than he'd thought. He put a leg on either side of her sprawled body to balance himself then leaned over and held her face between his palms to look for any residual trauma.

Her hands slid against the backs of his. She held them there a moment. Her lashes lowered. Her mouth parted. The green in her eyes deepened, beckoned him and yet questioned him at the same time.

He held his breath. Her soft pants caused her breasts to rise and fall. The movement highlighted her cleavage and the sweet promise that lay beneath the cloth. Her breathy sighs caressed his chin. She raked her bottom lip with her teeth then outlined the lip with the pink tip of her tongue. Her wet mouth called for his touch. His face lay within inches of hers. He came closer.

She blinked and released a jagged breath. Her eyes reflected her confusion. He paused, not knowing what she wanted. Her tongue wet her lips again as she hooked her fingers into his palms and eased his hands away.

They stared at each other a moment. His body rested against hers, her hips between his legs. Could she feel how hard he was for her? What she'd done to him?

"I'm fine," she whispered in that taunting way again. "I'm sorry." She shook her head and looked away. Her eyes glittered with moisture. "I'm exhausted." She gazed through the side of her lowered lids. "Jake—" She pressed her lips together. Terror flashed in her eyes again then was gone. "I haven't felt this safe—I mean, welcomed in a long time."

He brushed the hair away that had fallen in her eyes. A strong sense to protect her drew him in, made him risk moving his mouth a hairsbreadth from hers. He remembered himself before he indulged and tasted her lips. "You'll be safe here," he rasped, then stood to break their connection, "provided you haven't done anything wrong."

Fear blazed in her again a moment before she schooled her features.

He rose and left, unheeding the powerful urge to stay and explore what her body offered. As he exited, he turned in the doorway. "I'll be across the hall if you need me." Jake stepped out and closed the door. He let his hand rest on the knob while he sucked

in a couple of breaths to steady himself, half hoping she *would* need him, 'cause he sure as hell needed her. He pressed his hand to his cock and rolled his eyes to force some common sense into his muddled brain. She was a woman on the run. That look of sheer terror she had bothered him. What had happened? Was she guilty of some crime?

More important, *had* he done the right thing by letting the woman live in his house? He thought so but he had Jesse to consider.

"I told you she was a looker." Jake about hollered when Gramps materialized and startled him.

"Gramps," Jake growled, "you scared the hell out of me." He pointed a finger at the ghost to make himself clear. "You leave her alone. Stay away from her, especially when she takes a bath. From the way she looks, she's had enough frights."

"Boy, I'm not gonna bother her. I'm leaving her for you."

"Lord almighty, old man, don't you think one messed-up woman in my life was enough?"

"Son, don't give up too easy. All I can tell you is this," he said as he faded, "ifn' I was after her, I wouldn't wait too long. She's a rare prize."

"Yeah." Jake rubbed his face. "You could tell me what she's done. I'd feel better."

Gramps popped back from thin air in a flash. "If I tell yuh everything, me boy, it'd take all the fun out of the pursuit. Trust me, Jake. She's the one for you." He left in a wink.

Jake heard the door open behind him. He turned as Marie poked her head out. "Who are you talking to?"

Jake rested his hands on his hips. "Nobody." He rubbed his forehead. "I, uh, talk to myself. Runs in the family."

She gave him another strange look and shrugged. "Okay."

"Thought I'd warn you." Jake jerked his chin in a nod then walked down the hallway and out the front door.

Given his state of mind, the clear, cold night air would do him good.

* * * * *

Naked and clean, Marie sank into the down comforter hidden under the intricately stitched quilt. She'd luxuriated in the hot bath, let her body slide into the water while she imagined that Jake had actually kissed her. She'd thought he would when they were on the bed.

But she'd been wrong. He'd only checked to make sure she wasn't hurt.

Disappointment flooded her, yet she couldn't help the empty ache in her gut, the yen to have him touch her like a lover — and mean it.

The muscles around her sex clenched. She groaned and spread her legs as she savored the feel of the clean sheets. As tense as she'd been of late, she could use the release his sexy body could bring.

She closed her eyes and fantasized about the large man, his hard body as it lay next to her. She imagined his deep voice as he whispered words of desire in her ear, his calloused hands as they outlined her hip and moved higher to slip beneath her breast and cup her flesh. Marie skimmed her hand underneath the covers and let her fingers glide over her damp skin. She caressed a nipple, moaned with a soft breath, almost feeling Jake's firm but tender touch on her bare flesh. Her clit tingled. She relished how protective he'd been, how kind he'd treated her, how each touch of his body made her want for more.

She closed her eyes and fingered herself. Pinched the nipple with just enough pressure and tugged on it until it peaked. She let go of her grip a moment and licked her fingers then touched the nub of her breast again and pulled. She pretended Jake's mouth was on her, that his lips sucked her and laved the tender nib with his tongue.

She rolled to her side, turned her face into the pillow so no one would hear her cries of pleasure. She needed to come. Needed his hard penis to penetrate her, but this fantasy would have to do. She thought of him, when he'd been on top of her, on this bed. His body had tensed then, his breaths had grown ragged. His penis had hardened into a state of need. Jake the sheriff may not want her, but damn, Jake the man sure did.

And that's what she thought of, the man. At least tonight. She didn't want to mull over anything else. Not her troubles. Not what Jake would do if he found her out. She wanted to savor the sensation of his hard body as he lay on her, of the penis that pulsed in his pants, wanting to come out and play.

She giggled at that imagery, let her hand explore lower. Her mind filled in the blanks—Jake as he stripped and eased his body next to hers, his deep voice as he whispered words of sex, of his wanting, of his taking her.

She rolled on her stomach, fondled her clit and stroked the lust-heightened skin. Her labia grew wet. She flattened her hand and outlined her nether lips with her fingers then ground her hips across her palm, pushing the nub of her sex into it.

But it wasn't enough.

She lifted herself on her other arm, rested on her elbow in an attempt to angle her hips. The motion put more pressure on her lowered hand as she ground her hips into her palm and let the tip of the middle finger slide in and out of her.

She pressed her face into the pillow. The effort wasn't even close.

Jake's voice sounded outside her door. Her breath hitched in surprise until she realized he spoke to Jesse to tell the boy to go to bed.

His footsteps sounded in the hall. She let her mind wander, let herself dream he would come to this room, to her. "Mmmm," she sighed in her lowest tone, the demand for sexual completion heightened once again.

The steps stopped at her door, as if Jake stood there and listened. God, she hoped he didn't hear her.

After a moment, the door of his bedroom opened. His steps sounded on the oak wood floor as he walked into his room. The hinges creaked as he closed the door behind him.

Marie exhaled in relief but the thought of him so close gave her what she needed. In her mind's eye, he was in her room. And he wanted her. He pulled her hand away and took over for himself. She ground her hips harder, pretended it was his long hard flesh fucking her instead of the finger she used. She felt the seductive rise, the sense of contentment that only sex could bring.

She peaked, buried her head in the pillow and parted her lips. She groaned as the sensation washed over her.

Panting, she rolled onto her back. It took a moment but her pulse finally slowed. She stared at the ceiling. Jake Colder was the sheriff, but damn, her body craved him.

"The Freudian thing," she whispered. Reality needed to smack her in the face, especially with the thoughts she was having. She lived in the man's house, for God's sake. He had a son. Have a fling with the sheriff? Not in this lifetime, not when her problems ran so deep.

Still, being here... She glanced around the room as her eyes watered. For the first time since she'd left D.C., she felt safe—and more. Hearing Jake, listening to his footsteps, the sound of Jesse's TV program that echoed in the house. The quiet noises were the sounds of a home, something she hadn't had in quite some time. She took pleasure in them, not knowing when she'd ever be able to do so again.

She blinked, snuggled into the soft pillow and pretended she was part of Jake's life. Marie huffed at the bizarre thought. This wasn't her home nor would it ever be. She didn't belong here and she had too much wrong to even contemplate such an idea. She stayed petrified that she would be discovered by one of the crooked apes from the Back to America Movement. Then she'd be on the run again, as far and as fast as she could go.

But that didn't mean she couldn't fantasize about it. As she stared at the door, her tears welled. Jake took her in knowing she'd run away. She wasn't sure what to make of that or what to make of him. If he ever discovered her real dilemma, would he help her or turn her in? If she told him, would he believe the truth? She swallowed. She couldn't risk the chance. From what she could tell, the man bound himself to his duty.

You'll be safe here, he'd told her. Provided you haven't done anything wrong.

"Oh, but I have." She rolled over, hid her face in the pillow and let the drops fall. "I have."

* * * * *

Gramps popped in and watched the beautiful woman turn out the lamplight. Her sobs pissed him off. "Let 'em come," he threatened and wanted to spit. He looked around for a spittoon. "Damn, Jake." He gnawed the tobacco back up in his cheek and heard her snuffle in her sleep. "It's okay, li'l lady. Old Jake and I, we'll fix 'em. You wait and see."

He knew she didn't hear him but the sobs lessened, as if she'd been reassured. For the time being, he hoped she'd forget the worries that plagued her. Right now, he could worry enough for the both of them – and for Jake, though the boy didn't know it yet.

Marie's safety concerned the grandfather in him. She was the one for Jake. The woman, like his own Josephine, who could make Jake happy. But murderous folks looked for her. People filled with deadly greed. As an ethereal creature, he could only interfere so much. Rules, as they say, were rules. And as a ghost, when it came to heavenly precepts, keeping them grew more important. He couldn't let Jake know about the danger. But would his grandson be ready for them when the time came?

Would Marie?

He floated next to the bed. Marie had fallen asleep, thank heaven.

He looked at her in the peaceful repose, decided he could still stretch those rules a mite more. He'd watch over her in his own way – until Jake realized the depth of her problems.

Satisfied with his decision, Master Sergeant Thaddeus P. Colder winked, his mission clear. Then he disappeared, ready for duty.

Chapter Four

For Jake, the day hit early. He had the morning off, unless there was some emergency. He'd decided the night before they'd move a small head of cows down to their normal wintering spot and he'd pushed Jesse up before the crack of dawn to help him and Cal with the horses and a few other chores that needed to be done before he and Cal left.

Jake was glad he did. He hadn't slept well. Kept tossing and turning, thinking about Marie and what her problems were.

If she slept naked.

He gritted his teeth. The chore would occupy him and give Marie some time to adjust to his home without him or anyone else around to pressure her. Getting up to work in the cool autumn morning made so much sense.

The sun had been up about an hour when he came back. Jake sniffed the air as he opened the door to the kitchen. "Bacon." He stomped the dust off his boots and walked toward the stove. Marie's back was turned as she stood at the counter. She wore a pair of fitted pants. The cut emphasized her taut ass and lean legs. His dick twitched again. He stifled the urge to gawp at her and stepped up to the frying pan. "Smells good."

She turned her head and smiled. "Well, you said you liked bacon. I'm not much of a cook but I can make a mean omelet. I saw Jesse and another man out there. You guys hungry?"

"You bet."

She walked over to the sink and cracked a few eggs in a bowl. He watched her. He admired the swell of her hips, thought his hands would fit well on the curvature of her backside. He raked his gaze over her while she couldn't see him and allowed himself the view of her legs, her butt, the waist that curved nicely inward, the long dark hair that he'd love to run his fingers through to see how silky it felt.

He wanted her, but he couldn't have her yet. He wanted to know whatever was wrong with her first. But the wait plagued him.

She added some salt to the dish. A slight smile creased the faint lines around her lips. He liked that. Liked her in his kitchen. The scene was homey, comfortable. He hoped she'd consider staying on. Wanted her to believe that he could protect her, from whoever it was she ran from. The way she'd reacted last night, Jake suspected it was an ex-lover but he wasn't sure. She'd tensed when he'd mentioned a boyfriend but had quickly said she hadn't had one. Perhaps it was some guy who was pissed because she told him no? Jake didn't know but he wanted to find out. But he needed her to trust him

first, and when she did, then maybe she'd let him get closer and he could get this damn lust out of his system.

The vision of their nude bodies intertwined made his throat run dry. Blood rushed to his groin. He closed his eyes and savored the notion of her in his arms a moment then released it. He didn't want to get hard and needy again.

Still, he wanted her. Yeah, he'd had a few affairs with some of the women in the valley but, in reality, he'd been alone a long time. He wanted a good woman to warm his bed. And he wanted Jesse to have a real mother. Gramps said Marie was the one, said not to lose her. Not that Jake put stock in the ravings of the old coot but who knew? The ghost had never played matchmaker before. Could this woman become part of his life?

Jake frowned and pondered the idea. She was a woman on the run. Why would she stay? What did Gramps know about her that he didn't? Jake hated being kept in the dark. Without any details, he couldn't tell where the trouble would come.

But there was nothing to be done about it right now.

Jake put his hands in his pockets and stepped close behind her. The scent of her came to him. Clean, fresh. The smells of a woman. He wanted to brush the hair off her neck and taste her.

But he couldn't, he reminded himself. Not yet. "You sleep well last night?" He lowered his voice, let his breath skim the strands of her hair. He thought it a fair question since he hadn't slept at all.

She tilted her head to look at him. Her mouth was close. He could kiss her from where he stood. Her pupils dilated. The green around them deepened. "Yes, fine. Thank you." She used that bedroom voice again.

"I have the morning off. The boys and I are set to move a few cows from the upper pasture. It isn't far but it'll take a few hours. Unless I get called in, we won't be back 'til after lunch. Maybe later."

Her lush lips parted. He liked the shape of them. Thought they would fit well with his. God, how he wanted to taste her.

"Cows?" She licked her lips.

Jake lifted a corner of his mouth. He affected her too. He could tell. And he was damn glad of it. He reached around her, got as close as he could without coming on too strong, and broke a piece off a strip of bacon. "This is a ranch. We still have a herd, even though it's a small one."

"Oh." Marie's chest rose with the intake of her breath. Her lashes lowered. She sucked on her bottom lip then turned her head and went back to her work. "You make much at that?"

"No," he grunted. "Which is why I needed the two hundred bucks. The place usually loses money. This year we got lucky. We might break even." He popped the

meat in his mouth. Perhaps Gramps was right and her being here was providence. And if not, at least the association could be fun.

"If you don't make money then why do it?"

He shrugged and finished chewing. "It's in the blood. I want to keep the ranch a working one. We have our good years."

"Well, I have a double shift at the diner." Marie looked at him over her shoulder. "You still want me to be your housekeeper?"

"Hell yeah." Her question pleased him. "Like I said, I can't really pay you but I can give you some spending money every now and then. Mostly the deal will be free room and board."

"And an occasional night off?"

He nodded. "If you want it. But I need you to watch Jesse when I'm not here, particularly if I get an emergency. He's nine. I don't like leaving him in the house by himself. Especially at night. You saw how far away we are from town. If something were to happen, I'd never forgive myself."

When she smiled her eyes shone. "Agreed."

He pushed up the brim of his Stetson. "You know much about computers?"

She folded her arms and leaned against the counter. "Maybe."

He slid his hands in his pockets and gave her his sexiest, hometown grin. "It'd be nice if you could help with his school work too. He gets on that damn Internet and I can't get him off."

"Internet? You have Internet access here?"

"Honey, we may be backwoods but we still have all the modern conveniences."

Her lips twitched. She covered them with her hand. "I'll think about it." She pressed her palm against his chest to move him out of the way then stepped to the stove and poured the eggs into the hot pan. "Meanwhile, I still need cash so I'll be working at the diner. I won't always be here when Jesse gets home."

"That's okay, ma'am."

She still wore her smile. She eyed him a minute. "In that case, maybe you ought to get the 'boys' in for breakfast."

He nodded and plastered a stupid grin to his face but he didn't care. She would stay. That was the important part. Turning, he strolled out the door. For a short time, at least, one problem was solved.

Marie stirred the eggs in the hot pan and watched Jake leave. He looked different this morning in a pair of faded denims. He was more relaxed and, as she watched his prize-winning buns saunter, probably more deadly to her resolve to keep her distance. She shook her head. "Marie, if you can keep your wits about you right now, you're a strong woman," she grumbled.

Even with the temptation his body brought, after last night, she decided it'd be in her best interest for him to be close by. Internet access was an additional benefit. It would give her some freedom. Besides, Jake said he'd keep her safe and for some reason, she believed him. He had known about her almost as soon as she got there. If a stranger came into town, Jake would know that too. If she stayed at the ranch then Marie would be the next one to find out whom any new person was.

A crusty old cowhand walked into the kitchen and let the screen door slam behind him. "Ma'am." He nodded once to Marie as Jesse barreled in behind him and almost knocked him down. The cowboy turned to Jesse and chastised him with a whisper. "What's the matter with you, boy? I'm trying to make a good impression."

Jake entered behind them. "Marie, this is Cal Henderson, our foreman. He's been around since I wore diapers, the cloth ones, that is."

That warm feeling bubbled in her again. "Well, sit down. You guys can tell me what you think of my cooking. After that," she bent over and put Jake's plate in front of him, "you may change your mind about me staying."

"You're stayin'? Cool." Jesse sat and rubbed his grimy hands together.

Marie winced. "Jesse, I think you better go wash those things."

The boy's face screwed up in horror. "Wash what?"

She grimaced. "Your hands."

"Oh." He shot his father a pleading look.

Jake placed the napkin she'd set on the table in his lap. "Don't look at me, son. I washed mine at the spigot in the barn."

"Me too," Cal chimed in. He bobbed his grisly chin between his shoulders.

"Women." Jesse bowed his head and shot her a look of disgust then trudged down the hall.

Marie's mouth dropped open. She looked at the men seated around the table.

Jake almost choked on his food. When he recovered, he wore a mock expression of concern. "I'll talk to him."

"Right." She narrowed her eyes and forced a frown to her face. Her response was more from Jake's grin than Jesse's comment. Jake's smile dazzled her. Did funny things in the pit of her stomach. Carnal things. He made her stupid, thinking that she could perhaps have more here than a job, that everything would be okay.

But it wouldn't. She needed to keep that in mind. She sighed and walked away. She was a rational businesswoman. She held her own around the best of them. But her restraint around Jake waned fast. The man's seductive body emanated sex. Called to her. Tempted the wanton needs in her. The invisible seduction pulled on her every time she came around Jake. It didn't surprise her why the women of the valley salivated for the sheriff.

But she needed to keep her head, not lose it over some primitive need to fuck.

As she put the rest of the plates on the table and listened to the coffeemaker spit out its last drops, Marie chastised herself for her wayward thoughts. In the past, she'd always made the right choices. Her clients paid for her good judgment—until Bill Martin stepped into her life. Bill and she had become partners. They'd branched off into their own company. Paying the bills had been Bill's job. He'd insisted. It was after their debts piled up that she discovered he'd stolen the money she'd invested. God, why had she been so stupid? She knew better. When she confronted Bill, he told her about BAM and the plan to use the cash for the organization's subversive purposes. When she wouldn't cooperate, he tried to rape her. In his delusional state, he thought she wanted him and believed he could convert her to the cause.

She shuddered, remembering his icy hands as they groped her breasts. When she resisted, the same hands locked around her neck—cold, hard and deadly.

She touched her fingers to her throat as she picked up the pot of coffee and walked to the table, deep in thought.

"I'll take that if you don't mind." Jake rose and put his hand over hers on the handle.

"Huh?" She looked at him then recalled what had happened at the diner yesterday. She blushed. "Suit yourself." She let him have the coffee.

Cal chuckled. She frowned at both of them. "I've got to go."

"Aren't you going to eat?"

She shook her head. "No. I'll eat at the diner. I already called Katie. She'll be here to get me in a few minutes. And don't worry about me getting back. I'll drive my own car home but do me a favor and bring your plates over. I've already picked up enough dishes at the diner to last a lifetime."

"Sure." Jake nodded as she grabbed her purse to leave.

"Marie." He followed her. "Let me walk you out." He put his arm loosely around her waist. Her skin heated, her nerves endings fired as the hunger for him surged through her.

"Thanks for breakfast."

He'd lowered his voice as he opened the front door. His deep drawl strummed the imperceptible strings that held her to him. A bolt of lust shot straight through his touch to her clit and made her sex tingle.

"You know I don't expect you to cook."

"I kind of enjoyed it," she whispered. She couldn't help herself. She wanted to touch him back. She angled into him in the doorway and put her hands on his chest. She felt his heartbeat hasten under her touch. He pulled her flush against him.

The corner of his mouth rose. She thought he would kiss her. *No. I can't.* She pushed away before he did. She had to keep in the forefront of her mind that this was temporary. She couldn't get involved. If BAM found them, if Jake found out, she'd need to flee. She might not be here tomorrow.

Disappointment flickered in Jake's face then went away.

"I don't get a chance to cook much. Jake—" She repressed a sudden urge to explain her recent past to him. "I hope this works out," she said instead and meant it.

The color in his eyes deepened. Marie seemed glued to the depth of emotion she saw in those pools of blue. He shoved his thumbs in his front pockets and leaned his shoulder against the doorjamb, his voice sultry. "It will, Marie, if you let it. I'm glad you've decided to stay." His gaze made love to her mouth.

Her heart stopped a moment. She wanted to indulge in the lust-ridden feeling his action gave her.

"How'd you like to go riding tonight?"

"Tonight?" she squeaked, unable to handle the intense desire that conflicted with her need to survive. "But I don't know how."

"I can teach you." The corner of his lips edged up again.

"I bet you can," she muttered, thinking of a different type of ride, one that she could only do with his naked, sculpted body.

"Good." His eyes gleamed with humor.

"But...I'm working late."

His grin spread. "I'll be back by then. We can do it in the moonlight. You'll be fine."

She heard the crunch of gravel. She glanced toward the sound as Katie's truck pulled into the drive. Marie looked back at Jake.

A seductive air hung around him. He nodded at Katie's pickup. "You'd better go. I'll see you tonight."

Her gut told her this lesson would be a mistake but the rest of her wanted to be near him. She swallowed. "Tonight, then." As she walked down the steps, she hoped to hell the crisp morning air would cool down her raging hormones.

* * * * *

Bill Martin wasn't a man to be played with and he'd be damned if that slip of a woman would screw with him. "Where the hell is she?" He paced the living room of Marie's posh apartment and rubbed the lump on his head. The damn bump had finally started to mend but with the wait, the injury drove him crazy. He growled and marched into Marie's bedroom then plopped on the fancy bedcovers.

He'd moved in after she took off. He hoped to find some clue that he could use to trace her before his associates got nervous. Yeah, people were curious about where she was but right now only his closest allies in BAM knew she'd run. As far as everyone else was concerned, he told them she was away on business. And when he'd fended them off, he also let them know her investment partner was now her full-time lover. That way no one would be wiser as to why he spent his time in her apartment.

He rose and walked to the large window that faced the bed and opened the lacy curtain. He gazed at the lazy Potomac, the noonday sun that reflected on its waters. Marie's investments made him money, lots of it. Plenty of funds came in to cover this place and keep the purchases coming. And he'd balanced out the debt they'd incurred, kept it on the edge of complaint by the debt holders. The Internet made the task easy.

He looked over his shoulder at the computer in the living room. She'd kept everything on the machine. Her place was where they worked. He wanted it that way. Made everything cozier and her more comfortable. At first, he kept their interactions all business. He didn't want her to get suspicious. Then he made moves to get closer and more intimate. Yet she managed to buffer him and keep her distance. She'd ignored his subtle advances—until she discovered what he was up to.

He rubbed the welt on his head again. How many times had he wanted to haul her by the hair into this prissy bedroom of hers and pull her down on the silken bed, screwing her into the night—the way she'd like it, smooth, nice...easy?

He snorted. Too late for that now. She'd pay for her sins.

And pay again.

He'd take her when he found her, the way *he* wanted and as much as he wanted. And when he got done with her, she'd wish she'd submitted to him the first time.

He went back to the living room and hit the key on the mouse. A sensual picture of Marie popped into the foreground. He'd digitized the picture and modified the photo. Of course, he hadn't known what she looked like naked. He hadn't gotten that far. So he'd kept at least most of her breasts and her cunt covered.

He sat back and admired the handiwork he'd emailed to a few special friends. *Yeah*. The full breasts and the curve of the hip looked pretty good for an amateur.

He reread the words he'd tacked to the poster. *Missing – Marie Taylor Martin, wife*.

He figured the five-thousand-dollar reward would be at least enough to build interest.

He sneered. His dick jumped as he looked at the pic. It made him think of how he'd punish her when he found her. How much he would enjoy doing it.

And he would find her. He swore it.

He snarled and unzipped his pants to take care of the ache that built over the thoughts of Marie's naked body as she squirmed under him. Domination and control. He would have her. He would have it all.

But he needed to find her first—before the arms dealers he worked with found out and killed him.

Fuck. He needed the series of numbers she'd run off with to close the deal. The deadline for the bargain loomed over him. Yet when he thought of the risks he took, it heightened his determination. He yanked his cock out, slid his fingers down the sensitive underside to tease himself then circled his hand around his large dick and pumped. He frowned as his breaths deepened, wary of the unknown regarding the

deals yet liking the edge of fear that intensified his need to fuck. Yeah, the risk of the venture made him horny – and having Marie pay for it? That made it even better. The delay only sweetened his reward, increased the release he'd have when he found her.

He jerked himself harder. His climax rose at the thought of Marie naked, bound and gagged, under him. He teetered on the edge of coming. Yes, in a few weeks, he'd have the codes – he'd have her. He was sure.

He uttered a guttural bellow. Semen spewed over his hand. The warm sticky liquid coated his fingers and he thought, when he got a hold of Marie, he'd make her give him a hand job first – and beat her little ass if she didn't do it right. Then he would force her lips to his dick to lick him clean.

Yeah. His cock itched again when he thought about it.

He pursed his lips and looked at the screen. He nodded, pleased with himself. He'd displayed Marie's scantily clad body with some taste. As good as she looked, someone would find her. Soon. Right now, his close associates were satisfied. As long as they stayed that way, so was he. Yet outside of his fellow henchmen, the people of Back to America didn't know the girl had turned on him, and they could be trouble.

Still, if he found her, they would never have to know.

He snickered. Yeah, he loved the risks – because the returns were so much greater.

* * * * *

The afternoon rush had finally ended. Marie stretched to relieve the ache in her back. She put her hamburger on the worn melamine table and slid into the booth.

Katie walked up and handed her a cup of coffee then sat across from her. "Honey, I tell you, when the crowd from the Rendezvous leaves, it won't be so bad. But you'll still have some of the locals hassling you, unless, of course, you take up with Jake. Nobody will mess with him."

Marie frowned and sipped the hot coffee. "Katie, I thought you were interested in him?"

"Well, honey, why wouldn't I be? He's the best-looking thing in the valley."

"What about your boyfriend?"

Marie's new friend huffed. "He's moved to another mine across the state." Katie eyed Marie strangely as she sipped on her coffee. "Look, Jake and I are only friends. I'm not madly in love with him or anything. I just hate to see him and Jesse alone. If you take up with him, they won't be. You'd be a family." She lifted her cup again. "Trust me, if you want Jake, I ain't gonna stand in your way. Besides," she took another drink, "I think you two look cute together."

Marie flinched, pained at the thought of a life she couldn't even dream about, especially with a sexy hunk who represented the law. "Whatever makes you say that?"

The older woman's eyes shimmered. "Look," she said matter-of-factly, "I've seen the way he looks at you, and when you're not flustered with him, I've seen you desiring

him back." She wagged her finger at Marie. "Don't tell me there's nothin' going on behind those green eyes of yours." She leaned back against the seat. "You're a nice girl. I think he'd be good for you."

Marie couldn't help herself. She laughed. "I didn't know you were a matchmaker."

"I ain't." She set her hands on the table. "But there's something that tells me you two were made for each other."

Marie puffed out a breath. "Okay, Katie. You got me. A guy with his looks? Yes, he's probably the hottest thing I've seen in some time, and God knows, a man like that can do something to a woman, but I don't know if I want someone who's interested in every strange woman who walks through his door."

"Honey, let me tell you something." Katie sat up and put her elbows on the table. "I've known Jake Colder a long time. He's a good man and I bet, if the right woman grabbed a hold of him, he'd stick to her like glue. He's not one to mess around when he's made a bargain. To him, a deal's a deal, and those words, love, honor and cherish, the whole bit, would be part of the package. And I'll tell you another thing," she put her cup down, "since his wife left, he may have gone out with other women—God knows, he *is* a man—but he tain't *ever* let another woman walk through his door. Not like you have. Sweetheart," she leaned toward Marie, "you're the first."

For some reason, Marie blushed. She bent over to whisper to Katie. "I'm just his housekeeper. I think he feels sorry for me." She leaned back but kept her voice low. "Either that or he doesn't want any late night calls about some woman who's been molested. This way he can get his sleep." The cowbell on the door clinked.

"Pissaw." Katie waved her off and rose to deal with the new customer.

It gave Marie time to think—or rather to fantasize. She tried to see what Katie saw and imagined herself living at the ranch, calling the boys in for supper. She shook her head at the absurdity. Even if she'd wanted that life, there was no way she could get into a relationship with the man. Under the circumstances, she couldn't burden him with her issues and she wouldn't want to hurt Jesse if things between her and Jake didn't work out. Face it. Her ties to Jake Colder and Wyoming were too tenuous. She was Jake's housekeeper. Nothing more. That heated connection Katie had noticed between Jake and her had to end. Marie would see to that.

Marie took a sip of her coffee and looked at the stranger at the counter. He was a mature man, probably in his late thirties with a medium build and a tough edge about him. Katie flirted with him, tilted her chin and gave him an "I'm available" smile. Marie shook her head. When Katie turned to work the register, the man leaned on his elbow. He nodded once at Marie as his eyes narrowed.

An eerie jolt unnerved her. She put her hand on her forehead and pretended to rub it while she covered her face.

"Thank you, ma'am."

She listened to his baritone voice and peeked through her fingers. He picked up a toothpick and glanced at Marie again. Smirking, he stuck the stick in his mouth and chewed.

Katie put the change in his hand and leaned over. She pressed her upper arms against her chest and exposed the tops of her large breasts. The cowboy got an eyeful and grinned, more honestly this time. He nodded again, to Katie, then turned and left. The bell chimed as he closed the door.

Katie came back for her coffee.

"Who was that?"

Katie shrugged. "Got me. He came yesterday for the Rendezvous. Might stay on a while to help as a hand. This time of year the ranchers herd the cows down from the high open pasture. They need the help."

Marie glanced at the front door. An uncomfortable wariness grew in her gut, and it didn't want to go away.

Chapter Five

"You ready?" Jake ducked under the horse's head as he talked to her.

Marie took a quick gander at her new attire then looked at him. "As ready as I'll ever be."

His eyes sparkled from underneath his cowboy hat. His come-on grin deepened. After a moment, he broke their gaze and turned toward the gelding. He jerked a strap of leather to tighten the saddle. "I didn't know if you had a pair of jeans. I'm glad I guessed the right size."

Marie frowned and ran her hands down the coarse blue denim. He'd already been in the barn saddling the horses when she drove up. She'd scurried to her room to find the new pants spread on the bed. She tugged the edge of her pink vee-top blouse down over the waistband. "I'll pay you back."

"Nope." He swung around and eyed the fitted pants from her tennis shoes to her waist. His languid gaze made her skin heat and her labia clench. God, she wanted him. "Consider it a sign-on bonus. You'll need 'em round here."

She closed her eyes a moment to overcome the carnal urges his look caused. What was he thinking? Did he like what he saw?

A part of her hoped so. She'd been stiff-necked and businesslike for too long. For a man to look at her like he wanted her as a woman, well, it did things to her.

Things she should probably forget. She screwed up her mouth with the reminder.

"Come here." He waved her closer. She paused, unsure exactly what he intended. When he waved at her again, she drifted toward him. Both he and the horse looked bigger close up. Marie liked horses. They were beautiful, but she'd never ridden. The massive bulk of the horse made her nervous.

"He won't bite." Jake held the reins and waited for her to take them.

Marie hesitated as she battled the conflicts within her. The man emanated sex. She wanted him. But the logical part of her told her no, told her to stay the course, keep control.

But damn, doing that made her tired. Right now, she could use a man's strong arms around her, one who held her, who would protect her and ease her sorrows. But in reality, it couldn't be him. If Jake found out about her, it would challenge his position. He'd have to arrest her. Then there was Jesse. If the boy got hurt she'd never forgive herself. *No*, she pressed her lips together to reinforce her determination. Jake had a life here.

She didn't.

She glanced at him. He'd watched her as she stood there. His eyes darkened as she peered in them. He looked concerned. After a moment, he took a deep breath and slipped behind her, reins and all, then rested his hands on the upper part of her arms, sidling his hard body behind her. His torso touched her back, barely. The sensation caused her lashes to flutter shut. She tilted to expose her neck to him, half conscious of the movement. *God*, what he did to her.

He bent to her ear. His exhalations caressed her neck. "Don't worry," he uttered, his voice thick with sex. "I won't bite either." His lips grazed the upper part of her ear. "Not unless you want me to."

Her breath hitched. Her eyelids grew heavy. She looked at him over her shoulder. His masculine, sensuous lips were made for a woman to kiss. His mouth parted. She wanted to savor the taste of him.

You can't, moron.

She bit her lip and stepped away. He released her as she moved. Marie turned when she'd taken a step and stared at him. "I'm not worried."

The downturn of Jake's lips spoke for themselves. He was disappointed she hadn't played along, but instead of mentioning it he released a slow breath and eyed her from underneath the brim of his hat.

She scowled as she snatched the leather straps away from him, pissed at herself for getting into the intimate situation in the first place. "I'm just curious if he likes me. Domestic or not, I've seen guys get thrown off these things."

Jake smirked.

Marie put a hand on her hip, defensive. She didn't want to look stupid in front of him. "You know. Rodeo? ESPN?"

The roguish corners of his mouth turned upward. "So you're a TV rodeo queen?"

"No." Marie grimaced. "I watch sometimes, is all."

The horse let out a loud snort. She flinched. The gelding's eyes narrowed and stared at her. She swore the animal grinned, as if he mocked her. "What if he doesn't want me on him?"

Jake ran a hand over his mouth. Humor danced in his eyes. He came to her, eased an arm around her waist and cradled her against the side of his chest as he pulled her closer and into his arms. "You'll be fine." He ran his thumb along her lower lip. She thought he would kiss her. Instead, he turned her. With his hands on her waist, he aimed her at the horse.

And impending doom.

The gelding winked at her. She jumped again. Right into Jake. His powerful arms circled around her and pulled her against him. He chuckled softly in her ear. "Old Red won't throw you."

His smooth voice titillated her, made her pulse race. "How do you know?" Her voice squeaked.

His murmurs skimmed her ear. "He's too much like his owner."

Her breath hitched. She closed her eyes, hoping to forestall the urge she had to beg him for a sexual release.

Jake pushed her to Old Red. "Now grab the saddle horn and give me your foot." He bent down and grasped her ankle. She froze and tried to remember some old tale about taming a wild animal by staring in its eyes.

Jake cleared his throat and glimpsed up at her. "The pointed thing on the front of the saddle."

"I can guess that much." She huffed, irritated that she had let her mind wander, and grasped the rounded knob.

He grunted a reply then ran his hand behind her knee and pressed her onward. Her leg tingled with his touch. She frowned as he lifted her foot. His action forced her to place her free hand on his broad back to steady herself. Marie licked her lips, not really wanting their connection to end. She looked at him, grasped for some conversation to steer her mind away from what her hormones wanted her to do to his body. "What do you mean he's too much like his owner?"

Jake looked up. The corner of his mouth twitched as the gleam in his eye returned. "Neither of 'em would throw a woman. They like the ride too much."

"Oh." Blood rushed to her cheeks. She should have known better. She gulped as he slid her foot in the stirrup. "And you're the owner..." She winced. She shouldn't have spoken but she couldn't help herself.

"Yes, ma'am." Jake straightened and gave her a quick nod. His husky voice rekindled the heat in her belly.

She frowned. "I was afraid you would say that."

He chuckled as he stepped behind her and put his warm, calloused hands on her waist. "When I count to three, jump up and lean into the stirrup. Then swing your other leg over the horse. I'll help you the rest of the way." She could feel her heartbeat quicken as he leaned closer and whispered in her ear. "Ready?"

She pressed her lips together. She wasn't ready for this at all, but she nodded.

"Three."

"What?" She gasped and pulled at the saddle horn as he lifted her. His strong hands slid underneath her rear and pushed as she struggled to throw her leg over the horse's back.

"Oh." She plopped in the saddle and stared at Old Red's neck, surprised that she sat on top. Jake stood with his hands on his hips and a grin from ear to ear.

"I thought you were going to count to three," she scolded.

He pushed the brim of his hat up. "I did."

"Counting to three usually begins with one, Mister Colder."

"Um." He nodded. "Well, you can talk to my first-grade teacher about that." He handed her the reins. "Hold on to these. If you want to go left, swing them to the left and put your right knee in his side. Do the opposite to go right. Pull both straps back past the saddle horn to stop and give him a good swift kick to get him in gear."

Jake walked behind her then mounted his horse. "Normally I'd start you off in the corral but Red's tame enough so we'll start along the trail." She stared like an idiot at the reins in her hand until Jake backed his horse up and came alongside her. "Maybe I'll lead you first." Her brows went up as Jake took the leather straps and looped them over Old Red's head.

He clicked his tongue and kicked Ranger. Old Red followed close behind. She latched onto the saddle horn and tried not to bounce, praying she'd live through the experience.

* * * * *

Moon glow bathed the corral as they returned. Marie shivered. Without the sunshine, the air had grown much colder. She took a deep breath and caught the scent of sweet grass. She relaxed into the saddle. It amazed her how quickly Jake had gotten her to feel comfortable on a horse. The reins felt good in her hands and she led the gelding easily enough now. She felt better than she had in a long time. It was good to be in control of something in her life again. She leaned over and patted the horse's neck, content with her newfound skill.

A light breeze blew a strand of hair into her eyes as Jake dismounted. An errant leaf brushed past her. The wizened foliage danced in front of her then landed in the dirt near Jake's boot. She watched as Jake hitched his mount to the fence post and unsaddled the dark horse. He led the stallion into the corral then brushed his hands off on his pants. She slid off Red's back and stood. A stiff ache pained her backside as she tried to straighten.

"It takes a little getting used to." Jake came behind her and saw her rub her posterior.

Marie bit her lip to hide her embarrassment. "I think I'll be all right." She backed away from him to flex her legs then rubbed the ache in her knees.

"You want some help?" He pushed the brim of his hat up and sent her one of his quirky grins, as if he tried not to laugh.

She frowned. "I should be asking you that. What do you want me to do?" She pointed to Old Red.

He shrugged. "Come here and hold these while I take the saddle off." He pulled the reins from the pommel where she'd laid them and held them out to her.

She winced as she hobbled forward and took the straps.

"Remind me to get you some liniment when we get in the house." He walked around her and grasped her waist then turned her toward the horse. "Stand right here

and hold him." His palms brushed across her back as he walked around her and reached for the saddle.

Her heart nearly stopped. Blast, she had to get over these reactions to him. Plenty of attractive men had touched her before but there was something special about Jake.

She examined the breadth of his back as he stood in front of her. Maybe it was because he was a big strong man and, after last night, she had fantasies that he'd protect her. She rubbed her face with her free hand to remind herself he wasn't a knight in shining armor and that Prince Charming wouldn't come along and steal her away from her troubles. She had to get out of those herself.

He tugged on the leather binding. "Come around here. I want to show you this."

She scooted to his side by the head of Old Red. His biceps flexed against his rolled shirtsleeves as he pulled at the leather thong that held the saddle in place.

"These straps are called the latigo," Jake instructed. "This first tuck keeps the end from flopping around. The rest of these," he inched the long leather thong out from the knot, "are made real tight so the rider doesn't fall off. I'll show you how to strap this down tomorrow." He unfastened the last loop.

"Tomorrow? I don't know if I'll recover by then." She rubbed a rear cheek with her free hand.

When Jake looked at her, a humorous glow lit his eyes. He lifted the corner of his sexy lips and smiled, gazing at her for a second before he reached to pull the saddle down.

But that second was enough to undo her.

"You'll be fine," he said.

Marie tried to get a grip on herself. "Can I do that?"

His brows rose as if to question her decision. "Sure." Jake released the saddle and let it fall back in place. He took the reins from her then stepped under the horse's head and hooked them over the fence post. In a moment, he stood behind her. "Go ahead."

She rubbed her palms on her pants and inched toward the horse. "Just lift it off?"

"Yep."

She'd watched Jake. He'd tossed the other one away easily enough. She could do this.

Marie grabbed the horn and the back of the saddle then jerked the seat down. The weight of the thing almost yanked her arms out of their sockets. She thought she'd drop it until Jake reached around her and caught the edges. His arms pinned her between the saddle and his muscled chest. "Like I said," his rich voice whispered in her ear, "it takes a little getting used to. Let go. I got it."

Her skin heated against his firm body. She released her hold. When she turned in his arms, his mouth came within inches of hers. She rested her palms against his pecs, ran the tip of her tongue along her bottom lip. "I didn't think it was that heavy," she said with uneven breaths.

His heady gaze deepened. A sigh eased from his parted lips. He used the weight of the saddle to pull her closer. Her breasts perked as he held her against him.

"Darlin'," he rasped low, "you keep licking your lips like that and I'm going to have to do something about it."

She leaned into him, lifted her head closer to his, drawn by an unspoken need between the two of them. "You will?" Her voice grew breathy.

Marie felt the muscles in Jake's arms flex as he tossed the saddle behind her. He slid his hold around her body and pulled her close. "Yeah." His mouth brushed hers then he nipped her lip.

She tried to think, tried to remember why being here with Jake like this was a bad idea but somewhere between the heat in his embrace and the tenderness in his lips, she forgot the reason. Her body quivered. The ache for him burned through her like a shot of whiskey. Her nerve endings fired. Her clit hummed with sexual heat. She ran her palms over his shirt, feeling the hard taut muscles underneath.

His breaths were heavier, more uneven. Her fingers inched their way along his broad shoulders. When he pulled back, the color in his eyes deepened.

Before she realized it, the tip of her tongue licked her mouth again. She bit her bottom lip to stop herself. Jake grinned—slow, seductive this time. He came to her, outlined her mouth with his.

Then penetrated her with his tongue.

She gasped as he pulled her hips flush against his, against his hard body—and his even harder erection.

"Oh," she whispered. Her body trembled and soared with need. Her resolve to restrain herself around him fled. She wanted to be with this man. And right now, there was no mistaking he wanted to be with her too. Would it matter? One night of sexual ecstasy?

Jake's labored breaths increased with her own. She stroked the nape of his neck and ground her body against him. His hand slid down her back and her senses reeled, drunk with passion. She lost track of time until his mouth released her.

He pulled back a moment, stared at her, his blue eyes intense. Jake's gaze asked what she wanted.

Marie used her body to give him his answer. Her thumb outlined his strong chin. She stood on her toes to reach him. Her hands circled the nape of his neck and pulled him closer.

Jake's soft rugged exhalations brushed her lips. She groaned, not knowing and not caring if she was still breathing, the intoxicating scent of leather and Jake filling her, pushing her erotic desire higher.

She rubbed her hips against his large, hard cock once more.

His eyes closed. His breaths quickened. She listened to Jake exhale again, felt him shudder.

He bent his head to meet her lips. His mouth moved along her jaw, his tongue teased the skin underneath. Jake nibbled her earlobe as his hands dropped lower and grabbed her ass. "Marie..."

"Mmm." She loved the feel of him against her, his stiff cock against her pussy.

His palm outlined her hip, moved up her waist to her breast. He curled his hand and with the back of it brushed along the side of her breast. His fingertips circled the nub of the mound then slid into the deep vee of her shirt. The tips of his fingers skimmed the skin underneath then moved forward so that they slipped under her bra and brushed her nipples. "Marie," the huskiness in his voice mesmerized her, "I want you."

She let a hand slip to the buttons on his shirt. "I know," she said against his lips as she undid the top one.

He growled low in his throat. His hands grasped her rear then his palms slid to her upper thighs. He lifted her against him then curled her legs around his hips. She hooked her ankles behind him as he grabbed her ass again and pushed her crotch snug into his erection.

"God," Marie muttered as she draped her arms over his shoulders. She nestled her head into the curve of his neck to taste him, nipped the skin, licked his flesh, savored the salty flavor of him.

Jake groaned. Swerving, he carried her to the barn.

"What about Jesse?" she murmured against his strong chin.

"He's inside. He'll be fine."

"Jake..." She wanted to tell him this wasn't a good idea. Worse, some crazy part of her wanted to confess all that had happened to her.

He stopped. Stared at her. "Marie, if this isn't what you want, tell me now. Otherwise I'll go insane lusting after you."

She pressed her lips together. She couldn't lie. She did want him. Marie pasted on a smile to hide the gloom that threatened to overtake her, the thought that there could be no future with this man. "I can't say that, Jake. Because I want you too."

He kissed her. Deeply. Then strode to the barn door and grasped the handle while he held her.

The hinges squeaked as he pulled it open. The smell of hay permeated the air. The moonlight cast its white glow through the entrance in the otherwise pitch-black interior. Jake set her on her feet, slid her body down his. His fingers raked her ass then her back as he lowered her.

"God, woman..." He spoke through his heavy breaths. "I should take you in the house. Make love to you all night like I want to." His hands cupped her face. He bent to her, took her mouth with his and claimed her.

"It's okay," she whispered between the interplay of their lips, needing him in this moment, desperate for his body in hers.

Jake ran his hands down her neck and over her shoulders, across her chest to her breasts. He fondled them, teased the nipples with his thumbs. Little by little, he bunched the cloth of her blouse in his fists and tugged the ends loose from the waistband of her pants.

Her breath caught. Marie fumbled with the buttons on his shirt. Managed to get a few undone. She wanted him naked too. Now.

When he'd raised the blouse a few inches, he splayed his hands across her abdomen, covering it as his work-roughened hands teased her skin. The contrast from Jake's heat and the cool air made her shiver. Her desire surged. His mouth claimed hers again as Jake circled his palms around her waist then moved higher, taking the blouse with him to her breasts. Her hands gave way to his advances. She rested them on his shoulders, letting him do as he wanted. Her lashes lowered. Her mouth watered in anticipation.

He squeezed her breasts then ran his hands to her back and unsnapped her bra. Cool air hit her warm skin. Her nipples stiffened.

She looked at him. His eyes lit. She could see the moonlight dance in them. He pushed the bra off her. His thumbs alighted on her breasts, caressed the turgid nubs a moment. Then his hands clasped her sides. Jake lowered his head and arched her to him, to his warm, waiting mouth.

He lifted her to her toes. Their hips met. Marie rubbed her clit against his erection as he licked one nipple, then the other. Slowly. He encircled the nub with his lips, suckled her, used his teeth to tease her flesh.

She moaned, drunk with need for him. He wrapped one arm around her ass and the other around the small of her back. He raised her up then pressed her crotch onto his hard cock. The fire stoked her. She creamed. She could feel the wetness soak her thong. "Jake," she whimpered, and ran her hands through the dark tresses of his hair as he laved her other breast.

He slid one hand to her front, unfastened her pants and worked them over her hips. His hand slipped inside the opening. Marie panted as his fingers rubbed down her skin. Her breath caught at the first touch of him on her clit. Fire shot from Jake into her. *Lightning*. There was no other way to explain the sensation.

"God, you're wet." His heated breath teased her nipple. The coarse fingertip on her pussy massaged the sensitized nerve endings in her bud.

Her lips caressed his temple, her ragged breaths brushed his skin. "Jake, I want to touch you."

He lifted his head. Stared. His dark gaze speared her, stripped any pretense she may have had and laid her soul bare. Jake knew she wanted him, in more ways than one. The understanding lay between them.

He came to her, kissed her as if she could belong to no other man.

Marie pressed her hands between their bodies, unhitched his buckle then unzipped his pants. Her hand slid inside, her small palm met his hot flesh. Jake was naked

underneath. The sensation of that undid her. She had to have him now. She cupped his large penis.

"Jesus..." he groaned and broke the kiss, touched his chin to his chest as his eyes closed and his breaths labored.

God, his cock is so hard. The silky length of him was enough to fill her palm and then some. She wrapped her fingers around his sex. *And just thick enough.* She could barely touch her finger to her thumb. "Oooh." She he stroked him, loved the feel of him in her palm, let the sensation of him drive her insane with need.

"Marie," he rasped and took her hand in his, "let me please you first." Jake pulled her away.

"But..." she protested.

He grasped the end of her blouse and pulled, taking the straps of her bra as well when he reached them. He slipped them both off and dropped them to the ground.

Desperate, Marie managed to undo the rest of his shirt buttons and pulled the cloth open. She ran her hands against his sculpted torso, fingered the peaks and valleys of his hard muscles.

He held her. Smiled. Eyed her naked flesh. "You're beautiful." Her white skin contrasted against his tanned arms.

Jake bent and tugged her jeans, dropped them to her knees. They fell to her calves as he tossed his hat to the side and pressed his mouth against her mons. He knelt in front of her, his breath titillating her clit. Jake guided her hands to his back, rested them there and levered her knees apart. His palms slid down the inside of her thighs.

Marie's legs trembled. She could barely stand and balanced against him as he leaned forward. Jake used his thumbs to spread her nether lips and the hair that covered them. His tongue touched her. There. His hot mouth. Just a brush. On the top of her clit.

Oh, God. Marie moaned. Loud.

A low chuckle escaped Jake. His warm breath stroked her again. He followed with his tongue, licked her clitoris then circled it. His mouth covered her as he lightly teathed her flesh.

Marie's carnal sighs filled her ears. Jake pressed on. His tongue outlined her labia then dipped into her core. He thrust into her, once, twice. Three times, before he suckled her again. Licking upward, he nipped on her clitoral bud. She cried from pleasure.

Jake dipped a finger inside her. Pressed another against the skin between her vagina and her anus. His mouth continued its assault.

The erotic sensation intensified. When had she ever been so pleased?

His mouth left her. His other hand took over, pinching and rubbing the hood of her sex. His rugged exhalations caressed her labia. Jake licked around the edge, adding another finger to the one that fucked her. "God, I love the way you taste."

His husky voice sent her to the edge. He penetrated her harder. His fingers moved faster. Jake's mouth suckled the skin around them and Marie cried in ecstasy. Her body shuddered as she climaxed, her arms threatened to crumple against Jake as her legs gave way.

He held her up, let her mew until the last of her pleasure was savored. When her loud moans ceased, he ended the sweet blitz on her body.

"Jake..." she panted.

He looked up. The dark, needy gaze on his face made her lust surge again.

"I need you inside me."

He nestled his head in her crotch. Licked her again, tasted her, kissed the curls of her pubic hair. He stood and traveled his hand over her body. "Marie," he uttered through his heavy breaths. His hard penis wavered against her. "I don't have a condom on me."

"Jake, I won't get pregnant, not at the moment. And I don't have anything—" She pressed her lips together at the indelicate reference but she needed to be honest. She wanted him. "It's been a while. I've been checked. I don't have anything you can catch. I promise you."

A smile crossed his lips. "I believe I knew that about you, but I—" His Adam's apple moved as he swallowed.

She grabbed his penis and stroked, let her thumb glide over the slit in the head.

"Sweet Jesus," he groaned. "I'm clean, I swear it."

A cooler breeze blew through the door, circled around her then left. For some reason the zephyr confirmed her belief in him. She stood on her toes to reach his lips. "Then take me, Jake. Like you want to," she whispered against him.

He caught her up to him, wrapped her legs around him as he devoured her with his lips and strode to the side of the barn. His penis pulsed against her wet vee as he moved. When he reached the grainy wall, he rested her against it. With his hands on her ass, he held her up and plunged into her.

"Oh..." she cried and pushed her hips against him. Her clit soared, her vagina clenched. *Oh my God.*

Jake closed his eyes, whispered in ragged breaths against her neck. "Marie, you must know how I've wanted you." He licked and kissed her as he moved from her earlobe to her mouth then hastened the rhythm of his fucking.

The small muscles inside her clasped around him again. He was on the verge, she knew it. She felt him pulse inside. But so was she. Oh how she loved the feel of this man. Jake gripped her rear cheeks, tugged them apart, stimulating her skin, sending more fire into her core. In moments, she climaxed again.

Jake took her harder, but only for a second, then he held himself deep within her. His body shook. Loud groans escaped with his release.

After a moment, Jake stared into her face. "Marie..." he murmured then nestled his head in her neck and nipped it. "God, woman." He held her tight, kissed her chin then let his mouth hover over hers. His eyes penetrated her, made love to her soul. No man had ever looked at her like that.

Her mouth went dry. She understood how he felt.

"Dad?" The cry came from the house.

"Shit," Jake hissed. "*Coitus interruptus*."

She giggled as he lowered her and quickly bent to pull up her pants. Marie took them from him as footsteps sounded around the corner.

"I'll be right back." Jake quickly zipped his jeans and ran out to intercept Jesse in the yard.

Still dazed from the sexual onslaught, Marie eased her pants up the rest of the way. The cool air swirled around her. Made her flesh tingle. Goosebumps rose on her skin. Without Jake's body to warm her, she soon grew cold. She heard Jake and Jesse talking. She needed her blouse but was afraid to step into the light to retrieve it. The boy's voice seemed too close. She didn't want Jesse to see her.

She crossed her arms over her breasts. The chilly air sobered her. What had she done?

A shadow broke the pure lines of the moonlight. Jake stood in the barn entrance. His hands rested comfortably on his hips as he stared at her. The moonlight bathed his sculpted frame, the light making an aura around him that shimmered. The sheer splendor of his body stunned her. She held her breath. She had just made love to this man.

"Beautiful."

Desire resounded in his deep, raspy voice. Her heart raced again.

She tucked her jaw and looked away, embarrassed with the reckless sexual abandon they'd shared.

Jake strolled to her and lifted her chin with the crook of his finger. "Marie, I want you for more than sex. I hope you know that. I know this is weird. It's so sudden but I think we were supposed to meet. I think we're supposed to be together."

Marie was confused, needy. Yet she knew what he meant. Something more than his body compelled her to him. She wanted him intimately and on a much deeper level. How had this jumble of emotions hit her without warning?

Guilt rose in her. She couldn't let this happen. There was no life for her here. "Jake..." She ran her hand through her hair then rubbed her face. "I...I'm sorry. I don't do this, this one-night stand stuff. I usually get to know someone. I mean, we...we shouldn't have done this."

"Don't say that." He pulled her into his arms. "Look, I know this is awkward. I mean, we've known each other for what? A day? But," his gaze delved into her, "I like you and you like me. Things are simple around here. Believe it or not, for some strange

reason..." He looked out the barn door as if he tried to see something out there. Shaking his head, he returned his attention to her and inhaled deeply. "I think this could work."

She backed away and hugged herself. "Things may be simple for you but they aren't for me. You know I...well..." Hot tears stung her eyes. She shivered. "You said I was running. Aren't you afraid I'll take off someday?"

"Yeah." He stepped to her and wrapped his arms around her again for comfort. "But I'm hoping instead you'll tell me about it and let me help you."

She rubbed a salty tear off her face. "I don't think you can."

He sighed and lightly kissed her temple. "Marie, when you're ready to talk about your problem, I'll be ready to listen. In the meantime, I'll be there for you if you need me." He rubbed her arms. "You're cold. You'd better get inside." He released her and turned to get her blouse.

She followed him, limping. The pain in her tush had returned. "Jake?"

He picked up the rest of her clothes and faced her. The white light from the moon shadowed his face but she could still discern his troubled features.

Marie stopped in front of him. "I-I don't like making promises I can't keep and I'm not..." She shook her head to clear it then gazed back at him. "I'm not good at casual relationships. In fact, I don't have them."

The corner of his mouth rose. He handed her the blouse and bra. "That's good to know, Marie." He picked up his Stetson and placed it on his head with a nod. "That's damn good to know."

She kept one arm across her breasts while she took the clothes with the other, now embarrassed with her nakedness in front of him. Jake was the sheriff, and she didn't know him, not really.

To some degree, her sanity returned. She stepped past him toward the door. With her back to him, she slipped on the shirt then shoved her bra into the front pocket of her jeans, buttoning her blouse as she hobbled away.

"Damn." She heard him slap his hand against his pant leg.

"What?" She stopped and swerved to face him. Had she angered him?

Jake walked to her and slid his roughened palm against her cheek. His fingers threaded into her hair. "I'm sorry. I forgot your backside ached."

She smiled. "Only when I walk."

He moved closer and kissed her, captured her lips again with his intoxicating mouth. Marie moaned as her tongue intertwined with his, and tasted him.

His lips released hers. Jake eyed her strangely for what seemed like an eternity. "Think about what I said, Marie." His intense gaze pleaded with her.

Marie licked her lips. The corner of Jake's mouth rose. She blushed but looked into his deep blue eyes and caressed the small wrinkle that formed along his mouth with her finger. "Okay."

Lines formed on his forehead. "You do like me, don't you?" His look searched for an answer.

She smiled. "Yes, Jake, for whatever reason, I like you."

He nodded. "Well, at least that's a start." She gasped as he bent over and swung her into his arms to carry her. "Just promise me you won't take off too soon."

"I'll try, Jake." She nodded and leaned her head on his shoulder. "I'll try."

He glanced at her as he walked. "I'll take you into the house. You can let me know if you need some help with that salve."

Marie grew afraid her blush this time turned as crimson as the deep red in the sunset around there. "I don't think that would be a good idea."

He simply grinned.

Jake stepped onto the creaky porch. The old rocker on it moved back and forth in a steady rhythm then stopped. He halted and stared at the chair.

"What's wrong?" Marie looked at him.

"Nothing." Jake forced the corners of his mouth upward and stared at the still rocker. His brows furrowed. He gently put Marie down and opened the door then looked back as he walked her into the kitchen.

* * * * *

"Boy, what the hell were you thinkin'? You don't come on to a decent woman like that. You gotta court her, give her some time to ruminate on the situation." The old ghost paced Jake's bedroom.

"Gramps, if I need your help, I'll ask, okay? Besides," Jake groaned inside, "it just happened."

"Son, she ain't one of those doxies at the saloon. She's a lady and you'd best be treating her like one or you'll have me to deal with."

"Hell, Gramps, this isn't the Middle Ages. She's got a mind of her own."

"And she'll use it to take a hike if you keep these antics up." The old man puffed his cheeks. "I'd knew it'd come down to this. Guess I'll hav' tuh help yuh out."

"Gramps, I'm warning you. Lay off."

"I'm tellin' yuh, she's the one for you."

"Then stop telling me and let me find out for myself."

"Damn, boy, I know you're tired of being alone."

Jake stripped off his shirt and gave his great-great grandfather a black look. "She's scared and on the run."

The old ghost put his fists on his hips. "'Course she's scared but she needs you as much as you need her. She don't wanna leave. Yuh need to convince her to stay."

Jake scowled at the old man. "She's from the city. What makes you think she'd want to stay in a backwoods place like this?"

Gramps pressed his ethereal lips together. "She likes you. Even a dead person can see that. Hell, boy, that should be obvious to yuh after what she let you do to her tonight. Dag blast it." He pulled off his cap and slapped his leg with it.

Jake squinted as he eyed him. "You weren't watching, were you?"

Gramps choked then spit. "I wouldn't do somethin' like that but it don't take a brain to know what happened. Hell..." He paced again then swerved and pointed a whitish finger at him. "Yuh shouldn't be treatin' her bad, is all." He ran his hand through his ghostly hair then plopped the hat on top. "Takin' 'er in the barn..." he mumbled. He wagged his index finger at Jake. "She likes yuh. I told yuh so."

"Yeah." Jake swallowed and sat on the bed. "Gramps, we both slaked our lust, both felt something, but that doesn't mean she'll like living here." He stared hard at the dead infantryman. "Or that she'll stay. I won't go through that again."

"You won't. She ain't like that." Gramps nodded then a small smile flitted across his face. "You like her too. I knew you would." He looked at Jake. The old man's visage softened with a father's concern. "Of all the kids and grandkids I've had, I worry about you most. A man's supposed to have a woman."

Jake listened to the soft tapping on the door.

Marie's tender voice glided through. "Is your grandfather here?"

"Don't." Jake held up his open palm and gave the ghost a look that told him to get lost, then he crossed the room and opened the door.

Marie's eyes widened with curiosity. She'd just gotten out of the bath. Jake tried not to ogle the green silk kimono that clung to her damp skin. He hoped like hell she hadn't heard his argument with Gramps.

"Hi." He nodded and leaned against the doorjamb.

"Hi." Her mouth parted slightly as she stared at his naked chest. She licked her lips and gave him a tentative smile that sent his testosterone flying. Lust shone in her eyes. His need for her surged. He knew how she felt.

"I thought I heard you talking to someone." Marie tightened her robe and glanced around his room. "Maybe I should get dressed first."

Jake cleared his throat. His pulse picked up speed. "You look fine to me. I was, uh," he shoved his hands in his pockets, "talking to myself again." He felt a cold nudge.

"No you weren't," Gramps scolded him. "Tell her the truth. I wanna meet her."

"N—" Jake caught himself before he shot a series of expletives at the old man. He forced a calm he didn't feel then smiled at her. "On second thought, maybe you ought to get dressed. Cal got a pizza for dinner. He and Jesse have already eaten but there's some left."

"Okay." She rubbed her arms and walked the few paces into the room across the hall. When she glanced back at him, her eyes still said she wanted him but her look

narrowed with indecision. "I'll meet you in the kitchen." She shot him another smile, a sad one this time. After entering the room, she shut the door.

"Whew."

Jake heard the sound and swerved to find Gramps behind him.

"Boy, I'm tellin' you, that lady's one heck of a woman."

"Gramps, I'm warning you. I don't want her scared half to death." He ran his hand through his hair in an effort to unravel his confusion.

"Yuh like her. Admit it."

"Okay, I like her. What else do you want me to say? That I'm tired of being alone? Yeah, I'm tired. I'm damn tired." He sat on the bed and rubbed his hand over his haggard face. "I hope you're right."

"Lord be praised." Gramps slapped his knee then started to dance a jig. "Boy, I'm glad you're waking up, by golly..."

The specter stopped abruptly as a knock at the front door echoed through the house. "Now who the hell could that be?" With a pop, the old ghost disappeared.

* * * * *

"Dad, some new guy from the Bar A's here and wants to talk to you."

Jesse's voice echoed down the hallway as Marie leaned against her bedroom door, not able to help the pulse that raced and fired her clit. Jake's heated gaze had pierced the emotional wall she'd constructed in the bath. God, how did the man ignite her hormones so fast? Especially after what they'd already done. One would think she'd be satisfied for the moment. She closed her eyes. Her breathing deepened. She wished he was there with her.

She slid her hand into the fold of the robe and let her fingers touch her nipple. Jake had done that. Touched her there. She thought about it, relished the sense of his hands on her. Her breath quickened. Her crotch got wet. They'd made love, quick and fast. Yet she wanted him again.

Jake's footfalls sounded on the wooden planks.

The sound jolted her. If he caught her playing with herself, what would he think? She felt her cheeks heat.

She heard him walk to the front of the house and chastise Jesse for bellowing so loud, especially in front of a stranger.

A stranger. The warning served to remind her how tenuous her situation was. Who could be at the door?

She tossed a pink cashmere sweater over her head and pulled on a pair of slacks. Slipping on a pair of socks, she cracked the door open and peeked down the hallway. Part of a cowboy hat jutted up over Jake's shoulder. She strolled down the hall to get a

better look when a sudden shiver took her. The man spied her and nodded in recognition. He was the stranger from the diner.

"Wednesday, then. Thanks, Sheriff." When the man stuck out his hand to shake Jake's, Marie ducked in the kitchen. She heard the cowboy whistle as he hopped down the front step.

In a few moments, Jake walked into the kitchen behind her.

"Who was that?" Marie asked as she rubbed her arms to chase the chill away, suddenly not hungry.

Jake shrugged and grabbed a piece of pizza off the kitchen counter. "A new hand from the Bar A. Looks like I'll be moving cows on my day off."

Marie glanced toward the front of the house. "You're using your free time to move more cows?"

Jake nodded. "For the ranch next to us. They need more hands to do the job. It works that way out here. People help each other." His eyes seemed to bore into her, trying to discern her secrets. He looked away and took a bite. "You ride well enough now to help out. Want to go?"

She almost choked. "No."

Jake let out a low chuckle. He leaned forward and caressed her cheek with his thumb. "You know, Marie, it'd be better if you tell me what's troubling you. You can't keep jumping every time someone comes around." He bent over and brushed her lips with his.

She backed away and shook her head. Marie hugged her arms as she realized the depth of stupidity of what she'd done. She'd fucked the local sheriff. In the barn, no less. She shook her head. The arrival of the new man was a cold, sobering reminder. "Jake," she looked at him and steeled her resolve, "I'm the housekeeper. I think it's best we leave things that way."

Jake furrowed his brows. His eyes grew dark. "Why?"

She rubbed her hands down her pants and lifted her chin then lowered her voice so Jesse wouldn't hear. "I'm not going to have sex with you again. It wouldn't be right."

"Marie..." She heard Jake protest as she retreated. She ran to her room then shut the door and leaned against the wood. Her hands shook as she covered her face with them. Jake had seen the truth. She was scared, afraid of everyone and everything she didn't know.

She locked the door and undressed then crawled into bed. She'd been crazy to think of love, of safety and home, when she faced a virtual firing squad or a life on the run. Her tears ran. She eyed her suitcase through her blurry vision.

Tomorrow, while Jake was away, she'd pack the bag with the few things she'd been able to get, just in case.

Chapter Six

The sun hadn't risen on the frigid morning but Jake could hardly feel the cold. It'd been two weeks since the night in the barn. In that time, Marie had avoided him like the plague, would only talk to him when she had to—or when he forced her to, like when he'd take Jesse to the diner for supper and sit where she had to wait on him.

Yet he wanted her. She *still* wanted him, too. He could tell by the furtive side glances she'd throw him now and then.

"Hell." Frustration threatened to undo him. Generally, he was a patient man but having her around, watching her interact with Jesse, remembering how the soft curves of her body felt against his...

Fuck. His cock jumped in the saddle. The knowledge of what they could have together was enough to unnerve him. He adjusted himself and frowned. He had Gramps to thank for that—him and his damn promises. Yet the old man wasn't the cause of Marie's rejection. So what had he done wrong?

A stray cow took off. "C'mon, Ranger." Jake clicked his tongue at the horse to spur him. Together they chased the stray back to the herd and Jake settled the horse's gait into a steady rhythm. The lull let his mind wander again. He wanted Marie to see how good they were together. So how could he get her into his bed again? Well, sort of in his bed. He didn't care how he got her naked and wanting him. It could be the barn again. He didn't care. He just needed to do it—needed *her*.

And when he did figure out how, this time he wouldn't let her get away.

"You keep pushing 'em this hard, Sheriff, and you'll wear 'em out." Slim Jim rode up to him and interrupted his thoughts.

"I know," Jake gritted out as he trotted alongside.

"You in a hurry?" The new cowhand squinted at him.

"Maybe." Jake scowled as he urged some lagging yearlings along.

Slim snorted. "Women can do that to a man."

Jake huffed in reply.

Slim chuckled. "It's okay with me. I wouldn't want to spend time rustling cows when I had a pretty woman at home waiting for me. I'll see what I can do." He rode to the far side of the herd and hustled the cattle along.

Jake grimaced. What the hell did the man find so funny?

Probably the same thing his deputies did—Marie. Everyone assumed they were a couple, even Jesse. Jake had done nothing to dispel the thought, although for the moment the fact couldn't be further from the truth.

He huffed. It shouldn't bother him. Why the hell did he need one woman when he could find pleasure and entertainment with little problem from so many others? Besides, he liked his freedom. He didn't need a woman mucking it up. He shouldn't have let Gramps get those fool ideas into his head. Thoughts of a mother for Jesse, a wife for him. Someone to love, cherish...and spend cold nights warming up with.

He groaned. Hell, his first wife had destroyed any hopes of a life like that.

"Jake, you're an idiot," he mumbled and wished he'd listened to his good sense before he'd gotten...well, sexual, with Marie. Then maybe she wouldn't be so standoffish now. But hell, the moment had been so charged there was no way they could have kept away from each other. Had he come on too strong?

He shook his head. He didn't think so. Marie was more than willing. He'd even asked her about it.

But then she made the sudden shift to stay away. What had happened?

Fuck, he didn't know. Maybe Gramps was right. Maybe their first time together was a little too quick but damn...

He slapped his leg with the ends of his reins. Even if he had moved too fast, she didn't have to act like he wasn't there. Shit, a little conversation would be nice every now and then. Then maybe he could get someplace with her. But how was a man supposed to romance a woman if they wouldn't talk?

Damn. She'd ask for her space. He'd given it to her. That should be fine and dandy by him, yes sir-ee. Like he'd told Gramps, he didn't need another messed-up woman in his life. Besides, the household ran well now, thanks to her. He should be happy.

Instead, restlessness ate at his gut. He knew what the problem was. He liked her — thought Gramps could be right about her.

And it scared the hell out of him.

"Jake, you *are* an idiot," he said with more finality. These stupid ideas would never get him anywhere, especially with Marie.

He growled, knowing that in such a short period of time his lust had grown into more than an attraction. His true feelings had somehow crept up on him, yearnings he wanted to deny but couldn't. He was lonely. And when Marie and he were together, there was heat, even if she didn't say a word to him. She could feel it too. He could tell. But what did she want?

She liked him. She'd admitted that much.

And Jesse adored her. He saw the signs. So what was wrong with him?

Nothing, he decided and assured himself the problem came from whatever caused Marie to run. And that, Jake thought, he could do something about.

He prayed it wasn't something too serious.

"Well, we should be there before supper at this rate. That should help." Slim rode up and broke into his thoughts again.

Jake sucked in a deep breath and glanced at the road home. Would he risk another chance at love?

"Yeah." He nodded. He'd made up his mind. "It should help a lot."

* * * * *

"Jesse, make sure you don't forget your lunch." Marie finished filling his bag.

"Yes, ma'am." The boy wiped the milk mustache off with the back of a hand. Marie frowned at his attempt to clean his face and he leveled the mischievous glint in his eye at her — another Colder trademark.

Her lips quirked. She held back a laugh. The boy charmed women, much like his father. She sucked in a breath and hardened herself against any feelings of home, warmth...

Love.

She reminded herself she couldn't afford to get too close. Although Jesse had already broken through that barrier. The boy, though, she could accept. He needed the love of a mother. What would it hurt to give him that, at least for the short time she'd be there? Jake, however...

Between the cows and his work, the man left every morning before anyone else woke up. That left her alone with Jesse. She shook off the thought of Jake. She had to get Jesse off to school. She'd made it part of her regular routine to see Jesse went to school properly outfitted — clean clothes and teeth, brushed hair, his knapsack and a decent breakfast in his belly. She turned back to the sink and put another dish in the washer. Taking care of Jesse made for a long day but the sense of hearth and home she'd gotten from it more than made up for any inconvenience. She peered at the boy. She'd never felt more needed.

Marie frowned as she pondered her mothering instincts. The trait, in itself, was dangerous. It brought out the deeply harbored desires she'd had since she'd started her track as a successful businesswoman. Family and a career, why couldn't she have both? She shook her head. It was a dream that had long since passed for a woman in her situation.

Good thing she now handled her new station better. No more passionate interludes with the sheriff, not for this woman. She'd scheduled her other activities around the virile man to protect herself, especially with regard to her work at the Chuck Wagon. Marie had volunteered to take the dinner shifts in hopes that the hours would stymie his amorous attention. She grinned at Jesse. The added benefit was she could help Jake's boy in the mornings.

Of course, the weekends were still open but at least she wouldn't be around during the weekdays when Jake got home, unless, of course, he got an emergency. If that happened, she would leave the diner or Jake would drop Jesse off with her so the boy

could eat and do his homework at one of the tables. She'd warned Gus about the possibility. He'd said the arrangement was fine with him.

Marie shook her head. No employer in his right mind would allow such things in the city. They'd be too worried about lost business or the insurance implications. It amazed her how many people helped each other in this town. In her big-city experience, that kind of caring and concern grew rarer every day.

Her brows creased. The kindness of the people had become part of what she loved about this place. Would the feeling skew her judgment when the time came for her to go? She looked at Jesse again, longing to have a boy like him. But she couldn't afford to think such nonsense.

Then she stifled a laugh. Jesse had buried his angelic face in the cereal bowl, and lapped the contents. Her gaze caressed the boy. Yes, she already had deep feelings for Jesse and if the truth be known, she'd rather spend the evenings with him and his father, but she knew herself well enough. Her attraction to Jake would overpower her common sense. Then they'd make love again. God, if she did that, she'd never be able to leave him—not after the intense addictive passion they'd found.

Then if he discovered her past and she had to run or he had to arrest her, well, they'd all be hurt.

No. She closed her eyes against the loss of what she might have. This way was for the best. Still, when she thought of that night, her body shivered with desire. The sexual hunger between her and Jake, his hard body, the way he held her, penetrated her—all those things stoked her, made her long for more.

Her skin tingled. Her mouth dried and her sex went wet. She didn't think she'd ever felt this deep carnal intensity.

Marie pouted and dried her hands on a dishtowel, ashamed of herself. Jake wanted more than a temporary lover. He'd said as much. Yet her issues would find her here one day. It would be selfish to ask for more than the shelter she now shared.

She rubbed her brow to push the tender emotions she had about Jake away. But the thought of his half naked body in the moonlight kept intruding in her brain. She had little success trying to dispel the image.

And after having had him, she doubted she ever would.

Marie glanced at the clock. She should armor herself better against these homey thoughts. She was still vulnerable. Jake's seduction wasn't fast and hard now, it was slow and sensuous, and with every glance, every casual touch, she felt her emotional bulwark crumble. When Jake was off duty, he tried to romance her during her shifts at the diner. Then there were the evenings they both had free, when they huddled together over some television program or a game of cards Jesse would rope them into. The provocative look from his blue eyes would throw her and send her heartbeat into overdrive.

She swallowed—hard. She'd never felt this warm sensation—the one that said this was where she belonged. With Jake. He believed they were meant for each other. He'd

said so. Every time their eyes met, his gaze revealed a man who asked for more than a quick roll in the hay. Jake wanted commitment, someone who'd stand beside him through the good times and the bad. She worried about that. The roots of this life were growing around her—home, family, a life with Jake.

But that kind of partnership was one she could ill afford. The last thing she needed to do was bind herself to a man, especially Jake. The pain when she ran again would hurt too much.

"You gonna show me more on the Internet when I get home?" Jesse sipped his juice and his comment startled Marie from her brooding.

"Maybe." She rinsed off a dish. "After you give me another horseback-riding lesson. I want to practice my trotting."

"Yeah." He squirmed in the chair then took another bite. "Cool. You can show me more of that investment stuff. I wanna learn how to make money like that. The ranch needs all it can get."

That was true. Marie puffed a breath of air between her barely parted lips. None of the small ranches in the area made much, although many of the folk who lived in the sparsely populated valley were frugal and able to save. With Marie's talent, she could, in a real sense, increase their earnings, use ways they would never have thought of without some business-school training. As she closed the washer, she wished she'd at least be around long enough to show those who had become fast friends how to better help themselves.

Jesse brought his bowl over and gave her a big hug. The boy had started the act on impulse but it had become an established practice for him now. She hugged him back and kissed his cheek. Jesse had a strong need for a mother. Marie didn't mind. It was one of the things that endeared him to her. What she couldn't fathom was why any woman in her right mind would leave such a precious child.

"You know," he said as he pulled away from her, "Miss Scott is still asking about you."

Her brows shot up. "Your teacher from last year?"

"Yeah." He donned his backpack. "She thinks you're competition."

Marie straightened. "I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about."

She busied herself at the counter in an attempt to ignore him but the boy's quick mind wouldn't be stymied. "You know what I mean. Dad's sweet on you and everyone in town knows it."

"Jesse," she dropped the dishcloth she'd inadvertently picked up, "I'm the housekeeper."

"Yeah." He took his lunch off the counter then, very grownup-like, put his hand on his hip. "Marie, it's okay with me, you know. I wouldn't mind having you as my mom. You're a lot better 'en Miss Scott except you make me wash my hands." He lifted a palm in front of his face and puckered his lips, then both sides of his mouth turned

upward and he pulled that dazzling Colder grin on her. "Wouldn't mind some brothers and sisters, too, ifn' you have a mind, but probably more of the brothers if you can help it." He gave her a parting hug. "Unless, of course, the girls turn out like you."

After a comment like that, Marie knew that charisma ran in the family genes. Jesse stood proof positive of it. "I'll keep that in mind," she tousled his hair, "especially if I'm asked to take the job."

"Oh, you will be." He winked at her. "Gramps said Dad has all the signs."

"Gramps, again." She shook her head and wondered when she'd meet the progenitor of this brood. Charmers, all of them, she was sure. She turned him in the direction of the hall. "Now out of here, before you miss your bus. And Jesse..."

He'd walked on but turned when she spoke as if she'd caught him gloating over a secret plan. He flashed his special grin.

"Don't forget your coat," she said.

He looked at his shirtsleeves and became aware he missed something. "Oh yeah." He nodded then dashed down the corridor and left Marie to ponder his words.

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"That's about all of 'em." Slim Hancock hitched the lariat to his saddle as Jake rode up.

Jake nodded. He'd worked with the new hand from the Bar A off and on over the last couple of weeks and had developed a liking for the cowboy, although something about the man bothered him that Jake couldn't place. When the new man first showed up at his door, he wondered if Marie had known him. She'd taken enough of a fright when she saw him there but Jake dismissed the incident a few minutes later after she asked who he was.

"So how's the missus?"

A sideward glance let Jake study the cowboy. Slim didn't know Marie, at least by the way he talked. He'd let the man believe he and Marie were a couple, even though it wasn't true—yet. Jake spurred his horse and cleared his throat. "She's fine." The cowboy wasn't around anyone else long enough to know better. When he finally spent some time in civilization, Jake wanted him to know Marie would be off limits. He'd make sure everyone else understood the situation, too, now that he'd decided.

"Ya'll been together long?"

Jake took his measure of the man again. "Long enough. Why?"

The Texas man shrugged. "Just curious. You know, I once had a girl like her. Met her on the fly in some flea-bit cow town. Purty girl. Come to find out, the Texas Rangers were looking for her. Murdered some guy down in San Anton'." The hard look the man gave Jake sent a chill up his spine. Slim looked at the road. "Broke my heart. Never let myself care for anyone again I didn't know well."

"Sorry to hear that." Jake's eyes narrowed. He halted Ranger as they reached the crossroads. The cowboy rode up beside him. Jake pretended to scan the horizon then he cut his eyes toward the other man. "Need to pull more of my herd down in the next week or two. Could use an extra hand."

A corner of the man's mouth slowly rose but Jake couldn't tell if it was a grin or a sneer. Slim nodded. "Be glad to help."

"Good." Jake nodded and tugged his reins toward the road home. "The pay'll be the same. I'll let you know." With that, he gave Ranger a kick and loped off as he listened to his gut tell him it'd be better to keep the cowpuncher close by.

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"Well, Miss Taylor, you can understand," Mrs. Beason, Jesse's teacher, stammered. The afternoon light streamed in the window behind the portly woman, which warmed the already overheated room.

Marie tapped a pencil against the paper she held and ground her teeth as she listened to the teacher's complaints.

"I really don't know what to do with the boy." The older woman pushed her glasses farther up the bridge of her nose. "School's been open for over a month and he hasn't done one bit of homework."

Marie berated herself for taking the dinner shift to avoid Jake. She'd done too good of a job of skirting Jake and now Jesse suffered.

"He's a good child," the older woman continued. "But last year Miss Scott spoiled him." Her glasses slid down her nose again and she peeked over them. "You know she's always been sweet on the sheriff."

Marie wanted to roll her eyes in protest at the teacher's innuendoes. She didn't know who this Miss Scott was but Marie didn't have any dibs on Jake and she grew tired of hearing she did. Instead, Marie put the pencil and paper down and folded her hands in her lap while she politely listened. Right now she'd like to throttle Jake for letting Jesse's schoolwork get behind. She glanced at Jake's son, who squirmed in the chair next to her then she stared at the desk where she'd placed the list of missed assignments. "Thank you for calling, Mrs. Beason. We'll go home and start work on these right away." Marie glared at Jesse. "Won't we?" The boy quickly bobbed his head up and down.

The teacher sighed. "Well, I'm glad you could come. Couldn't get a hold of the sheriff. And I know talking to a non-family member is unusual but we're a small community. I understand from good sources that, in more ways than one, you're really part of the Colder, er..." She looked at the ceiling while trying to find the word.

"Family?" Marie cringed. Did everyone think she slept with the sheriff?

"Yes." The woman beamed and bobbed her double chin up and down.

Marie rolled her eyes. "Mrs. Beason, believe me when I say I'm only the housekeeper, however, I will pass your concerns on to Jake." Marie ignored the shock on the other woman's face. Rising, she shook Mrs. Beason's hand then ushered the young Colder through the doorway.

When they were out of earshot, Jesse tapped her arm and whispered, "You're not gonna tell him, are you, Marie?"

She stopped and put her hand on her hip. "Tell who?"

"Aw, c'mon. You know my dad. He'll skin me alive."

Marie scowled. "He'll be lucky if I don't get to him first. Why hasn't he checked your homework? I always made sure you started it before I left for the diner."

"Well..." Her young charge bit his lip and developed a sudden fascination with the ceiling.

"Jesse." A well-tailored, buxom blonde walked out of a classroom behind them and covered the distance between her and the boy before Marie could say, "Who?"

"Hi, Miss Scott." Jesse squeezed the greeting between his gritted teeth as the woman enveloped him in a bear hug.

"Oh Jesse." She turned his head with the crook of her finger and peered into his face. She gave him an all-knowing look. "What have you been up to? You know, Mrs. Beason's kept me informed of your progress," she nagged in a matronly voice. "I know your work isn't getting done."

Marie fast became the invisible woman. She crossed her arms as her irritation grew.

"Now," the woman said, "tell your father I'll be over tonight to help you. He *will* be home, won't he?"

Jesse nodded.

Marie's lips thinned. "Excuse me." She tapped on the woman's shoulder.

"Yes?" Jesse's old teacher stood and finally looked at her. She turned her nose up at Marie's shabby dress. "Oh." The woman put out her hand as if she had to deal with a dead insect and wanted to touch as little of it as possible. "You must be the new housekeeper I've heard so much about."

Marie held back her sneer in the midst of the woman's perfectly made-up face. "Yes, and also the new tutor. Unless it's for a social visit, I'll assume we won't see you."

"Well..." The pretty woman crossed her arms over her daring neckline and raised a flawless brow. "If that's the case, I'll have to recommend some improvements when I talk to Jake, although..." She pouted then pasted a thinly veiled smile on her face. "A social visit sounds like quite a good idea. Tonight, then." She backed away and waved at Jesse. "Bye, sweetheart."

"Come on, Jesse." Marie held out her hand as she glared at the now empty path Miss Scott had taken. Marie huffed and attempted to quell the jealousy that bristled in her. "Let's go home."

Jesse put his hand in hers. "Marie, I think you'll do." He walked her down the hallway.

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh," he said and shrugged. "It's somethin' Gramps says."

"Gramps, huh?" Marie swung their hands back and forth. "You don't like her either, do you?"

Jesse forced a shudder to rack his body. "Heck, no. She pinches my cheek."

Marie laughed. "Your father really didn't show any interest in that bimbo, did he?"

Jesse squeaked then cleared his throat and lowered his high-pitched voice. "Yeah, ah, in a manly sort of way."

Marie raised her brow. "A manly way?"

Jesse shrugged. "I think he took her out once. She's been after him ever since. But don't worry." He patted her hand. "Gramps says you got the claim to Dad."

"Gramps, again. When do I get to meet him?" She tamped down her green-eyed monster and focused on the boy, convinced the plastic blonde wouldn't be good for him. "And by the way, how much is this claim worth?"

Jesse tittered then placed his free hand over his mouth. "Ah, well..." He straightened and jerked his chin with a firm nod. "Ask Dad."

Challenged, she smiled. She knew she shouldn't say it but jealousy was a compelling master. She couldn't help herself. "I might do that."

Chapter Seven

Dust rose on Jake's heels as he rushed to dismount then led Ranger into the barn. He'd been restless all day, thinking about Marie and what they could have together. After he put his mount in the stall, Jake freed the stud of his saddle and tackle then closed the weathered exterior door and paused to stare at Marie's car in the drive. He'd gotten home in time to see her. Good. He knew she'd leave for the diner soon.

Determined, he pulled the brim of his hat over his brow. Gramps had been right. Marie was special. And the longer she stayed, the more he realized that. In the short time since they met, she'd become a part of his life, a part he now decided he didn't want to lose.

The cool autumn breeze brushed his cheek and snapped the ends of his jacket as he meandered toward the house. It was crazy but Jake realized he relished coming home, seeing Marie with Jesse as they laughed and played, worked or rode. They were the family he'd wanted for his son—and for himself. He chastised himself for not recognizing how lonely he'd been until now, otherwise maybe he would have realized his deeper need for Marie sooner.

He stepped onto the porch and heard Marie's voice through one of the slightly open windows. He listened to the warmth that radiated from her. She loved Jesse. He could hear it when she spoke, see the warmth in her face when she looked at the boy. When she'd dared peek at Jake, he only saw regret in her eyes yet he knew they could have so much more. Determined now, he would work to get the happiness they all deserved, and then some. Like that sensual night they'd shared in the barn.

He slowed as he remembered the shock on her face the first time he kissed her. Then the events afterward. Jake swallowed, his throat dry, the remembrance of Marie's luscious body against his. He closed his eyes to savor the erotically potent sensation he got every time he thought of her naked, wet and hungry for his advances.

Yeah, he'd taken her hard. But she'd been ready for the ride. More than ready if her reaction spoke true. As loud as she got when she came—God.

Jake sucked in a breath to control himself. He had the desperate urge to march in and sweep her off her feet, right into the large poster bed his grandparents had left him, in order to see her expression again, to feel her warm, supple body under his.

He growled and turned the knob. That fantasy was impossible for the moment. Coming on to her would make her run from him faster. *Until he caught her*, he thought.

Somehow he'd find a way to win her heart.

"Wow. I didn't know you could get neat pictures like this."

Jesse's voice rose. The door creaked as Jake opened it. Jesse sat at the computer screen in the family room and turned to stare wide-eyed at him. The look on the boy's face, in itself, wasn't good. Marie's glare confirmed that Jake had trouble.

"I've got to go." She rose and looked at her watch. "I'll be late tonight and Jesse's got homework." She glowered again. "He's started his math but it would help if you'd see *all* his work was completed...right, Jesse?" She put a hand on her hip and Jesse nodded when she crossed her arms. "He also has something to tell you."

"Oh?" Jake removed his hat and hung it on the coat rack, not knowing if the chill in the room came from Marie or from the breeze that blew through the open doorway. "You want to tell me now or after the homework's done?"

"After." The boy's head bobbed with his quick response. He gathered his schoolwork and rushed from the room.

Jake shook his head and looked at Marie.

Her eyes narrowed.

He strolled over to her and rubbed her arms. He yearned to hold her. "What's wrong?"

"I—"

A knock at the door interrupted her. Marie glanced at the opening. Her gaze turned from cold to sub-zero. "I've got to go." She grabbed her coat from the rack and stomped out.

Jake scratched his head and let his eyes follow her. Then he noticed Wendy Scott at the doorway.

"Oh hell," he muttered under his breath and rubbed his chin, 'cause that would be exactly what he'd have to pay to get the woman out of there.

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Marie eyed the pale moonbeams that shined on her new rear window. She'd closed the diner and the hour had grown late. She stretched to relax her body. She should be tired but she wasn't. Too many thoughts and emotions ran through her. She inhaled the cold air, thankful she could feel its crispness, grateful she still walked with the living.

The wind gusted and blew her hair into her eyes. She ran a hand through the strands to smooth it and looked away. She should go home. Or, rather, to Jake's. She grimaced. She thought of Jake's place as hers as well now. Perhaps that was part of her problem. Where she lived was Jake's home, not hers and the fact made the gulf of some inner sense she couldn't name grow wider. She felt even more alone.

She breathed again to dispel her sorrows and watched the treetops near the old fort lean in the blasts of wind. She shivered as the chilly autumn breeze blew. It was almost October and the temperature dropped more each day. Per the older folk of the valley, the winter would be harsh.

Marie tightened her fleece coat around her and looked down at her faded jeans. The pants contrasted with her expensive coat but somehow they looked great together. She zipped the jacket shut and remembered the pleasure in Jake's face when he'd first seen her in his gift.

Jake.

She moaned as she thought of him. She'd tried like the devil to forget how his embrace felt, the passion that burned between them, the need for his hard body in hers that would spring up in her from nowhere when he touched her. In all the twenty-eight years of her life, she'd never experienced anything like that.

She brushed a hand over her lips to remember his touch. With regret, she let her head drop. The country life, a man like Jake, these were childhood dreams she'd given up long ago. She hadn't regretted her life, at least before Bill Martin and the Back to America Movement. She'd basked in her success.

But dealing with Jesse's school today made her want those old dreams again. She already cared too much for the sandy-haired boy, and when he'd gazed at her with that now-familiar Colder grin, she couldn't help the instincts that rose in her.

The wind blustered and scattered her thoughts. A sign on the old fort quivered and seemed to wave her forward. Pensive, she walked along the road. Maybe she needed to move on, before she grew even more attached. She wanted the best for Jesse. As a fugitive, Marie wasn't it. She gulped to hold back the feelings that begged to spill over her. She'd always believed she'd be a good mother. After her talk with Jesse this morning, Marie realized she wanted a chance to prove it. Above all, she finally recognized she wanted a home, a family...and Jake.

She shook her head. She couldn't even afford to fantasize about a life with him, yet she'd watched him, wanted him. She'd never forget how his hard body felt intertwined with hers. A tear welled in her eye, the knowledge that all she'd come to care about in such a short space of time would be lost to her. Jake was a good father, a man with integrity. Marie now believed what Katie had once told her. When Jake finally said the words love, honor and cherish, he would mean them. He deserved better than she could give.

Marie lowered her head and puffed her cheeks. The time had come to forget the possibility of such a future. As much as she hated to admit it, even the snobbish schoolteacher would be better for the Colder family.

She peered at the old fort, strangely beautiful in the moonlight. The place seemed to come closer. The realization hit her that she had meandered toward it. Marie looked around to see if anyone was about.

The low moan of the wind echoed in the trees. Its sound beckoned her. She sauntered onto the grounds of the sleeping structure. The muted sounds of the night surrounded her like a shroud.

The wind whistled briefly through the gatehouse. Her feet crunched against the gravel as she passed one of the old officers' barracks. Most of the fort had become open

field, the few birch and pine trees left acted as lone sentinels to the now-deserted property. The moon shadowed the limestone buildings that remained. The white rock glowed in the pale light. She passed a sign that said "Old Infantry Barracks". The marker showed where one of the quarters once stood. In her mind, she saw the worn log structure. Soldiers talked and laughed and a small group played cards on the porch front.

She strolled over one of the bridges that crisscrossed the small brook which flowed near the old parade ground. The creek ran the length of the green. She listened to the water gurgle in the channel.

In her mind, she imagined the daylight. A child in knee pants shouted to a friend by the water. The boy wanted to show them some glorious find by the creek bed. In her mind, the boy looked like Jesse. She smiled, thinking that's exactly what that child would have done in an earlier age. She stopped and leaned on the railing to enjoy her fantasy and to take in the stark beauty of the place. The rivulet below her meandered and danced under the bright moon. In the distance, a few pinpoints of light flickered on the far distant highway.

The place had been a haven for the weary and downtrodden along the old Oregon Trail. Modern roads skirted the ruins now and had left the crumbled structures forgotten, but Marie could still sense the serenity and hope the place had given to others a little more than a century ago. She put her hands in her pockets and walked on—and prayed for a similar kind of peace that could be found here again for just one more.

The scruff of military boots seemed to sound on the old commissary porch. Her head snapped up. From nowhere, warm yellow lamplights burned in the windows and a group of men leaned against the open porch railing. The apparitions smoked tobacco and discussed the growing restlessness of the neighboring Indians.

Marie squinted and looked closer. The wind gust tossed leaves and small twigs in her face. The bluster subsided. When she looked again, she breathed a little easier. Only the pale moonlight gleamed against the log and stone, sending shadows into its deeper recesses. She shook her head and walked on. *I must be more tired than I thought.*

"So yuh gonna do somethin' about yur problem or sit there and take it on the chin?"

"What?" Startled, Marie glanced at the old store. A small squall blew and made a tree branch tap against the side of the building. She looked behind her, searched for the voice. Perhaps the stress from her problems had gotten to her? She shouldn't be surprised. The kind of tension she'd had would upset anyone. She shook her head and moved on.

"Yuh heard me."

She looked around. The eerie voice floated on the breeze.

"I thought yuh was a fighter, not some silly woman who couldn't hold a grain a' salt."

That did it. Marie put a hand on her hip. "Whoever you are, you could at least have the courtesy to look me in the face."

"Yuh really want me to? Dunno. Promised Jake I wouldn't."

"Jake?" Marie turned around in a circle to look for the intruder. "You know Jake?"

"Hah. Ought to. Been around since he was born."

The corner of her mouth rose. "You're Gramps, aren't you?" She circled in the other direction and still couldn't see him. "Come out. I promise I won't tell."

"Okay."

She jumped as the solid voice sounded behind her. She twirled around to face the man. In front of her stood an older Jake with a salt-and-pepper mustache. "But..." Stunned, she pointed at the building. "Where were you?"

He had his hands on his hips and looked every bit as cocky as an older Jake would. "Don't worry 'bout it, Miz Taylor. I move fast." He crossed his arms. "But yuh have to make good on that promise. Yuh cain't tell Jake yuh seen me."

"Why?" She bit off her smile and eyed the senile older man. Jake had warned her that certain qualities ran in the family. In the dim light, Jake's grandfather didn't look much more than forty-five, fifty max. His temples had a touch of gray and he wore the blue uniform of an eighteenth-century officer.

"Well, promise me and don't look at me like that cuz I know what you're thinkin'. I ain't crazy." His hands were cold as he took her arm and tucked it into his then walked her toward the creek. "Trust me, I got all my wits about me. I just work here sometimes is all."

Marie covered her mouth with her hand and laughed. "I'm sorry. I...well, I let my imagination get away with me. I swear I could hear people talking, and I don't mean anyone from this century."

He nodded. "The place does that to yuh, don't it? Not to worry." He stepped onto the bridge and gently lifted her arm to help her, as if she wore gloves and a hoop skirt. "Them that live here are here to protect."

She giggled. She still might be right about the senile part. "So do they have reenactments?" She pointed to his clothes.

He grinned. "Well, I guess yuh could call it that." He let go of her as they strolled across the wooden planks. "Anyway, that ain't what I came here to talk about."

Marie frowned. "How did you know I was here?"

"That ain't important." He took off his leather riding gloves and slapped them against his hand. "Miz Taylor..." He stopped and faced her. "I know yuh have a few problems but I want yuh tuh know that Jake's in your camp. When trouble gits here, and it will, don't go flyin' off. Stand and fight. Like we did here at Fort Bridger. Jake'll protect you."

"But how do you know? I mean, how do you know trouble's following me?"

"Trust me." He touched the bill of his cap and nodded. "You deserve some happiness and so does Jake. You two should be together." Gramps hopped off the bridge onto the dirt pathway then offered her his arm. She placed her fingertips against his uniformed forearm and stepped off.

Smiling, the old gent walked her to the large gazebo that stood in the midst of a grove of trees. With the graciousness of an eighteenth-century gentleman, he took her hand and placed a cool kiss on the back of it. "You're one fine lady. Now remember, we'll be there." He turned and walked off.

"Gramps?"

He stopped and looked at her.

"What makes you so sure Jake and I are meant for each other?"

He used that knowing Colder grin. "Let's say I have it from a higher authority. Now, I gotta go. Remember what I said." With that, he disappeared.

Marie stared. Where did he go? She shook her head. He had to have gone through the trees. The shadows the moon cast must have caused the impression that he'd simply disappeared.

Suddenly giddy, she ran up the stairs to the gazebo and imagined an army band playing. She swirled around a few times, and held out an arm as if she held part of her full ballroom skirt. She pretended to dance a waltz with a dark, handsome soldier who had escorted her to the grand event—one who looked exactly like Jake. Finally, she held up both arms and spun quickly around. The movement made her dizzy and she loved the sensation. Before she fell, she leaned her head against one of the poles that supported the roof.

"May I have the next dance or is your card full for the evening?"

The deep, rich voice floated to her. Marie jumped and grabbed her chest. Her heart pounded, her breath caught. Jake stood at the bottom of the stairs, smiling. Then he bolted up the steps two at a time.

"If it is, I guess I'll have to cut in." He took her in his arms and gazed down at her. "I didn't mean to scare you." He placed a light peck on her temple.

Marie found her voice. "Jake." Her body warmed in his embrace. "I..."

His thumb brushed her cheek. "I wanted to find you and thank you for helping Jesse. Wendy told me what happened."

Marie's brow arched. "Wendy?"

"Jesse's teacher last year." He rubbed her back.

"Hmmm." Marie peered into his face. "The one you have a 'manly interest' in?"

Jake frowned. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Let's say Jesse isn't blind."

Jake chuckled. Leaning forward, he pressed his forehead against hers. "You jealous?"

"Not of that bimbo."

"Good." Jake pressed his seductive lips against hers. "Because I don't have any interest in her, manly or otherwise."

Marie swallowed. "Jake, I don't have a claim on you. It's really none of my business."

"What if I want to make it your business?"

She pressed her lips together. "You'd be wiser not to."

Jake nodded. "I think it's time I convinced you otherwise."

This time his kiss seared her insides and she drew away from him to catch her breath.

The blood rushed to her head and threatened to evaporate what common sense she had left. "Jake, don't tempt fate. Let me go before my problems crash down on you and Jesse."

He lifted her chin with his finger and stared into her eyes. "Sorry, Marie. Can't do that. Not when I'm so close to having something I've wanted for so long."

"Jake," Marie pleaded and pushed against his chest to no avail.

He kissed her neck and her resolve about fled. *Think of Jake. Of Jesse.* You have to fix your problems first.

She pulled her head back and stared at him. Her determination to see this through would be the hardest thing she'd ever had to do. "Tomorrow I'm moving out." Her lip quivered. "I'll...I'll still clean the house and watch after Jesse but I'm getting too close to you, and it's scaring me. This isn't what you want or what you need."

"Marie." Jake grasped her elbows and forced her to look at him. "Tell me what it is. What's pulling you away from me?" His gaze pierced her.

Tears spilled from her eyes. "I can't." She pushed again.

His steely arms held her. "Is it something I'd arrest you for? Is that what you're afraid of?"

"Yes," she yelled and pounded on him with her fist. "But it wasn't my fault. Trust me, Jake," she mumbled under her tears, "the farther away I am from you and Jesse, the better." She broke from him and ran down the stairs.

"Marie," he shouted and moved to go after her.

"Let her go."

"What?" Jake swerved to find Gramps standing behind him.

"I said, let her go." Gramps walked up and put his hand on Jake's shoulder. "She needs to cry it out." He sighed. "And she needs to know you trust her. She don't know that yet."

Jake closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead. "Gramps, what did she do that's so bad?"

"What she had to." The old ghost fretted as he eyed the younger man. "Don't worry, son." He clapped Jake on the back. "The right time's gonna come so be ready."

Jake looked at the ghost but the specter disappeared in front of him. Jake threw up his arms then leaned against the railing. It was fruitless to push the old man for more. Jake bit his lip, looked at the distant moon and prayed. "Gramps, for God's sake, tell me," he mumbled under his breath. "How can I help her if I don't know what the trouble is?" He cocked his ear and listened to the night sounds, hoped he'd hear his great-great-grandfather's voice. The rustling leaves told him otherwise.

He lowered his head in defeat for the moment then walked down the steps and followed Marie's track along the dirt trail. As he came to the fort's end, he stopped and stared at the officers' barracks gleaming in the moonlight. Gramps had lived there once. Now he did again. Jake thought maybe he should take up residence for the night and pester the old goat. He grunted and walked on. The ornery coot wouldn't give him the time of day if he didn't want to.

Jake kicked a loose stone and pondered Gramps' words. Marie was in deep trouble and it wasn't her fault. Somehow, he'd known that, just like he knew he'd always love her. He stared at the diner across the road and the realization hit him. Be it fate or providence, the two of them *were* meant for each other. His grandfather had tried to tell him that. Jake looked at the stone building again and nodded. "Thanks, Gramps."

He walked on, his steps quickened. If Marie thought it'd be easy to get rid of him, she was mistaken. Stubbornness ran in the family, and once Jake made up his mind, he didn't stop until he got what he wanted.

He decided what his next move would be, what it should have been from the very first. He wasn't short of resources. Hell, he'd been the law in town for years now. If his grandfather wouldn't tell him, he'd find out on his own.

Jake got in the squad car and stared at the old fort then realized why it had taken him this long to figure out what he needed to do. He'd liked Marie from the get-go. Now he was afraid he'd find something he wouldn't like at all.

Chapter Eight

Jake squinted as he stared at the report on the monitor. Frustrated, he folded his arms across his chest and leaned back in the chair. The morning sunlight peeked through the blinds of the stationhouse and glared against the drab computer screen. Beside the BMW license and registration, he'd displayed the owner's picture. It was Marie all right. She hadn't even bothered to lie about her last name. He grunted in frustration then hit the clear button. A three-year-old speeding ticket wasn't anything to run from. He stared at the blank screen, confused. He'd found no warrants, no arrests, no nothing. So what the hell frightened her?

Jake drummed his fingertips on the gray, metal desktop and tried to think. It'd been easy enough to get her social security number. Accessing it had given him a bit more information. She'd worked as a financial advisor and left the company where she'd been a rising star to work on her own. According to her ex-secretary, she'd taken most of her clients with her. The woman rattled off a number and told him smugly, if she wasn't in, he could talk to her partner and live-in boyfriend. He glanced at his scribbled notes.

Bill Martin. Jake already hated the guy.

He picked up the number and rolled the smooth paper between his thumb and forefinger. What would make a savvy businesswoman flee after a couple of months of self-employment in an industry she knew so well?

He looked at the name he'd written down again. Something in his gut told him the man had been involved, but how? He couldn't even tell what Marie had done.

Jake threw the paper on the desk and glanced at the file. *MT Associates*. That was the name of her fledgling firm. Gritting his teeth, he picked up the phone and dialed the number.

* * * * *

Katie patted Marie's hand as they chatted over a cup of coffee. "Don't worry, honey, you're gonna stay with me. Besides, you need to get out some. All work and no play makes a dull girl." She winked at Marie. "Tonight we'll do the town." She stood and straightened her skirt. "At least, what little there is of Fort Bridger." One of the few customers left waved at Katie and the waitress returned to service the floor.

Marie plopped an elbow on the chilly melamine table and rested her chin in her hand. God knew, she didn't want to leave Jake, but deep in Marie's heart she knew she had to. Somewhere between the horses, the cows, the ranch house and work, she'd fallen in love with the cowboy sheriff and his precious son. It pained her enough now.

How would she feel if she'd gotten closer?

The bells on the well used wooden door jingled. She blinked away her tears to see who had entered. Jake stood in the entrance and scanned her with those midnight-blue eyes. His stern countenance made her gulp.

He removed his hat and came to her, intent on whatever his goal was from the look of him. "Mind if I sit down?"

She winced at the iron in his voice. It wasn't really a question. She licked her lips and nodded.

Jake dropped his hat on the table and slid into the seat beside her. The corner of his mouth rose and Marie realized he stared at her mouth. It had been that affectation of hers that got their passion started to begin with.

She looked away when he placed his palms on the table. He clasped his hands in front of him. When she looked at his face again, his eyes narrowed and drilled her with inquiry.

Marie shifted in the booth and looked away as the silence lingered. She probably should've already left Fort Bridger. Swallowing, she let her gaze carry her head upward.

Jake's hard look bored into her. "What did you do, Marie?" His voice sounded smooth and soft but the edge she heard in his tone hit her as hard as granite.

Marie licked her lips. "Jake, I..."

"Honey, you missed breakfast this morning. Where were you?" The welcomed interruption from Katie's coarse voice broke the hold Jake had on her. Marie said a silent prayer, thankful. There was nothing she could tell Jake and then be able to stay in Fort Bridger. And God knew she wanted to remain for as long as she could. Where else could she go to maintain a low profile?

Jake eyed her for another moment then turned to Katie. "I had some data I needed to check out." He looked at Marie and took a sip from the cup of coffee Katie'd placed in front of him.

A shiver ran up Marie's arms.

"Well, I hope you found whatever you're looking for," Katie said, "and so's you know, Marie's gonna stay with me for a while. At least until you two figure things out. I wouldn't want you worrying about her." Katie frowned. "I don't know what's going on with the two of you but you're both hankerin' for each other plain as day. Knowin' you both, I cain't believe neither of you are doin' anything 'bout it." She pulled a rag from her waistband and walked off. "Damn shame if you ask me," she mumbled. "Two fools are perfect for each other..."

Jake rubbed the hot cup, his eyes rimmed in sadness. "I don't want you to leave."

She folded her hands. "I-I don't want to go." She glanced at him. "I need to." She paused and pressed her lips together. "There's something between us and it's growing

stronger. If I don't leave, I'm afraid—" She shook her head. "I meant what I said. I'm not making love to you again. It isn't right and...and it wouldn't be good for Jesse."

"Says who?" he rumbled.

She lifted her chin and saw her last customer at the counter, ready to leave. "You and I both know that. Now if you'll excuse me. I have work to do."

"Fine." Jake scowled. "I can tell you this—" He stood and leaned over her as she slid to the edge of the booth. "I don't know what Bill Martin has on you but I intend to find out."

Marie froze in shock and terror. "Bill?" she squeaked.

Jake straightened. "I talked to Mr. Martin this morning, and don't worry..." He picked up his hat and placed it on his head. "I didn't let him know who I was or where I came from. Nor will he be able to figure it out. But I'm telling you, Marie, I'm going to find what it is that's keeping us apart." He leaned over and kissed her—hard. "I want you in my life. And I want to know why you're not." With that, he spun around and marched out.

Marie sat stock still and watched the taillights of Jake's cruiser as he left the parking lot. Then she closed the jaw she hadn't realized had dropped open.

Bill? Alive?

She jumped out of the booth and rushed to retrieve her jacket. "Katie," she shouted over her shoulder, "please take care of my customer. I'm going home to pack. I'll be back for the next crowd."

She stopped for a split second as she realized what she had almost done. *God, had he pressed her, she would have told Jake the truth.*

The thought drove her. She ran out the back and jumped into her sleek black car.

* * * * *

Slim Jim Hancock, alias Jim Douglas, watched the BMW tear out of the parking lot. Earlier he'd seen the sheriff come and go. He had a damn good view from his little motel room. Thank God, the angle the place had could keep him hidden. Tailing the Taylor woman was hard enough without the sheriff sniffing at her skirts.

Quite a busy place, the diner, Slim thought as he grabbed his 9mm Beretta and stuffed it in his shoulder holster. He donned his jacket and hurried. Once out of the room, he jumped into his pickup truck then rolled onto the highway. Up ahead, Slim spied Marie's car as it turned onto the dirt road that led to the Colder ranch. He grimaced. He didn't like taking risks. He hoped the sheriff wouldn't be home. The big man wasn't someone he wanted to tangle with.

Slim eased the truck onto the lane and drove through the dust Miss Taylor's tires had kicked up. Someone might see him on the lonely road again but he couldn't afford not to follow her. His gut told him she had the information he needed. The stuff the Back to America Movement was so hot to get.

Slim doffed his cowboy hat and cruised onto the flat land that belonged to the Bar A, his employer for now. It was a good thing. The spread adjoined the Colder ranch and gave him an excuse to be on the property.

He pulled onto a bypass trail that skirted the sheriff's place and stopped the truck within sight of the house. He rolled the window down part way and listened for any sounds that could mean trouble. The wind gusted and blew into the truck. The breeze ruffled his flannel collar and rattled the paper he kept in his front pocket. The frigid air carried the scent of cows, fresh hay and a hint of snow. Slim took a deep whiff. The smell let him reminisce over the days of his youth, days spent herding doggies without a worry. He looked up at the sky and remembered he hadn't watched the daily weather report. It looked like a front coming in.

He inhaled a deep breath and took the folded paper from his pocket. He glared at the picture of Marie.

Missing – Marie Taylor Martin, wife. Five Thousand dollars reward for news of her whereabouts.

The practically buff figure was curvy and soft yet he wondered if the breasts were real or some doctor's dream. Slim snorted, questioned whether the sheriff had an opinion based on closer observation.

He inspected the house. The police cruiser was gone. Noting his good luck, he creaked opened the truck door and hopped onto the grassy field.

Time to make his next move.

* * * * *

Marie rushed into Jake's home and went straight to the computer. "The Internet, you idiot. Why haven't you checked your business through it?" Any movement she hadn't made in the accounts would mean Bill was alive. Besides, surely someone would have discovered her missing by now, unless...

It took a few moments to log on to the company website. Quickly, she entered the codes that allowed her access to the managed accounts. "Come on, baby," she mumbled as she hit the final key then waited while the data processed.

<ACCESS DENIED>

She stared at the monitor. Her heart leapt with hope. Her fingers flew over the keyboard again.

<ACCESS DENIED>

Someone had changed the codes. Only one person could modify them besides herself.

"Bill, you sonofab—" She typed the code that back-doored the system.

<ACCESS DENIED>

Sweat beaded her brow. Bill had to be alive and if he was...

She carefully typed the keys again.

<ACCESS DENIED>

"Damn." She slapped the keyboard. Her heart pumped with fear. Leaning back, she closed her eyes for an instant and rubbed them with the back of her hands as she worked to calm herself. When she opened them again, the crude instant messaging system Bill had created opened up.

>Marie, my darling, I've finally found you. I've missed you. Come home. I promise to make things right.

She froze. Her stomach lurched to her throat. When they started the business, Bill had set up the system on their website. It worked somehow through their company's host but she didn't know exactly how. He'd set it up so he could access her as long as she was logged onto their site. They'd used the secure connection to communicate to each other when they couldn't meet or when there was an immediate need to invest or reallocate money—she just didn't know he'd used her computer IDs to kite the investments her clients made. He must have been monitoring the site. It would be the only way he knew she was on the damn thing.

Another message popped up.

>You know you must. You have something we both need.

>The others aren't as forgiving as I am.

She shivered as goose bumps tingled on her arms.

The doorbell rang and caused her to jump.

She broke out of her panic and backed out of the website. Marie rubbed her hands over her damp face and neck to check her unease. She had to keep her wits about her. She licked her lips and tasted the cold salty sweat that had gathered there. The bell sounded again. Marie's hands still shook as she got up to answer the door.

The new cowhand from the Bar A stood in front of her. The man made her antsy. What did he want?

"Ma'am." The cowboy nodded and took off his hat. "We haven't officially met. I'm James Hancock but my friends call me Slim."

Marie didn't move.

"Uh, I stopped by a while back and talked to your husband."

"My husband?" Marie shook her head to clear her dazed mind. "The sheriff isn't my husband. He's..." She frowned. "He's my employer. I'm the housekeeper."

"I see." The man ran the brim of his hat through his fingers. "Well, I'm sorry to bother you but I wondered if I could use the phone. You see, I was in the middle of making my rounds and forgot to call in. Left my cell phone at the motel. You mind?" He nodded toward the inside of the house.

Marie questioned if what he said was true. He'd been to the diner several times since she first saw him and although Katie flirted with him outrageously, he appeared

to stick to himself. Jake thought him a good hand yet she couldn't help but consider her initial misgivings. Something told her to keep him away.

Still, that was her big city way of dealing with a stranger. In this valley, she'd come to realize people didn't act that way. In the end, her conscience got to her. She opened the door wider. "I guess not. The phone's in the kitchen."

He followed her in. He glanced warily around the room as she turned and walked part way down the hall. "It's this way." Marie pointed toward the kitchen and wondered why he seemed so uneasy. When she heard him pick up the receiver and dial, she walked to her bedroom and shut the door behind her. Perhaps she imagined the man's guarded nature. She'd done that a lot lately. Imagine things. But after her miscalculation with Bill, she questioned many of her judgments. She frowned. Bill's resurrection had unnerved her. Perhaps she'd overreacted to this man.

She leaned against the wooden doorjamb, tried to settle her thoughts. She took in a slow breath. Bill was alive. He had found her, sort of. She walked to the closet and grabbed her pack to check it and reassure herself that the documents were still there.

The papers covered the bottom. She fumbled through the statements and copies of transactions then heaved a sigh of relief. Somehow she would get out of this. She wouldn't let Bill drag her in any deeper. Thank God she wasn't responsible for murder.

Marie glanced at the mailing receipt she'd stuffed with the list of strange codes and offshore bank account numbers.

Federal Bureau of Investigations

Washington, D.C.

She'd anonymously mailed copies of the documents to them, hoping that someone who wasn't connected with the organization would receive them and do something. Obviously that hadn't happened. Still, that piece of paper was even more important than the others to save her skin. It proved to the authorities that she'd tried to help.

She shoved the documents into the bag and gathered a few remaining items she'd had in the bathroom then zipped the duffle shut. She had to decide on her next move. Had Bill really found her?

She calmed a little. The computer didn't reveal where she physically lived. At least, she didn't think it did, but knowing Bill, with his connections, he could track her down.

She shook her head. She needed to think straight. Right now, he couldn't know where she was. If he had, he wouldn't have asked. But she wasn't a computer geek. There were ways to track messages. Could he find her?

Yes, she decided. The question was how soon. She ran her hand through her hair. She needed to leave. But where to?

Her heart broke at the thought of leaving. She looked around the room, let her fingers run over the rich wood of the antique spindle bed. This would be her last time in this room, this house, Jake's arms. Her eyes swelled with moisture as her hand caressed

the soft homespun quilt that lay on top of the high-set mattress. She'd had dreams in this bed, dreams of better days and warmer nights.

A drop trickled down her cheek. She'd finally found love, only to lose it. She would miss Jake, miss being part of his family. And very soon, she knew, it would be time to leave the valley for good.

Reluctantly, she slung the bag over her shoulder and walked out, oblivious to the fact she'd let a stranger in the house. As she stepped in the hallway, she heard the screen door slam. When she walked into the living room, the main door stood ajar and Mr. Hancock was gone. She turned to the computer monitor. She remembered she hadn't turned it off.

The website was open again. Across the IM program were typed words.

>I'll get you, Marie. TRUST ME.

>AND WHEN I FIND YOU, YOU'LL PAY.

Chapter Nine

Moisture beaded on Bill's face as he stared at the screen. Hot rage boiled in him. He'd almost had her. He hammered a new command into the computer. The woman had gotten the better of him once. She wouldn't do it again.

The rhythmic staccato sounded from the buttons as his fingers deftly moved over them. Marie operated a computer out there somewhere. He would find her. He hit the enter key and sat back to analyze the series of electronic commands that crossed the screen.

He couldn't afford to waste time. He'd already traveled from Canada to Mexico to look for her. Before he left again, he needed proof. BAM, his pet name for Back to America, hadn't turned on him—yet. If he got the series of codes he needed to complete the arms deal, they wouldn't.

His eyes narrowed as the computer jargon flew across the screen. Fear-driven adrenalin pumped through him. The transaction had been the biggest arms deal they'd had so far and he'd been the one to engineer it. He'd conceived the idea. He'd worked the plan. He'd even gone so far as to seduce Marie away from the established investment firm, convincing her she could go it alone.

Bill fingered the framed picture of Marie's computer-generated nude body with a small amount of regret. Yes, he'd used her and the money she'd made to finance his exchanges, but it was all for the good. He'd hoped to convince her to join the Movement, but she'd discovered he'd pilfered from the accounts before he could convert her. Then she'd hit him. For that miscalculation, she would pay.

He hit another key and glared at the screen. More calm now, he realized Marie hadn't been properly prepared for what she'd found. He'd tried to educate her, told her of the misdeeds of the degenerate whores the Movement wanted to terminate. It was part of the dirty work needed to cleanse the land of riffraff. He hadn't minded. Those fiends deserved what they got but he hadn't the time to show Marie the evil of her clients' complacency, their willingness to make money on the backs of the patriots of this country.

Bill leaned into the padded cowhide chair and put the picture in his lap. He'd moved over a quarter-billion dollars before she stopped him and ran out with the series of codes given to him by the dealers. Without those encrypted numbers, the arms deal would be finished.

He ground his teeth with impatience. Setups for the deal were transmitted via computer. Without the right number sequence, he didn't know how to get started. One false signal and the digitally coded avenue would permanently close. He'd have to

work through months of personal contacts again and hope those same friends still trusted him.

Of course, if Marie tried to use the codes, he wouldn't have to worry about trust. He'd be dead.

Sweat glistened on his upper lip as the processing stopped. The hit would come when he wasn't looking.

The monitor lit up and Bill punched another key. The upper crust at BAM had discovered his *faux pas*. Right now, BAM kept him at arm's length, supposedly to keep him out of trouble. Others searched instead, using the underground network to find the codes. The management thought his hands were tied. The screen flashed again and he hovered over the keyboard. A lot they knew.

He hammered out a few additional commands and a sequence of codes rolled across the screen. The monitor flashed. He allowed himself to relax. Leaning back in the leather chair, he folded his hands behind his head and let a smirk crawl across his face. He felt like the cat that'd caught the canary. *The cunt*.

It wouldn't take long now. The tracing stopped. The words copied themselves on the screen. It was a Wyoming server. He picked up his glossy print of Marie and leered. "Now, darling, where did you put those codes?"

* * * * *

Slim Jim Douglas watched Marie fly out of the house and into her car. "Damn." He hit the redial button on his cellular phone and started the engine. A brusque feminine voice answered on the other end.

"Party in flight. Advise," said Jim.

A moment of silence ensued before the voice responded. "Does she have the documents?"

"Unknown." The airwaves crackled. He switched channels and waited for his orders. Then it came.

"...man says to stick to her, handsome. If she hits the Interstate, bring her in. Quietly."

"Copy."

Slim tossed the phone on the seat as he watched the BMW pull along the side of the house. The motor roared and the tires spun as the panicked woman raced the engine. "Well," he straightened the hat on his head, "that answers one question." He let his mouth rise into a lopsided grin. "She got Martin's message."

He put the truck in gear and drove onto the dirt byway. Ms. Taylor was too keyed to see if anyone followed. Slim hung back, not worried she had pulled out of sight. Travel on the long driveway took you in only one direction—to Fort Bridger.

Slim crested the small ridge that hid the house from the county highway and spied the Taylor woman's car. She turned toward town. With a jaundice eye, he watched her

slow as one of the deputy's cruisers came into view. Casually, he pulled up to the end of the drive and recognized the deputy as the car passed.

He turned onto the road and kept the BMW at a distance. As the car entered the town limits, it slowed even more and Slim sighed with relief as he watched Marie drive into the motel parking lot. He cruised by. She left the vehicle and went into the diner. Slim turned down a side road and stopped. Picking up the cell phone, he hit redial again. "Cancel flight."

"Copy. Report when position changes."

"Copy." Slim turned off the phone and pushed the edge of the hat up his forehead. He huffed as he looked over his shoulder toward the back of the diner. If anything, the naïve woman had guts.

He brought the truck around and pulled into the motel. He figured lunch at the greasy spoon would be especially good today.

* * * * *

Smoke from the bar oozed into the poster-size bathroom as Marie straightened the hem of her slinky black dress. She stared at herself in the broken, rusty mirror. What had *ever* made her wear this? The neckline revealed too much, the hemline was too short. Never mind that Katie's cleavage plunged deeper and her skirt was shorter. Marie frowned. She should never have let Katie talk her into this. As soon as she'd walked into the place, Marie felt like every male had undressed her with his eyes.

She examined her face in the wall-length mirror that hung in front of the toilet. At one time in her life, the outfit would have been simple but chic. A quiet, elegant statement against a backdrop of diamonds and pearls. Now it just clashed with the acrid smell of cigarettes, mold and cheap perfume.

She wrinkled her nose. Most of these men she saw in the diner every day. For the most part, they were honest and hardworking but they weren't used to seeing her in anything but beat-up pants and a t-shirt. This dress was the only decent one she had left. She sighed. Maybe the outfit was bad luck. She'd met Bill in this garb—and she'd left him on the run in it as well.

She flipped the toilet seat down and plopped her backside on top of it then stared in the mirror. She'd wanted to feel elegant once more. Now her feet hurt, her back ached and she smelled like a trash heap. She blinked against the tears and stared deep into her own eyes. She knew the answer to her dilemma. The man she wanted to see her dressed like this sat at home with Jesse.

Home. Jake's place. The place she wanted to be. She bit her lip and pulled a piece of toilet paper off the roll to dab her eyes. It was useless to resist her feelings. For whatever reason in her short time with Jake, Marie had found a life she didn't want to give up.

The shouting at the bar grew louder and distracted Marie from her maudlin thoughts. She straightened, set her jaw and peered toughly into her pupils. "It's time,

Marie. Time to go for good." She whipped open her small beaded purse and took out a lipstick Katie had made her buy, the same color as the ruby red wine she'd been drinking. She stood, rubbed the color onto her lips and reminded herself she was a lady.

The noise outside grew hostile. Marie eased opened the bathroom door and inched out. The rounded end of a bottle flew at her. With a scream, she ducked. A cold hand pushed her to the floor. She covered her head and held her breath as the bottle shattered against the wall behind her. Warm foam splashed against her bare back and a shard of glass bounced off her.

"You idiot. You almost hit her." Marie heard a male voice roar through her mess of tangled hair, then a crack like bone hitting bone rent the air. In seconds a thud sounded in front of her. When she opened her eyes, a bearded man, one of her regulars at the diner, lay flat on the ground and stared into her face.

"Sorry, Marie," he slurred as he squinted his glazed eyes and passed out.

Suddenly the place erupted. A chair flew toward the bar.

"C'mon, honey, we gotta go." Katie appeared by her side. She grabbed Marie's arm, and yanked her up.

"This way, ladies." Slim materialized out of nowhere and blocked a cue stick that flew their way. He took a punch to his back then turned and locked the attacker's arm with a quick twist.

"Weehaw," Katie yelled as she pulled Marie down and shimmied under a table. "C'mon, honey. We'll be safe under one of these." The table broke under the weight of a body as Katie scurried out of harm's way toward the back wall.

Marie pumped her hands and knees into motion to follow her to another safe haven.

"Look at him. Ain't he a dream?" the rowdy Katie burst out as she settled under a table in a booth and pointed to Slim.

Dazed and confused, Marie looked in his direction. He fought three men at once.

"I thought these things only happened in the movies," Marie mumbled in bewilderment and leaned forward to get a better view.

"It's all in fun, Marie." Katie laughed as a pitcher of beer crashed on the edge of the table and splashed onto the bodice of Marie's outfit.

"Oh." Marie jumped back and cringed underneath as the cold brew trickled between her breasts.

"You okay, honey?" Katie pulled her closer to the wall.

"Fine," Marie nodded as sirens wailed in the distance. She scowled. "Just fine."

Katie patted her on the back. "It'll be all right. Jake'll get us out of this." Marie half listened and leaned forward to look for an escape but Katie yanked her back. "That is, if you don't get hurt. Honey, this is a spectator sport. Yuh gotta keep outta the way."

In moments, the sheriff's department burst through the bar doors.

* * * * *

Word travels fast in a small town. Jake listened to Jesse's television program that played in the other room as he poured Cal a second shot of whiskey. His foreman rattled on about the getup Marie wore to the bar and again Jake paced the floor. It was all he could do to stay put. He took a bitter sip of his own drink when the police band crackled.

"Code 3. Disturbance at the Slow Dog Saloon. All units respond."

"Shit." Jake slammed the clear glass against the desk.

"Go." Cal laid a hand on his shoulder. "I'll take Jesse to my place."

"Thanks." Jake ran to his room. In seconds, he rushed down the hall as he buckled his gun and holster on his hip.

"Dad, what's wrong?" Jesse ran to meet him. The boy looked worried. "Is Marie coming home?"

Jake had seen that look before. It broke his heart. He knelt in front of him and hugged him. "She'll be home soon." Then he held the boy at arm's length so he could look into his face. "Count on it."

Coatless, he rushed out the door, oblivious to the cold snow that fell around him.

* * * * *

The loosely hung door squeaked as the frigid gust hit it. Jake felt the blast on his back and brushed the melting snowflakes off his sleeves. He stood in the doorway to survey the damage. The bar stood empty except for a few folks that cleaned up or treated wounds. Two tables leaned on busted legs. Others were upside down. Several stools were missing pieces and a broken pool cue lay across the bar. A shattered bottleneck christened it with beer. In the middle of the floor stood one of his deputies who held a very pale-faced Marie.

His jaw set and he exhaled between his thinned lips. Pissed, he pushed up the brim of his hat then looked at Marie and saw what remained of her dress. His mood grew blacker.

"They were fightin' over her, Sheriff." The bartender nodded matter-of-factly as he mopped up the riverbed of beer and broken glass that flowed over the bar.

"I don't doubt it," Jake growled.

"I didn't do anything." Marie stomped her foot.

Jake's glare fixed on her as he walked forward and nodded to his officer. "Evenin', Pat."

"Evenin', Jake. Kept her here like you asked."

"Preciate it." Jake eyed her pale face for several moments as the deputy exited then let his gaze travel slowly down her body. Her long, soft hair flowed over her shoulders and one of her sleeves was torn. The wet dress clung to her, outlined her generous

curves and accented the trim legs and dirty knees exposed beneath the thigh-high hemline. If he hadn't been so angry, he'd be paying the devil to keep his hands off her. As it stood, he worked to keep a strong jealous streak in check. He knew why the men fought over her. If he'd been there, he'd have been one of them.

"You okay?" His voice sounded hoarser than he'd expected.

"Yes." She nodded and licked her lips. Her body shook.

He didn't want to tell her it'd be all right. Instead, he glared at her as he fought to control the struggle between his overwhelming urge to hold her and his need to shake her for wearing such a getup unescorted. "You'll have to make a statement."

She lifted her chin. "I already made one to your deputy."

He stepped closer and looked down at her. "Then I think it's time we went home."

She crossed her arms. "I'm not going with you."

"The hell you're not." An arctic blast swirled through the broken door. Marie shivered violently. Jake clenched his teeth as her breasts peaked under the flimsy fabric. "Where's your coat?"

"It...it's lost." She trembled again. "I'm not going with you, Jake, and that's final." She picked her purse up from a nearby table and brushed past him. "Now, if you don't mind, I'm leaving."

He grabbed her arm. "Marie, you can either explain at home or at the station why I shouldn't arrest you for this. It makes no difference to me."

"What?" She pulled her arm free. "Jake Colder, I told you I didn't *do* anything."

"You incited a riot." The stench from her beer-soaked dress reached him. "And from the way you smell, you're not driving anywhere."

Katie stood up from the corner booth where she nursed Slim's swollen jaw. "It's like she said, Jake." The woman walked over to them. "She didn't do anything. We were only sittin'. Fact is Marie had just com' outta the bathroom."

"Katie, stay out of this," Jake warned her.

"Yeah, Katie," Marie scoffed. "Otherwise he'll arrest you too."

"Slim." Jake eyed the cowboy who looked at him with a fat-lipped grin. "You think you can escort Miss Katie home?"

"No problem, Sheriff." With a wry smile, Slim Jim picked his hat up from the table and put it on his head. "As long as I know you'll take care of Miss Marie. Katie won't let me leave otherwise."

Jake nodded. "I will."

Quickly Slim ushered a protesting Katie out the door.

Jake turned and pointed to where Marie stood. "Stay right here. And I mean stay. I have a few things to take care of and then we can talk."

Marie pursed her lips and folded her arms as Jake sauntered toward the bartender and spoke to him in a low voice. Talk? Who did he think he was? He didn't have any right to hold her and she certainly didn't have to *stay*...did she?

Another officer came to the door and signaled Jake to come outside. Jake waved to the deputy then followed him out—and left Marie to stand alone in the cold, wrecked saloon.

"Leave me here to freeze to death," she mumbled and briskly rubbed her arms.

The bartender jerked his chin up then shook his head. "Lady, you're one lucky woman." He snorted then threw his towel across the bar and put his palms on the aged wood. "I'd like to say the same for myself. It'll be weeks before I get this place going again." A slow grin captured his lips. "Although, I do say—" He looked at her and nodded, his mouth curved upward from one ruddy cheek to another. "It was one helluva fight." He snickered as he went into the bathroom and shut the door.

"Hmph." Marie crossed her arms in disgust.

The wind whistled through the open doorway. The breeze carried the men's muffled voices from outside. She rubbed her arms to take the chill away and clenched her teeth. She didn't need to be a ninny and stand there like an icicle. She slunk toward the sound of Jake's voice. "This is ridiculous," she softly chided herself. She couldn't think of one reason for her to stay. It wasn't her fault. Jake or no Jake, she was leaving.

She peeked out and spied the sheriff at the far end of the lot. He was engaged in a conversation with the deputies. "Hah," she huffed. She could do this. She reached in her purse for her keys and tiptoed out of the tavern, able to slip unseen around the corner of the building.

A cold flake landed on her nose then another. When had it started to snow? She glanced around. The ground was dusted with the white stuff. She hurried. When she reached her car, she pressed the button for the entry on her key chain and hopped inside. She shifted gears, started the engine then flew into reverse. She needed to get out of Dodge, or at least, out of Fort Bridger.

Her tires crunched on the gravel lot and the few flakes on her windshield swirled in front of her. Normally she drove with safety in mind but now was not the time. She forgot about her seat belt as she heard the car automatically lock. She exited onto the road and looked in her rearview mirror to see if Jake followed. She stared for a moment, wanting him. Jake watched her. The snow gusted about him. It'd be the last time she'd see him. Her heart caught in her throat. She crushed the sentiment. Now was no time to second-guess herself.

She gripped the steering wheel and stomped on the accelerator.

* * * * *

"Sounds like ol' Gardner tried to protect your claim, Jake." The deputy referred to the man who'd landed the first punch. Pat slapped his back as Jake heard the sound of the screeching tires and turned in time to see Marie's Beemer pull onto the road.

"You want me to go after her?" Pat asked.

"Nope." Jake glanced at the deputy. "You finish up here. I'll take care of this myself." He sprinted for his cruiser and jumped inside.

His stiff, frozen fingers flipped the lights and siren on and he cursed a blue streak when he pulled out after her. Why was the damn woman so stubborn? Couldn't she see he was trying to help? In moments, he followed her but Marie refused to yield.

She passed the fort and turned onto Katie's street. Jake cut the siren as she pulled into the driveway behind her. He forced his temper under control then stepped out of the cruiser and marched over to her open door. "You're supposed to pull over when an officer flashes his lights at you."

She got out and stood a hairsbreadth away from him.

"Didn't I tell you to stay put?" he growled.

"Jake, I was freezing." She slammed the door. "I saw no sense standing in the cold."

"The building wouldn't have been so damn cold if someone hadn't yanked the door off. Besides," he loomed over her, his voice hard, "you were told that you could either talk to me at the station or at home, not Katie's house. At any rate," he glanced at Jim's parked truck and then at the darkened house, "I think she's rather occupied."

Marie crossed her arms and glared at him.

"Get in the cruiser. I'm taking you home."

She lifted her chin. "I will not. I'm not going anywhere with you."

"Get in the car," he commanded through his clenched teeth, "or I'll take you down to the station house and put you behind bars."

"For what?" Her voice squeaked as it began to rise. "I haven't done anything, Jake Colder," she yelled at him. "You have nothing to arrest me on. *Nothing*." She poked his chest.

He locked his hand around hers and pulled her to him. Towering over her, he spoke slowly and deliberately. "Try drunk and disorderly, inciting a riot, driving under the influence, failing to heed an officer, speeding..."

"Speeding?"

"You didn't even have your seat belt on, did you? I can tell by how fast you got out."

"My seat belt? Jake Colder, you just want me to come home. I hardly drank a thing and I'm not going to put up with this."

"You had two glasses of red wine. That's enough." His baritone voice rose a few decibels.

"How would you know?" Her eyes narrowed.

"It's my job to know," he bit out in a lowered voice. "Now get in the car."

"You asked the bartender about me, didn't you?" She tried to jerk her captured hand backward but Jake tightened his hold. "This is ridiculous." She struggled harder. "Jake, let me go."

"You're coming with me."

She stomped her foot and struggled against him. "I – will – not."

"You want to go to the station?"

"Jake, I did *not* start that fight."

"Tell that to poor Russ. That is after he's made the repairs. Do you know how much this is going to cost him?"

"Jake," she squeaked and grabbed her trapped hand with her free one to use the weight of her body to pull harder. "I'm – sorry – about – Russ." The words faltered as she fought him. "But the fight wasn't my fault."

"Not your fault? The way you were dressed?"

"You arrogant, bullheaded hick. I wasn't the only woman who wore a skirt." She yanked her hand harder. "Oooh, if I was a man I'd hit you."

"You threatening a police officer?"

"*Threat...* Erg, Jake, I'm not going with you and that's final. Now, let – me – go." She pulled against his hold and kicked him in the shin.

"Fine." He'd had enough. He spun her around as he grabbed his cuffs off his belt and shackled her hands behind her. "Add resisting arrest and striking an officer to your rap sheet." He bent over and whispered in her ear. "Along with whatever else you've done but won't tell me."

"Jake." She yelled his name at the top of her lungs as she yanked against the metal. "I hate you."

He turned her back around so that she faced him then grabbed her legs and hoisted her over his shoulder. "That's okay, honey. I can't arrest you for that."

"Jake Colder. Put me down." She squirmed on his shoulder. "This is not funny."

"Sweetheart, trust me. I'm not laughing."

"Jake. I mean it." Her voice choked as he marched to the cruiser. "Jake, please," she cried.

"Woman, give me one good reason why I shouldn't jail your cute behind."

"I – didn't – do – it."

"Tell it to the judge."

"Jake, don't do this. Please?"

He placed her on her feet and held her at arm's length. "Why?"

Her eyes were downcast and she trembled in the cold air. He lifted her chin. Another pool of tears formed behind her lashes.

"Please?" she asked.

"Dammit, Marie. Why do you have to be so difficult? Why can't you tell me what's bothering you?" Jake gritted his teeth and turned away from her so she wouldn't see the frustration on his face. "Come on." He took her by the arm. "Get in the car."

She swallowed as her sheepish eyes gazed at him. "Are you...going to...arrest me?" She choked out the words between sobs.

"It depends on what you tell me when we get to the ranch."

Her voice caught. "You...you're not taking me to jail?"

He led her to the rear passenger door and put his arms around her. "No, Marie. I'm taking you home where you belong. Now come along quietly, would you? We've already made enough of a scene."

She pulled away from him. "I don't belong with you, Jake. The ranch is your home, not mine."

He wanted to say, "We'll see about that." Instead, he bit off the words and took a deep breath. "The cruiser's warm." He opened the rear door that led to the cage in the back. "I'll take those cuffs off if you promise not to fight me." She slowly nodded, and in seconds he'd freed her hands. She rubbed her wrists and her shoulders shook. "Marie," he whispered resignedly and held her snug against him. Her tears soaked his uniformed shirt. "Shhh, it'll be all right, honey. I promise." He rubbed her arms.

"Oh Jake." She looked into his face. "I'm scared."

"I know," he nodded. "I also know that no matter what you've done, it'd be better if we faced the trouble together." He lifted her chin. Her lips trembled. He stroked her mouth with his thumb. Every fiber in him told him to kiss her. Another gust blasted and sent Marie's hair bouncing over his shoulders. "Come on. Get in." He sat her in the backseat of the car and put her seatbelt on. Reaching over her, he grabbed the blanket he kept in back and wrapped it around her shoulders. He had to remind himself he was an officer of the law. She didn't need the amorous attentions he wanted to lavish on her. Not right now.

"Jake. My things. They're inside." She looked at her dress. Her eyes darted to the house. She was frightened.

"You can get them later."

"But, Jake..." She panicked. "I-I need them." She bit her lip. "Look at me. I'm a mess."

"No."

"But I have nothing else to wear. All my things are inside."

He looked at the darkened house. "I'll find something, okay?"

Her brows creased. "But, Jake, everything I have is in there. I need my things."

"I'll get your bag in the morning. Now don't argue with me. They'll be fine here. Trust me." He leaned over and shielded Marie from the wind. "Whether you've noticed or not, there's a storm brewing. I want to get home and I don't have any intention of

interrupting two people who seem to be enjoying themselves. *They* happen to like each other and like *showing* each other they do. Unlike a few other folks I know." The irritation peaked in his voice.

"Jake." She lifted her hand toward him. Instead of touching him, she let it fall on her lap. "I didn't mean to..." Suddenly she stopped and looked downward.

"You didn't mean to what?"

She looked at him and bit her lip. "I didn't mean to upset anyone."

He squatted alongside the car door as she stared at his uniform now soaked with tears and stale beer. "Oh, Jake, your shirt."

He glanced at it. "Yeah, well, it seems this cultured lady I know likes to mess up my clothes."

A smile tugged at her lips then sadness filled her eyes. "I'm sorry, Jake. I don't mean to be a bother."

"Yeah." He sighed.

"This is the last good dress I have."

"I understand." He rubbed her cheek and nodded. "Let's go before you catch your death from pneumonia. You're freezing." He stood and closed the passenger door then got behind the driver's seat.

He watched Marie stare at Katie's house in the rearview mirror as they drove off, a worried frown plastered on her pretty face. He scowled. He wanted to know which one of her things could be that important.

The snow thickened as he reached the county highway. He slowed at the stop and gazed at the fort. Did Gramps know what had happened to Marie before she arrived at Fort Bridger? Probably, but it didn't really matter. Even if Gramps did, the old coot wouldn't tell him. He looked in the mirror again at Marie. She'd folded her hands and held her palms to her forehead—like she was praying.

Jake took a deep breath and turned onto the road, saying a small prayer himself, thankful Marie was unhurt, grateful she at last let him take her home.

* * * * *

Ghostly eyes watched as the police vehicle passed the old fort. As the apparition rocked on the aged wooden porch of the officers' barracks, he lifted the bottle of beer and took a sip. The bartender spoke true. It had been a hell of a fight. Damn shame the tavern got wrecked but the result had been worth it. Jake would have let Marie walk outta his life if he, Thad Colder, hadn't done something to stop it.

Gramps pulled his army cap over his eyes then slid lower in the rocker and put his feet up on the railing. "Yep," he claimed and with great satisfaction, "brilliant idea of mine to throw the first punch. Amazin' how li'l it takes tuh git some fellers fightin' these days. Now, Josephine..." He put his hand over his heart and gazed at the crescent moon. "If we can git the li'l lady's problem solved."

He rubbed the moisture off the bottle as a smile crept across his mouth. "All in all, though," he sported a cocksure grin, "it's been a good night's work."

Chapter Ten

The warm fire crackled in the hearth. The wind battered the window behind Jake and howled in protest at his small measure of comfort. He breathed in the burned pine and cedar scents as he sat in the overstuffed chair in the parlor and stared into the flames. Marie didn't delight in being back. All the way home, she gazed out the window, pensive, looking like she would cry.

He rolled the cool, empty shot glass between his fingers. Gramps had told him she'd leave soon if he didn't pay attention. Would she have left tonight?

A strong gust grazed the house and banged the shutters as if in answer to his question. Of course she would leave. If not now, eventually. She was on the run and the one thing a person on the run *wouldn't* do is get attached. He looked at a picture of Jesse on the wall and his heart almost broke. He couldn't let that happen to the boy again. He couldn't let it happen to himself.

The house stayed quiet except for the fire and the pipes from the shower. Jake was grateful Marie had peacefully headed for the bathroom when they got home. He didn't know if he could handle any more arguments with her and if she'd cried one more time, his steel police demeanor would have folded for sure. When she closed the door, he called Cal. He'd hoped to catch his son awake to tell him they were back but Jesse was already asleep. He'd told Cal to let the boy know of Marie's safe return then hung up. The water stopped. Marie had finished. Jake looked up and wondered how long the statement would be true.

The hair blower whirled. He heard the hum through the walls. Jake rose and walked to the antique cupboard to pour himself another shot of whiskey. Could he have read Marie wrong? Was she the type of woman who could live in the wilds of Wyoming with him? He tasted the bitter amber liquid and stepped back then let himself drop into the chair. It didn't matter to his heart. He loved her. The truth was as simple as that.

Jake took another sip and pondered what he knew. The answer lay in whatever crime she'd gotten involved in, except now he knew it was more serious than he'd first suspected. She was afraid of a jail cell. Terrified. Yet it was her issue that caused his dilemma. He didn't know where to turn without arousing suspicion. If she was guilty, he'd turn her in, but if she wasn't...

He needed facts. He wanted to be sure first. He ran the tip of his finger through his drink. He knew he'd wait for her in any case.

He gazed blankly at his glass and formulated a plan. So far he'd respected her privacy but she seemed too attached to that bag of hers for it to be more than a place for

her to keep her clothes. Perhaps he should take a closer look at the suitcase – and at her car.

The firelight shone through the shot glass. The beams created a prism that showered kaleidoscope markings on his hand. The golden light sparkled over his fingers and brought his mind back to the present. He lifted the drink and peered through the liquid to let the warm, amber color bathe him.

Then he sniffed the whiskey, smelled the potent scent and hoped the odor would shock him into reality. The attempt failed. Miserably. He downed the stuff. The liquid burned all the way to the pit of his gut. He leaned forward, rested his elbows on his knees and eyed the bottom of the glass. Sighing, he ran his hand through his too-long hair. What did he have to do to get Marie to stay? Life had been hard when his first wife left. With Marie, it would be devastating.

He thought about getting another shot until he heard the soft patter of feet on the wooden floor. Marie appeared in the doorway, her hair damp, her body loosely covered with only the thin bath towel. His jaw dropped. Lust grabbed his crotch. The remembrance of her body joined with him in the moonlight taunted him.

"I didn't have..." She pointed down the hall.

Jake's throat went dry. He held the glass to his forehead and closed his eyes to control the blood that rushed to his gut. "Sorry." He started to rise. He hoped she wouldn't see what her practically nude body did to his groin. "I'll get my bathrobe."

"Don't." She licked her sensuous lips and stepped into the room. Her chest rose as her inhalations deepened. "Don't get up, Jake."

Her voice was soft, breathy. The sound did things to him, stirred his hunger to have her naked and moaning beneath him. He leaned back and gulped, rested his forearms on the padded sides of the chair for moral support. A muscle worked in his jaw as he looked at her. He kept his eyes on her face, tried to subdue his budding erection and focus his mind on her fears. Those were what kept her away from him. Her problem was the most important thing now.

She padded forward. The top of her shapely legs exposed themselves in the warm glow of the firelight. Her mouth parted. Her lips were wet. A look of seduction burned in her eyes.

"Marie," he choked, "if you come any closer, I guarantee you, there'll be no turning back."

She pressed her full lips together and clutched the white towel. "Jake..." Her breathing became labored. "I don't want to turn back. I don't want to leave. I..." She blinked. Tears glittered in her lashes. Jake fought the urge to hold her.

She looked at the floor a moment then at him. She opened her mouth to speak then paused. The carnal need in her gaze locked on him and spoke for her.

The depth of desire in her green eyes torched his tormented soul. Then time ceased, transmuted into a dark void. Jake watched the passion rise in Marie's face. The seconds began again as the pulse raced in his neck. Marie's fingers loosened the edges of the

towel, barely pried apart the ends. By inches, the movement exposed the soft white mounds of her body, the erect rose-colored peaks of her breasts that were ready for a man's mouth to suckle.

Jake gripped the armrest with his free hand and held his breath. Her breasts rose with her shallow pants then her flesh quivered as the towel slumped silently to the floor.

His empty glass slipped from his fingers and thudded on the Oriental carpet. An arm's length from him, Marie's moist, dewy body shimmered in the firelight.

"Marie..." His voice thickened.

Her eyes enveloped him with their carnal intensity.

He moved toward her as if magnetized then froze as he remembered her confusion and pain. "How sober are you?" His eyes gravitated from her body to her face.

"Very. I had my last drink over two hours ago." She licked her lips. Fear and hope radiated from the gesture.

He ran the pad of his thumb across her warm mouth. "Marie, I..."

"I want you, too, Jake. Maybe if we get the lust out of our systems, you can see things more rationally."

"I doubt it." The hunger in her eyes stirred the erotic craving within him. His floodgates dropped. "But I'm willing to try." He swept her into his arms and pressed the flesh of her body against him then captured her lips with his. He needed her. Had to have her like he had to have his next breath. If this would be the only time he could show her, then so be it.

Marie's hands reached for his belt. Her fingers slipped into his waistband. His cock pulsed in his pants. "Oh, Jake, I need you so." Her breath skimmed the faint hairs on his neck, made his penis beat harder with anticipation.

Her admission gave him hope. She shook in his arms. Sadness racked her body. "Make love to me, Jake, like you've never made love before." Her voice cracked. He heard the tears she wanted to shed.

Not tonight. He didn't want her to cry. He wanted her to fly.

Jake pulled his head away. Looked into her forest-green eyes and smiled. He knew what he had to do. He had to make slow love to her, test and taste each part of her, let himself know her body completely. And with each move, he would let her see how much he loved her, how much he needed her — how much she needed him.

Marie was his life now. His woman. He couldn't let her go.

He brought his head down to her. Let his lips brush across hers. She moaned from the touch. Her soft body curved into his. Her hands slid up his chest and fingered the buttons on his shirt.

"Go ahead," Jake whispered against her. "Undress me."

She glanced at him and licked her lips. His testosterone shot higher. He liked to watch the pink tip of her tongue, wanted to see it do other things—to him. He wondered how much game she had in her.

Tonight would be the time to find out.

He rubbed his fingertips across her back then let the outer side of them slide against her ribs. Marie's eyes fluttered shut. Her breathing deepened. As he moved his hands up her sides, she gripped his shoulders. He spread his fingers and grasped the underside of her breasts then pressed his palms into her flesh, letting his touch glide across her satiny skin as he eased his fingertips together. Her mouth parted. Jake grasped the turgid peaks and pinched them. She mewled. He pulled on them, just a gentle tug, and twisted them slightly. She gasped. Her fingers gripped into him. Her body yielded to his touch.

Jake bent to her, pinched one nipple harder and teathed the pert bud after first laving the skin then sucking on it.

"Mmmm," she cried. He liked the sound of sex in her voice, the need that burned for physical pleasure.

Marie forced her eyes open. An effort, he could tell. Her hands trembled. She pulled the shirt from his pants and worked the buttons, first undoing the bottom clasp then each one in succession. He liked the way she looked when she touched him, liked the shyness she seemed to have even while her heart beat faster against his hand.

He straightened so she could reach the rest and let his thumbs slide over her pebbled nipples.

A small moan escaped her. Before Marie could undo the last button, her lashes closed once again. She freed the fastening then slipped her hands into his shirt and glided them along his skin. Marie leaned into him. Her breasts pressed into his chest. Her palms rested against his shoulders. The feel of her naked body against his made his insides shudder with want.

"Jake." She breathed against him, tasted him, licked his chest then moved to his smaller nipple and raked it with her teeth.

His turn came to groan. He shrugged off his shirt but pre-cum from his aroused state wet his uniform. Good thing he still had his pants on, otherwise, as hard as his cock was, he'd have taken her by now.

He lifted her, cradled her to him, dropped to one knee and sat her on the soft threads of the thick antique carpet. She leaned back and let her arms support her. Her slender legs folded toward the fire. The firelight encased her with a reddish-gold hue. The pert buds of her breasts were rosier, even more inviting with the glow. Marie moistened her lips, looked at him with that mixture of desire and modesty that tempted every fiber in him.

Jake got on his knees in front of her. Pulled Marie's legs apart and opened her to him. Her labia glistened with her wetness. The trimmed hair around it glimmered. She drew an uneven breath through her sweet, parted lips. Her legs trembled but Jake knew

it wasn't from the cold. She wanted him. Her lust waited for him, heady, strong. And too much to be denied. In the daylight, her mind might refuse them this pleasure, but tonight she let her body rule.

Thank God. His eyes took their fill of her. The way she wanted and needed him healed a hole his troubled soul, a tender spot he had nursed for too long. The flames crackled as he hung there. Marie's mouth parted. His cock swelled, hardened like a stone.

Jake put his hands on her knees, ran his palms against her inner thighs to her crotch. He thumbed the skin around her labia. She dropped her head back. Another moan escaped her. He stooped to her cunt, inhaled the flowery scent of her arousal and sucked her delicate flesh into his mouth.

Her hips bucked to him and she pressed her clit against his face. He nipped her then dipped his tongue into her vagina. A hint of salt. Mostly sweet. He hummed against her. "I love the taste of you." He suckled on the nib of her sex again.

She mewed. Her head rolled to the side. He slipped his hands under her tight ass and squeezed as he lifted her higher to give him better access to her depths.

Marie lowered her upper body to the ground. Jake bent his legs and slid his knees under her thighs to raise her up. He liked to play with her, liked the sensations that rippled through her and showed in her face. He lifted her hips, licked her, raked her clit with his teeth. He used his thumbs to massage the edges of the crevice between her rear cheeks as he outlined the curve of muscle that led to her sex. Jake dipped the tips into her vaginal opening, got them wet then slipped them back and used them to coat her rear. Her muscles clenched. Marie moaned.

His pants tented with his rock-hard erection. He pressed a thumb against her anus as he kept up the pressure with his mouth on her clit and labia. Her cries grew louder. "Jake..." she uttered. "Oh God." Her fingers touched his hair then she reached above her and grasped one of her wrists with her opposite hand and straightened her arms. It was as if she didn't know what to do with them. "I want to touch you."

"Not yet," he rasped against her.

"Mmm..." She pulled her hands to her body and slid her fingers over her rib cage.

"Touch yourself for me, Marie."

"Huh?" she whispered through her sexual haze.

"Pull on your nipples for me. Let me see you."

"I've never..."

He smirked. "Good. Do it."

She closed her eyes. Her small fingers found her breasts. She rubbed the tips.

"Pinch them."

She grasped the tops and did. He nipped her clit. Her slow moan about made him come.

Jake's erection grew painful. He needed release. He took one of her hands and put it on her mons, ground her fingers into the clit and dipped the middle one inside her. "Play with yourself," he said while he shrugged off the shirt. "Let me watch." She glanced at him under heavy-lidded eyes. Her hand moved, a little at first, then more vigorously as she toyed with herself. Jake unzipped his pants and yanked them down. His erection popped out hard and proud. He kicked off his shoes, shed his socks and pants in a hurry, then came to Marie and hovered over her. She still fingered herself and looked at him with want.

He smiled. He liked her soft and sultry under him like this. Bending, he kissed her. "You've never done this in front of a man, played with yourself, have you?"

She pressed her lips together and shook her head. "No."

"Well, we'll have to see what else you haven't done." He grasped her wrist and licked her fingers, tasted the flowery emission from her sex, then set the hand on her breast again. He let his erection waver against her clit and vaginal opening. She closed her eyes and jutted her hips to him.

She was ready. But he didn't want to take her. Not yet.

He leaned on one elbow and took his cock in his hand. He coated the tip with her juices, rubbed his flesh against her. He let the head barely ease in and out of her with each pass against her clit. She whimpered, twisted against him. "Oh Jake, I want you in me."

That was what he wanted to hear. He plunged into her, slipped an arm around her shoulders and rolled to bring her on top of him. "Move for me."

She did. Ground her hips against him, moved her clit over the top of his pubic bone while her vaginal walls clenched his cock. Her gyrations about drove him insane. He wanted her to come before he did.

She rode him. Rode him hard. Her sensual cries urged him on. She was on the edge. Jake knew it. He slapped her ass. Not hard, just enough.

Then did it again.

Her breath hitched. He'd surprised her. She pressed harder. Soared. Her head lifted. Her eyes shut. He felt the small muscles within her spasm around him. He grabbed her rear cheeks and squeezed.

She screamed with her release.

Jake relished the emotions that played across her face when she did. He would never get enough of her.

When she peaked, he used his hands to clamp her hips to him. He couldn't hold back any longer. He pumped inside her now. Hard. In seconds he climaxed and thought his growls matched hers in intensity.

Marie collapsed against him. Her rapid breaths brushed his nipple. He felt her heart as it pounded against his chest.

Their heavy breaths flowed together in a steady rhythm. He held her a moment, their bodies still joined, as if they were inseparable. Jake pressed his lips to the strands of dark hair at her temple. A log crackled in the fire. An inner warmth absorbed him.

He nestled his face into her damp hair and inhaled the clean scent of her. She was his. He had to get her to see that, had to get her to see she couldn't leave him no matter what. But how? "Marie," he whispered, hoping he wouldn't dispel the magic that held them together for the moment, "I love you."

She looked at him. Her eyes shimmered, creased at the edges with worry. She fingered his lips then kissed him. "I love you too."

He stared at her for endless moments. "I've been waiting to hear you say that." His throat tightened. "I want you here with me. Always." He lowered her face to him and kissed her.

"Jake," she barely whispered as she pulled away. "I don't know how long I can stay. I just know I don't want to be without you. I've been resisting this." She sniffed and lifted her chin. "I want to spend the night with you, to know what it's like to wake up in your arms. If this is all I can have of you, then I'll take whatever I can get, but you know I can't stay forever."

Her voice choked. Marie didn't want to admit that she loved him, afraid it would make things harder when she left for good, but the look on his face showed her his one vulnerability.

He loved her. He wanted her. She couldn't let him go on believing she didn't want him back.

Marie tucked her head under his chin to hide her sadness. For the moment, he didn't protest her leaving. She thought he would the way he pressed his lips together, the way his eyes narrowed with pain.

But he had to know. They shared a special moment tonight. And she may never be able to get this, get Jake, back again. She kissed his neck. The scent of his spicy aftershave lingered on his skin. She inhaled it. She would remember this.

He lifted her chin and eyed her again. She swallowed to fight back the sorrow that threatened to spill over her. *Enjoy him while you can.* She forced a smile and ran her hands through his thick, dark hair. She loved the feel of him.

He came to her. His lips were tender as they traveled down her neck. "You can't leave me now." His strained voice broke her, threatened to undo her resolve yet strummed the inner strings of her soul. A man like Jake was all she had ever really wanted. And now that she had him, she would lose him as fast as she'd found him.

He breathed against her. His exhalations stirred the flames within. He lightly took the flesh of her shoulder between his teeth as his strong, calloused hands caressed her back and slid lower.

Passion ignited within her again. She pushed her knee slowly up his thigh and kissed him with an urgency that consumed her. She wanted him, had to have him.

His breath caught. His brow creased. His mouth thinned into a frown. "Then we have tonight at least. I want to spend the whole time with you, too. Maybe I can still convince you not to run anymore. I want you to trust me."

She sadly smiled. "I do, Jake."

"Then..."

She put her fingers against his mouth to stop him. She couldn't explain her problem to him. It would change things. And she didn't want him pleading. This was painful enough. "We have tonight, Jake. I want to enjoy what we have while I can." She bent to him, kissed him with all the feeling she had inside.

He grasped her. Held her tight and took over the kiss, told her in that physical way that he wouldn't let her go. Not if he could help it.

She knew that, and knew what she had to do—but that was tomorrow's problem.

Not tonight.

His heavy breathing matched hers. His penis throbbed against her leg. These things told her he wanted her again.

"Perhaps we should move to the bedroom." He lifted a corner of his full lips yet sorrow still showed in the creases in his face. "I'd like to have you in my bed at least once."

Her soft huff echoed with the same air of sadness. Then she smiled. "I'd like that Jake Colder."

Marie watched his Adam's apple move up and down. He wanted to say something again, she was sure. But he didn't. He just stared, as if he tried to read her face.

"I love you, Marie," he said, his voice hoarse. "Don't ever forget that." He rolled her over and laid her on the carpet. He squatted beside her then lifted her in his arms and carried her to the room where she slept.

"I thought we were going to your bed?" she asked as she looped her hands around his nape.

He grinned, this time with more pleasure. "This *is* my bed." His searing gaze ignited her libido and torched her soul. "But now I have someone to share it with."

His comment warmed her, bound him to her heart. She tightened her arms around him and touched his neck with her lips.

He pushed the partially open door with his elbow then stepped in. Jake laid her on the cherry wood bed. Her legs dangled over the side, her knees fell wide open as he flipped on the light on the nightstand. She pushed herself to her elbows to watch him. He looked at her a while, eyeing every part of her. The blue in his eyes deepened with desire. His cock jerked as it pulsed and hardened. Her body warmed, knowing that he wanted her.

Jake moved to her, lay on top of her and slid his hands over her waist then up her ribs to the inner sides of her arms. He skimmed her breasts with his thumbs as he passed them, grasped onto her wrists then leaned over her and settled himself between her legs. He took the nub of her breast in his mouth, teased the sensitive tip with the edge of his teeth.

Even in the cooler air, her skin grew hot. Her pulse beat faster, her breaths were more rapid. She eased her hands from his grasp and threaded her fingers through his hair. "Jake, if there's a way..."

He took her hand and gently kissed her fingers. "I'll find one, Marie. I swear it." His calloused fingers caressed her shoulders. The heat in his eyes smoldered and fueled the need within her. "Marie," he whispered against her chilled skin. The warmth of his breath charged the nerves underneath. "I want one night too. Fact is I want more than one."

The blue in his eyes pierced her depths once more. His mouth laved her nipple then kissed downward under her breast to her waist. Her eyes fluttered shut a moment as a surge of desire ripped through her, a need so strong she couldn't deny it, an aching sweetness that threatened to envelop her. It was more than lust. Jake filled a need so deep she couldn't even define it. She parted her lips. A moan eased from her mouth. She had never felt like this with a man.

His fingertips slid down her torso. Lightning charged her skin with his touch. He grasped her hips, kneaded the skin beneath. He kissed her, captured her mouth with his. She belonged to him. At least for tonight. And he belonged to her.

He breathed deep and stared at her. "Marie, I didn't think." He grimaced. "I know we talked about...our health. You said then you couldn't get pregnant at the moment, but what about now?"

Her body was so aroused she didn't understand at first. "Oh," she finally said.

"I don't care. I want you. If something..." His Adam's apple moved again.

"I'm covered, Jake. Promise. There won't be any consequences. Not in the children department."

He pressed his lips together. "Do you want children?"

Pain flickered so briefly across his face she almost didn't see it. "Yes, Jake. I do. When the time is right, and with the right man. But you know enough of my circumstances."

He nodded. Then warmth and some other emotion flooded his gaze, one that satiated her soul, made her believe that with him, anything was possible—because he would make it that way.

"Good," he said. "Because I wouldn't mind having more."

"Jake..." She didn't want him believing they would have a future.

He brushed her mouth with his hand then caressed her cheek. "You never know, Marie. Maybe if you'd tell me..." He stopped but his brows knitted. His eyes gleamed with his determination.

She placed her fingers on his mouth. "Not tonight, Jake. Tonight let's pretend that time won't come."

He nodded. "If that's what you want."

She slipped a hand between their bodies and grasped his cock. Jake sucked in a breath and closed his eyes.

"What I want is to see you. Touch you." His penis quivered in her hand. He raised his hips a bit to give her what she groped for. Marie rubbed her thumb against him and felt a vein on the lower side. Blood rushed through it. Made Jake harder. Her clit tingled knowing how he desired her. She circled her fingers around his flesh then moved her hand up and down his stiffened penis. Jake was large. From the first time she'd touched him—her clumsiness with the coffee in the diner, she knew that. Their tryst in the barn confirmed what Marie had imagined about him. Since then, her body wouldn't let her forget how erotic and carefree their lovemaking had been. Still, she'd avoided him. She'd been afraid of him, afraid of what he would think if he knew about her—but now?

Now, she thought the moment odd and yet wonderful. How, in a time when she needed someone to dispel her demons, he was there.

Marie closed her eyes and let her innermost desires rule. She wanted to focus on the feel of him. She pushed against his chest with her other hand to guide him off her. When Jake stood, she bent to his cock and flicked her tongue over the purpled head then laved the slit. She could taste him. Taste both of them. The erotic combination pushed her clit into hyperdrive. She moaned and caressed him with her mouth, inhaled the musky scent of him.

Jake sucked in a breath. He rested his palms on her shoulders. His body shook as she suckled the tip and grazed the edge of her teeth against the sensitive underside.

"God, Marie." His powerful fingers held her jaw and pulled her face up to gaze at his. "I want this to be good for you too." His thumbs brushed against her temple then downward along the ridge of her chin, thumbing her lips when he reached them.

She licked the bead of pre-cum that beaded on the slit then looked back at his face. "It will be," she whispered alongside his hot skin and felt his penis tremble against her cheek. She put her lips to his shaft then slid them down and sucked him into her mouth as deep as she could. She used her tongue to press against him in waves as she descended and rose again.

He groaned. He used her shoulders again to support himself. She pleased him. She'd never felt so content.

Marie eased her fingers to his ass and grasped his firm backside. She used her fingertips to massage his skin while she pressed the inside of her lips and tongue

against him. She fucked him with her mouth, eased her lips back to his tip and scraped his skin with her teeth then did the same going down.

"God..." Jake's body shook. Marie treasured the way he responded to her.

"I want you, Marie," he rasped.

She pressed her mouth against him once more then released him. "I know."

Jake eased her back against the bed cover and took her nipple with his mouth again. She moaned in earnest, wanting him. Her sex fired with heated lust.

His fingers traversed her frame to reach the sensitized area between her legs. Jake stroked her clit then dipped a finger into her wet vagina. Her hips arched with a will of their own.

God, how she wanted him. Wanted this.

He rubbed the bud of her sex with his thumb as he finger-fucked her and teased her nipple with his other hand. Jake's eyes darkened with passion as he looked at her. Marie had never had a man do that, watch her with such intensity. With someone else, she might have been ashamed, embarrassed that they would see how much she loved this. But with Jake she didn't care.

Her breath caught as he pressed his fingers harder against her. Blind passion spiraled within her and consumed her. Her breaths grew even more erratic. She closed her eyes. She had to. The heated sensations of her body demanded it, needed her full attention on what Jake did to her.

The pressure increased and her craving for release surged. The thought of him observing her with his heady blue gaze spurred her on. She used her hands again, ran them up her sides, squeezed her breast with one of them while Jake administered to the other.

"That's it, darlin'," she heard him murmur against her waist. "Show me what you like." He pulled her other hand to the breast he'd touched and used his fingers to guide her to her nipple. He rested his hand over hers, felt the upper part of her hand as she moved on herself.

His palm on her mons still rubbed her. Jake changed up the motion. Fast then slow. He licked her navel, tongued down her abdomen to her clit.

Marie opened her legs wider, bent her knees and slid the tops of her feet against the inside of his legs.

His mouth reached her pussy. He moaned against her. She cried out loud when he sucked her clit.

She wanted to please him, too, but he was too far out of reach. God, Marie wanted him inside her.

Jake nipped her. Sucked her. Put another finger in her. His other hand grasped her ass, pulled at it, lifted her hip and slapped her flesh once again.

She moaned with pleasure. She'd never known the small stinging sensation could push her to the edge. He thumbed her anus then caressed the rim. "Do you like that?" The coarseness in his voice spurred her on.

She couldn't respond. His touch had overwhelmed the rest of her. Marie's body was clay in his hands. He pressed against the dark opening as he nipped her clit again.

Her cries filled her ears as wave after wave of carnal ecstasy rolled through her and scorched her every fiber. When she peaked for the last time, her guttural scream rent the air.

Marie panted, hard and uneven. She struggled to inhale, trying to slow her pulse. She eyed Jake, half embarrassed, half emboldened. "I never..."

Through his heavy breaths, he grinned, with more than satisfaction. Jake gazed at her with love. "You never did what?"

She felt lightheaded and giddy. She opened her mouth and outlined her lips with her tongue, purposefully flirting with him. "I've never had anyone touch me, er..." Marie didn't know how to say it delicately.

Humor edged his mouth. "On your anus."

She pressed her lips together in a flat smile and nodded. "Yes."

"You've never had anyone spank you either, I take it."

She twisted her mouth. "No," she squeaked, "I haven't."

Jake laughed. "So..." He ran his hands along the underside of her arms and pressed them over her head. He held them there as he lay on top of her. "For a city girl, you haven't done much, have you? Not in the erogenous department."

She shook her head again and let the impish smile grow on her face. "I was brought up in a conservative household."

"Mmm." A corner of his mouth quirked into a grin. "What have you done?" His mouth reached her chin and pressed against the underside. "What do you want to do?" he whispered. His suggestive voice stoked her libido again.

She didn't know but being with him made her bolder, even wild. "Make love in a public place—or in the wilderness. I don't think what we did in the barn would count. We were still in a building."

"Probably not." He chuckled. "Get caught and you'd be arrested for that."

She squinted and forced herself to frown. "Would you arrest me?"

He bent and nipped her neck, sucking the skin a moment. "Only if you wanted me to make love to you in handcuffs."

Her breaths grew ragged again. "I've...never done that either."

He arched a brow. "Do you want to?"

She pressed her lips together. "Do you?"

His gaze deepened. "Marie, I'll do anything you want if it'll keep you with me."

His honesty cut her and made her want at the same time. "Jake, I wish I could."

He brushed a few stray tresses of hair from her face. "You have me, Marie. Always. Whatever you've done or gotten involved with, we can do this together."

She bit her lip, afraid of what else he might say, afraid he would convince her to stay when she knew her presence would put him and Jesse in danger.

His eyes darkened. His mouth parted with the shallow pants of his breath. "Marie..."

A salty drop threatened to fall from her eyes but she wouldn't let it. This moment was too precious, too raw – too real. She needed him to complete her. A voice sounded in her head, reminded her to relish every moment. The memories of his touch would warm her in the coming, cold nights. She tugged at him, wanted him to cover her body with his. She needed him inside her, craved the intimate connection, knowing, as much as she wanted this for a lifetime, she wouldn't have it again. "For now, Jake, make love to me. Show me you love me because I need this from you right now."

He slid his body over hers. "I knew you did, but I want more from you."

For some reason, the tender ache in his voice soothed her troubled soul. God, the feel of him. Could she ever get enough?

His hand caressed her shoulder as his hard shaft nestled against her thigh. Jake's lips captured hers with a desperate passion. His cock quivered against her. "You're so wet."

His deep sensual voice fueled her. He leaned into her to seduce her lips again with his mouth.

She groaned in response and lifted her hips to meet his.

The tip of his penis slid into her. The slowness with which he eased inside served to magnify the heat that spiraled inside her. When he filled her, she pressed her hips hard against him and gyrated them.

"God, Marie." Jake gritted his teeth as he paused, holding himself back. "I don't know how long I can last if you keep that up."

"It doesn't matter," she whispered hoarsely. "We have all night."

He pulled his torso away from her. "We have longer than that if you let it," he croaked.

She bit her lip to keep the tears at bay. "Take me, Jake. However you want. I want to always remember this about you."

His gaze penetrated her deepest desires. His lips consumed hers as he encircled his arms around her and held her tight. He slipped inside her pussy. His cock filled her void, rocked her in more ways than one. With each thrust of his powerful hips, she soared higher. Her eyes closed. She wrapped her legs around his ass and pressed her hips against his crotch. He exhaled harder. She relished the sound. His thrusts rotated against her sex. "Oh God..." Beads of perspiration formed between their flesh. Their slicked bodies eased the friction but intensified the erotic tension.

"I love you, Marie." His husky voice skimmed her ear as he laved the lobe.

Jake did things to her, things no other had ever done. He pushed open her deepest desire, delved into her personal secrets. The thought of that made her wanton, needy for him. He plunged hard into her again. She caught her breath as his final penetration put her over the top then she cried aloud as she heard him groan, knowing he'd climaxed within her.

She'd never felt this satisfied. Marie latched onto him, held him tight, knew at some point she would have to let him go.

Jake lifted his head and gazed at her. The blues in his eyes swirled with emotion. "I want you always, Marie." His fingers threaded through her hair.

She pressed her lips together. "I know." She swore she wouldn't cry. Instead she fingered his rich mouth. "I..."

He brushed his thumb over her lips. "Don't say it," he murmured against her skin. "Like you said, tonight's for us. Let's worry about everything else tomorrow."

She nodded and hoped to abate the moisture that rimmed her lashes. Wrapping her hands around his neck, she pulled him to her and brushed her lips over his mouth. "I love you, Jake. I always will."

His dark gaze probed her. "We'll work through it, Marie. I swear it."

She nodded as a wayward drop escaped and ran down her temple.

Jake wiped the salty bead from her soft face and watched as she teared once more. She was so vulnerable. He wanted to slay whatever demons haunted her yet there was nothing he could do until he knew more. But he didn't want to mention that now. He'd pushed her enough for one night. He didn't want to break the spell of the moment.

Instead he kissed her again and savored the tender heat of her lips, the ardent entwining of their tongues, the sheer taste of her, how her warm, supple body molded against his, how her skin grew hot yet felt like velvet. How her breaths quickened as he stroked his fingers against the tender inside of her thighs.

His erection had gotten rock-hard again from watching her. She was so damn beautiful when she writhed in ecstasy. It took all the patience he'd learned through the years to hold back. Yeah, he had wanted one night, too, he thought. The night he'd fantasized about before he'd put a face, a name, to the woman of his dreams, and if anyone would've asked, fact was, he wanted more than one. Contrary to what she might think, now that he found her, he wouldn't let her go. He swore a silent promise to himself and to her. He would find whatever was wrong and fix it.

He pressed his lips together to seal the thought then kissed her sweet lips and indulged in his most ardent fantasy.

The one that said Marie was his.

She shivered. He held her close. "You cold?"

Marie nodded. He straightened and tugged down the blankets of the bed then lifted her and set her on the sheets and covered her back up. "By the way, I can do the

traditional missionary, too—us in the bed with me on top, if that’s what you want. I promise.”

She giggled in her hand. Her happiness warmed the cold part of his heart.

He went to the hearth and opened the flue then broke some small pieces of wood and put them on the grate. In a few minutes, he had the fire roaring.

Jake glanced at Marie. She had the covers pulled over her. Strands of her long hair hung over her shoulders and across the quilt. She sat in the bed and watched him, his movements, as if she memorized every detail. Fear gripped him. There was only one reason why Marie would do that. Would she have left tonight?

Probably. Jake had thought to give her some space when she moved her stuff to Katie’s. He thought she needed it. Now a large part of him was relieved that the incident tonight happened. The fight had stopped her from leaving him entirely and allowed him to get to her before she took off for good.

Jake couldn’t let her flee. It would kill him and just hurt her more.

He came to her. Crawled under the covers with her. “Warmer?”

She nodded. Her eyes were still shinier than they should be. The quilt slipped below her breasts. Tresses of her hair fell against her white skin. Her rosy nipples peeked out between them, as if asking to be kissed. He bent to one of them. Pressed his lips against the tender nub. An exhale eased from her mouth, a sensual hiss that pleased him. She arched her back to greet his touch.

“Oh Jake.” There was desperation in the sound.

No, his mind screamed. He wouldn’t let her go. Somehow he had to keep her here. But he was running out of time. “Marie, promise me something.”

“What?” She brushed her fingers over the side of his face.

Jake wanted to tell her to let him prove himself but he knew she still didn’t trust him enough. “Maybe I should say instead that I believe in you. Please believe in me too. Not just that I love you, but that I’ll protect you—from whatever it is.”

The corners of her mouth quivered. “I know you would.”

Jake pressed his lips together, grim. He would get to the root of this whether she liked it or not. “Good.” He laid the plan in his head. He knew what needed to be done. But for tonight he had her, and he would take as much of her as she was willing to give.

He kissed her, took her lips with his and tasted her once more. “I’ll fix it, Marie, whatever it is,” he said with more conviction. She wouldn’t like what he’d decided to do but he assured himself that he would be doing the best thing for both of them.

“I know you’d try.” Her fingers caressed his face.

Jake took her in his arms. Held her. Kissed her neck and pressed small, slow pecks along her jaw to the crook of her neck. Her vein pulsed under his mouth. She stirred him, was an integral part of him. Even with his first wife, he’d never felt a connection like this. For once, he finally understood what Gramps had had with his great-great

grandmother. They were one, Marie and him. And the more they made love, the more a part of him she became. She just didn't realize it yet.

He let his fingers drift over her soft skin, across her breasts to her waist. He kissed the other side of her neck, nibbled on her earlobe. Her chest heaved with her breaths. This time her exhalations not only aroused his flesh but strengthened the ties inside that bound him to her.

Her tender hands caressed his chest and played with his nipples. Her fingers tantalized his skin, slipped below his waist to his cock and fingered him.

"You know, woman, you're going to be the death of me."

"Pffff." She giggled again. "All I know is you're getting harder. You are a randy man, Sheriff Colder."

Damned if he wasn't. Jake smirked. "Must be the woman in my arms." He kissed along her jaw to her lips again. "Because I don't think anyone else could have this effect on me."

Her lips curved upward.

"Does that please you, Marie?" He touched the tip of his nose to hers.

"Very much," she murmured in that sultry way of hers.

"Good." He took her lips with his. "Because you're the only woman I want in my life and in my bed."

He liked the way her smile broadened. His dick stiffened more. He wanted her.

She stroked him again, used her thumb to caress the head of his cock. He closed his eyes and groaned. "God, woman." Jake kissed her again. "I want to make slow love to you."

Marie giggled. "Missionary style?"

He knew a gleam of lust probably shone in his face. "If you want. I told you I'd do whatever it took to keep you with me, although I have this feeling you like being on top."

She sputtered. "How would you know?"

Jake shot her a sly grin of his own. "You're my woman. I can tell."

Marie bit off a laugh. "Is that a bit of investigative procedure or is it learned from your vast experience with other women?"

He pretended to wince. "Maybe both."

"Hmm, as I thought." Her gaze softened. "You've been with a lot of women."

Jake frowned, not liking the gist of this conversation. "I've been single a while. A lot? I guess that's a matter of opinion. Yeah, maybe. Not as much as some." He threaded a hand through her hair. "Now that I've found you, I don't want anyone else." He stared long and hard in her eyes. "I can promise you that."

She nodded. Her eyes became glassy. "I believe you," Marie whispered in that sex-ridden voice of hers.

Jake kissed her. He wanted her. There were no words to describe how he felt. Instead, he took her hand away from his cock and slowly pressed his tip to her wet center. "We're one now, Marie," he murmured against her lips as he eased inside her. "You're mine now. And I'm yours."

Her lashes flickered closed. He rolled her on her back and covered her with his body. Her soft exhalation brushed his mouth. Jake closed his eyes and kissed her, rocked her with his rhythm. She bent her knees to open her hips and took him inside her, took all of him. He thrust into her. Slow. Until the waves of passion increased in them again.

"Jake..." Need resounded in her voice. She exposed her neck to him and raked her nails down his back.

God, how he wanted her. He nipped the tender skin she offered. His tempo increased. He ground into her. The huskiness of her sighs grew heavier. The pulse in her neck beat faster. He could feel the thrum as he tasted her with his tongue.

She whimpered again. He savored the sound as he beat harder into her. Their sweat-slicked bodies ground together. The pitch of her voice rose.

She screamed as she came. The small muscles in her vagina clenched him, grabbed and wouldn't let up.

He groaned. Heard his own voice in his ears. *She's mine, dammit.*

And he wouldn't let anyone take her away.

* * * * *

Marie gazed at the fire Jake had built in the bedroom hearth. The logs spit softly, the wooden embers glowed red from the low burning flames. Jake slept next to her. She smiled at his handsome, serene face. She had never felt like this, warm, safe.

Loved. She'd belong here if not for her troubles.

Gently, she fingered his cheek, knowing this was how wedded bliss would be with him.

He stirred. "Woman, you're supposed to be asleep." The deep timbre in his voice soothed and stirred her at the same time.

"I know." She snuggled next to him. "I couldn't help myself."

"Couldn't help yourself?" A wicked glint shone in his eye.

"No." She brushed her lips over his. "Jake?"

"Hmm..." He cradled her to him and closed his eyes.

"I love you."

He opened a lid. The lines around his eyes wrinkled. "I love you too, Marie." He sat up on an elbow and caressed her cheek. "But you've about wore me out." He held her chin and peered into her face. "I meant what I said. I want you to be with me always. I want you to marry me."

She bit her lip.

A corner of his mouth turned downward. "Just tell me you will if we can get you out of whatever you're in."

She held his fingers and kissed them with the desperation she felt. "Yes, Jake. I'll marry you, if you still want me when this is over."

His frown deepened. "You need to tell me, Marie, so I can help you."

She pressed her lips together, unwilling to reveal more. How would he feel if she told him he had to take her in?

A smirk twitched his lips. He lay back on the pillow. "All right. Have it your way." He ran pulled her to him then ran a hand through her hair. "I won't ruin tonight by asking more." He lifted her chin. His look bore into her. "But I want an explanation in the morning. We can't go on like this. Even if you go to prison, I'll be there for you."

A pang of anxiety hit her. Did he know? Then she schooled herself. He couldn't, otherwise she wouldn't be in his bed at this moment.

She reminded herself to enjoy every minute. And not just the sex. It was the way he held her, the way he cherished her. He loved her. And that emotion she wouldn't get again, may not ever have from him if he found out what happened. A pain flickered in her. She could tell him something, hope that when he found out more that he would believe she didn't have anything to do with the scam to her clients and the Back to America Movement. "Jake, I didn't do anything wrong but it might seem to other people that I did."

His eyes narrowed. His lips mocked a smile. He nodded at her. "Glad to hear it. Then the chances are good we can start spending our lives together a lot sooner." He covered her lips with his. "I don't want to have to wait too long for you. I will. But I don't want to. I want to start our lives now."

"Yes, Jake." She brushed his cheek and kissed it lightly then cuddled next to him.

"In the morning then." He turned her face to him. His look brooked no argument.

"Yes, Jake." She bit her lip, knowing she needed to be gone in the morning. Sadness arose in her and would have swamped her good feelings but she submerged them as fast as they came. Tonight, she would pretend she was Jake's, and he was hers.

He held her to him. Marie watched as he fell back to sleep.

It seemed like hours had passed before Marie closed her eyes. She brushed her lips over his then rested in his arms. She absorbed every bit of him, committed to memory the look of his face, the warm feel of his embrace, the musky scent of their lovemaking.

Tomorrow she'd tell him a partial truth, just enough to satisfy him, then she would leave for good. After tonight, she had to.

Biting back her tears, Marie fell asleep, haunted by what the daylight would bring.

* * * * *

Bill Martin stood at the window of his cheap motel room. Being stuck in Cheyenne didn't get the job done. He was still too many hours away.

Wind and snow blistered outside as he turned and paced the tattered carpet. Fuck, he hated delays. His "nonstop" flight ended in Denver due to the gale-force blizzard, miles short of his intended destination. He'd rented a white 4X4 in the nick of time and made it to Cheyenne before the state troopers turned him back and closed the Interstate. Now everything west of there was socked in, shut down by the raging snowstorm.

The only lodging left had been this dinky motel room. The desk clerk had insisted he'd gotten lucky.

"Damn it." He stomped to the small picture window and pounded his fist on the frigid metal ledge. The stupid clerk told him this was the worst storm Wyoming had seen this early in sixteen years. He gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. He couldn't sleep. Not when he was this close.

He rubbed his head and looked through the glass pane. The wind howled again and beat the blinding snow against the window. "To hell with you," he yelled at the wintry fury and glared at the ice that formed outside. "Fuck this storm."

Growling, he marched to the bed and lay down then turned on the dilapidated television set to a late-night action flick. He pulled his mock picture of Marie from the bag he'd sat on the edge of the mattress and fingered the image with reverence. His internet search for her had taken him to the Wyoming server but the call from a cowhand named Slim led him directly to his woman. "Nice picture," the man had commented. Bill studied it a little longer and nodded his head. It was nice. *Very nice.*

He was supposed to meet the man at Fort Bridger tomorrow, an old Texas cowboy who looked for a few extra pesos. Bill scoffed. He'd give the man the money—and more.

Bill put the picture away. He'd finally hit pay dirt. Breathing a little easier, he relaxed and leaned against the thin, scratchy pillow.

Another day or so was all, mere moments until he reaped his reward.

Chapter Eleven

The ringing resounded in the near empty house. Jake heard the echo down the hall and bolted upright. He ran a hand through his hair and glanced at the clock—5:26. Who the hell would be calling him at this hour? Marie stirred against him. He didn't want to get up. But this early? The caller could be only one "who"—the department.

He gazed at Marie. Her hair fanned over the embroidered pillowcase. Her moans of ecstasy came back to him. He loved the taste of her, the smell of her arousal. He didn't think he'd ever pleased a woman more.

He bent to kiss her then the phone rang again. Jake grumbled as he rose and stumbled across the hall to his room. He yanked up the phone. "It'd better be good." His voice sounded rough.

"Jake, where've you been?" The voice of his youngest deputy, Kyle Thorsen, registered in his brain. "We've been trying to get ahold of you for over two hours."

Jake flinched. "I've been otherwise occupied. What do you want?"

Kyle cleared his throat. "I won't ask. You look outside yet?"

Jake gazed out the window. The thickly clouded sky looked ominous and at least two feet of snow covered the ground. The drifts were even higher. "Oh hell."

"Yep," the deputy agreed. "John's got all the four-wheelers out looking for the dumb and stranded. You want me to send a truck for you?"

Jake sighed. "Yeah. Tell 'em to make it quick but careful. We don't need any more accidents. How many do we have so far?"

"Fifteen. Most of 'em on the Interstate. Ten valley folks still missing. Not sure how many are stuck on the byways."

Jake cursed under his breath. "Why can't the damn folks stay home when the weather gets bad?"

"Don't know, boss."

"Yeah. Radio me when the truck heads out. I'll be ready."

"Yes, sir." The man hung up.

Jake scowled as he padded back to the bed he and Marie now shared. This was one morning he didn't want to run out into the cold. He tiptoed into the room.

Marie had awoken and sat up when he walked in. The daylight exposed her creamy white flesh. "Good morning." She stretched like a cat.

"Mornin'." He smiled, went to her and placed a peck on her lips.

"Who was that?"

"One of the deputies." He ran his fingers through her hair as Marie's brows knitted. "The valley's snowed in," he continued. "I've got to go."

"What about Jesse?"

"He'll be fine. He's with Cal. Now..." He pushed her shoulders back into the pillow and put his lips to her forehead. "Get some rest. I know you didn't sleep well last night."

She looked away.

Jake frowned. "When we weren't making love, you tossed a lot." He bent over, held her to him and kissed her deeply. "I love you, Marie. Put your trust in me, okay?"

Her watery eyes peered at him. He could read the struggle in them. She bit her bottom lip as he turned to leave. "Jake, my bag?"

"I'll get it. Meanwhile, get in my dresser and see what you can find for clothes." He stood up. "I've got to get ready. We'll talk when I get back." He walked out and closed the door behind him. He didn't want to see the fear in Marie's face again.

Pensively, he walked down the corridor. He grabbed his clothes and gear from the parlor and dressed. Putting on his coat and hat, he stepped outside and figured the frigid jolt might knock some sense into him.

Or at least, give him some idea of what he faced.

* * * * *

Marie watched through the bedroom window as the SUV that came to pick up Jake pulled away from the house. Snowed in? Now what would she do?

Anxiety gripped her. Sulking, she turned away. She couldn't possibly stay another night. It already took too much out of her to leave. If she stayed one more day, well, she'd never be able to let Jake go.

She wiped away the mist from her eyes. What had gone wrong? Somewhere in her late-night wisdom, she'd thought having sex with Jake would ease the pain. Now her heart about broke, hurt even more now that Jake had offered her the life she wanted.

She rubbed her chilled body and stepped into the hallway to get Jake's bathrobe. Stark naked, she opened his bedroom door and walked in. Except to clean, she hadn't been in his room. She felt odd being in the darker room there in the buff. She glanced around the utilitarian chamber. Why *did* Jake sleep here? She'd asked him time and again to take the larger room but he would always tell her it didn't feel right.

Now she guessed he'd changed his mind because he said he wanted to spend the nights in the big bed with her.

She crossed to the closet and opened the door. When she reached for his robe, she noticed an open box on the floor, one she hadn't remembered seeing before. Bending over, she looked closer.

A photo sat on top. A blonde woman stared back from the frame. It was simply a picture but something about the image seemed eerily real. Gingerly, she picked the photo up and fingered the quirky smile of the pretty woman. This woman had broken Jake's heart.

She put the picture back but underneath it lay another photo of Jake and his wife. Jake wore his army uniform and the two of them seemed to look at each other as if no one else existed. She picked up the one of the couple. Jake was younger then but just as handsome. He had ribbons on his chest and the image reminded Marie of how little she knew of his past.

She brushed her fingers over his face and wished the woman had been her. She wouldn't have been so foolish as to let him go. She pressed her lips together to hold back her tears and put the picture away. That woman had hurt Jake and Jesse. Marie pulled on the robe and tightened the sash. If Marie ever met Jake's first wife, she'd bop her in the nose.

"Well, good morning, purty lady. You and Jake have a nice evenin'?"

She jumped when she heard the crusty voice behind her. Gramps stood there in the old officer's uniform.

"Sorry to pop in on you like this." He stood near the bed.

"How long have you been there?" she squeaked.

"Now don't git all riled up." He shook his head. "I let you have your privacy. But this is too important. We need to talk. Fast."

"Talk?" Her voice hit another octave. "How did you get in here? I thought I was alone."

"Well," Gramps mouth twisted. "You are, kinda."

"Kinda?"

"Uh, well..." He pulled off his army cap and ran the rim through his fingers then cleared his throat. "There's somethin' yuh oughta know about me, Marie."

"What?" She pulled the edges of the robe closer together and wanted to tell him it didn't matter to her that insanity ran in the family. She just didn't want him to barge in on her. But she hadn't heard him walk—

She looked at the door. "You didn't come in through the door, did you?"

"No, ma'am." He straightened and put his hands behind his back.

She pouted and glanced at the window. It was shut and locked tight. "But there wasn't anyone here when I came in. Jake said we were alone last night. You weren't..." She shook her head. "You weren't here...were you?" Her tone rose and grew imperious.

"No, ma'am." He put his cap on his head and stood at attention.

"You didn't come through the window?"

"No, ma'am."

"Then how did you get in?"

The older man went into parade rest— chin up, face front, his eyes looking directly ahead. "I faded in, ma'am. Master Sergeant Thaddeus P. Colder ready for duty." He acted as if he gave a report to his commander.

"You *faded* in?" Irritated, Marie walked over to him and placed her hands on her hips. Even in his current stance, he towered over her. "And how did you manage that?" She looked at him. He seemed a bit translucent. She blinked to get over the effect.

"It's difficult to explain, ma'am." He lifted his chin higher and directed his gaze over the top of her head.

She folded her arms across her chest. "Did Jake know you spent the night?"

"No, ma'am."

Marie puffed her cheeks and relaxed.

"Because, I didn't." Gramps broke ranks and crossed his arms. His biceps bulged under the uniform. "Marie." He opened his mouth, paused, then yanked the cap off his head. He marched toward the bed and slapped the hat on his thigh. "Damn, Jake. I told him to tell yuh and I dun' gone and broke my promise to 'em."

"What promise?"

"That I wouldn't pester yuh. Look." He stepped toward her. "I know yuh think I'm crazy but yuh gotta listen. That man, Bill Martin, he's a comin'. He's out tuh git yuh and those damn numbers you been haulin' round. I popped in here 'cause I thought Jake would be here so I could tell 'em."

Marie stuttered. "Jake...k-knows a-about the codes?"

"No." Gramps scowled as his brows knitted. "I ain't give away all yur secrets."

"B-but how di-did you...?"

Gramps paced on the pine floor. "I came tuh warn Jake. But I found you." He stopped in front of her and grasped her arms. "Marie, where is he? I gotta let 'em know."

His hands were clammy through the terry cloth fabric and his eyes held a deadly gleam. "But...but...but..." She shook her head. "I don't know," she peeped.

Gramps released her and glared. "He's at that damn police station, ain't he? Goll' darn it." The man paced again. "Takes off and leaves his woman unprotected. What the hell kinda way is that tuh treat my great-great granddaughter-in-law-to-be?" He stopped and turned. "We've got a few hours." He marched up to her. "I'll find 'em, Marie." He nodded brusquely. "I'll find 'em and we'll fight off the enemy together."

With that, he popped out.

Marie waved a shaky hand through the thin air. Nothing there, merely a cool, comfortable sensation.

From nowhere, Gramp's face faded back in. Marie jumped and gasped at the same time.

"By the way," he squinted at her, "you know how tuh shoot a rifle?"

Her mouth fell open. She slowly shook her head no.

He knitted his brows. "Well, it's all right, darlin'." He tapped her cheek like she was a little girl. "I'll find Jake. We're gonna git this guy."

Her knees wobbled and her eyes rolled back in her head. A strong set of hands seemed to catch her and guide her into Jake's bed. The cool hands tucked her under the covers.

She pried open her eyelids and thought she saw Gramps fade into thin air again. Luckily, she sank into oblivion instead.

* * * * *

"Come on, you dumb yahoo." Bill sat in the car and cussed under his breath. The trooper in front of him manually opened the gate to the Interstate. It was almost ten in the morning. About time they plowed the damn road. He'd been there since seven thirty.

The trooper strolled up to his rented vehicle. Goose bumps rose on Bill's skin. He hoped the man didn't suspect him. Bill lowered the window and let the frozen air into the heated interior.

The policeman bent over and studied him. "How far you going, mister?"

"To the coast, Officer." Bill pasted a huge smile on his face. "My family's there and I haven't seen them in a week. Be real glad to get home. This has been one heck of a storm."

The trooper nodded. "Yeah. Tell me about it." The man eyed him a minute longer then straightened. "Be careful. The road's still closed in some parts. Mighty slick in any case and they're expectin' more snow. You might need to pull off for a while along the way."

Bill forced a smile. "I appreciate the advice, Officer."

"No problem." The man nodded and walked to his car.

Bill let the cruiser pull ahead of him and followed the vehicle from a distance. He didn't need anyone to muck up his plans now. He looked at the dense gray sky. *The weather be damned.* He had someplace to be. He shifted into gear.

The officer pulled off at the next exit and Bill picked up speed. He snapped on the radio and tuned into a scratchy AM station to listen to the weather report. A few more hours, he reminded himself.

Only a few more hours before he punished Marie's sweet ass and took his revenge.

* * * * *

Jake stood by his office window and scanned one of the reports. They'd gotten lucky. Most of the accidents were fender benders and, miraculously, all the missing

residents were located. Not that it was really so unusual. Most of those who'd been born and bred in Wyoming prepared for this type of weather. The pass-through traffic was what generally caused the problems in this kind of storm.

He looked out the window. He'd been back a few minutes now but Kyle Thorsen still worked the last dispatch. Some businessman who took a shortcut around the closed part of the Interstate. The man's car had slipped off the highway and rolled over. Kyle'd radioed in and said the driver would be transported to Memorial some miles away. Jake wondered if the man had a family.

He dropped the paper on the desk and picked up his coffee. His hands warmed against the heated cup. Looking out the window, he examined the leaden-colored sky. It looked pregnant with snow.

Pregnant? Funny choice of words. Marie said she would like to have children with the right man. Well that was him. But if he didn't take precautions, that event might happen sooner than later. She'd said she was protected. And fortunately, he was generally a careful man.

A few flakes fell. The sky threatened to drop more snow. Jake wanted to pick up Marie's bag before that happened. He reached in his pocket for the key Marie had given him in hopes he'd drive her car home for her.

He frowned. He intended to do more than drive it. From her confession, he had enough probable cause to search her bag and the car. Now, depending on what he found, all he had to do was figure out how to approach her after he did it. He tossed the key in the air then caught it and clutched the metal in his fingers. Yep, he would bring Marie's things to her. That and whatever well-kept secrets he could discover, starting with her bag and her car.

* * * * *

Groggy, Marie awoke and glanced around Jake's room. She'd been tucked snug under the covers. How that happened she wasn't sure. She rolled her head from side to side to stretch her neck and sat up. She must have wandered into Jake's bedroom and fallen asleep. That had to be it. It couldn't have been...

Slowly, she recalled the shadows of the morning. Gramps a ghost? Not likely. She rubbed her face with both hands. The stress must have gotten to her. Either that or they put weird stuff in the drinks in Wyoming.

She huffed at her ridiculous thoughts, reclined against the headboard and reveled in the softness of Jake's double bed. The pillows smelled like him, a spicy, musky maleness. She took a deep breath to savor the scent. He loved her. And she knew she loved him back. Now what would she do about it?

She closed her eyes and tried to dream the life she could lead—if she didn't have the thefts that hung over her and the threat of Bill Martin and his cronies showing up. God only knew what they would do. But Jake had said to trust him, to let him help her.

She grimaced. Maybe she should. But she knew she risked a lot in the process. Would Jake listen to her? Would he believe her?

She didn't know. Still, she couldn't do anything while the valley was snowed in. And neither could anyone else. She buried her head in the pillow and sighed. There'd be time enough for talk. Jake had made her promise that much before he'd been pulled away. She closed her eyes, tried to forget reality but sordid thoughts continued to flow in her mind. At some point, Bill would track her down and then she'd be on the run again. The offshore account numbers he had set up had more than a quarter of a billion dollars in them. He wouldn't let that go without a fight.

Fortunately, with the help of Jake's computer, she had kept the money moving around so Bill couldn't get his grimy hands on the rest of the funds.

The stark truth of what she needed to do was plain. Bill had proven he could be deathly violent. She couldn't risk Jake and Jesse's lives in order to save her own. She rolled over on her side and hugged one of the pillows. Eventually, she would leave but never would she forget last night.

Feeling a little woozy, she eased herself into an upright position and peered through the window. The dreary day depressed her and she needed to go to work. The diner wasn't that far. Gus would need the help serving those who had been stranded in the storm. It suddenly occurred to her she had no idea what the time was. Quickly, she glanced at the clock. 11:21?

"Oh my God." Jake should have picked her up and taken her to the diner. He hadn't called, had he?

She threw off the covers and jumped to her feet. Tightening the sash of Jake's robe, she raked a hand through her hair and remembered she had nothing to wear. She picked up the phone by his bed and dialed the number for the station.

"Jake'll be here in a bit." Gramps faded in and stood by the phone then pressed the button on the cradle. "But before he comes, we need to talk."

"Uh..." She wavered on her feet, afraid she might have gone crazy again. Gramps was a ghost. "I'm supposed to be at the restaurant."

"That place don't need yuh. Jake does. Besides, he called you in sick."

"He's been here?"

"Not yet. But he's acomin'."

The apparition sat on the edge of the bed. She pinched the bridge of her nose. She still dreamed. That had to be it. "No." She waved her hand at the older man and walked toward the door. "I'm not doing this." She wagged a finger at him. "You are not real. You are not here. And I'm as sane as anyone else in this family." She crinkled her nose and giggled as she realized how funny the statement sounded. No one, except Jesse, was sane in this family. Gramps was senile and Jake wanted to marry a strange woman who came to town with a bullet hole in her rear window.

Suddenly, Gramps popped in front of her out of thin air. "You wanna tell me the joke?"

She shrugged. "Why not? I've decided I'm as loony as everyone else in this house."

Gramps crossed his arms and huffed. "You're not crazy. I thought we'd got this straight."

She bent her head to rub the ache in her temple. "You're not here. You're a figment of my imagination. Gramps lives—you know, Jake never told me where Gramps lives."

"That's because I'm not livin'." He lifted her chin with a clammy finger, his mouth firmly set as he looked at her.

She stepped back and put her hands on her hips. "I refuse to believe in ghosts."

"Well, then how do you explain this?" He took off his head and held it in his hands.

Her eyes rolled back in their sockets and the world went black. "Damn," she heard the faint voice say as she felt herself lifted up, "not again."

* * * * *

Jake pulled his penknife from his pocket and dug into the small hole behind the driver's seat. He hoped to find the bullet still there.

He probed carefully then heard the dull ping of some loose metal. Jake cupped his free hand under the hole and dug into the leather. The slug had lodged firmly but he managed to loosen it. The object fell into his gloved hand.

He'd been careful not to scratch it. Now Jake examined the metal with a jaundiced eye. The tip had exploded and he noted the scoring on the cylinder. It had been a hollow-point, a bullet meant to kill.

Frowning, he dropped the evidence into a plastic bag. After he tied it securely, he slid the plastic sack into his breast pocket.

The rest of the car was clean. With Katie's permission and her door key, he unlocked her house. Slim had left, he noted as he made for the room Marie should have bunked in.

Marie's bag sat on the far end of the guest bed. As he walked around the footboard, he said a small prayer then unzipped the satchel, hoping he would find something that would help him prove her innocence. He fumbled through the clothes. When he came to a lacy bra, he ran his fingers over it. He swallowed hard. Last night was more than the fulfillment of their mutual lust. It was about love. He'd made a promise to Marie. He intended to keep it.

He cleared his mind. To save her, he had to focus on his investigation. He pulled out the clothes and laid them on the bed. Papers were scattered across the bottom.

He pulled them out and read them. They were bank statements, some in English, and some, it looked to him, in German and French. The customer listed was Back to America. A smaller piece fell out from between the sheets and floated to the bed. Jake

dropped the other papers and picked up the hand-written scrap. It was some type of computer code. But computer code of what?

"I'll take those."

Jake's head snapped up from the bed toward the deep voice and the Beretta pointed at him. The sheriff in him narrowed his eyes. "I always thought you were quiet for a cowboy, Slim. Too quiet."

"Put 'em up, Sheriff. I don't want any trouble."

Jake raised his arms.

Slim kept Jake beyond arm's reach as he grasped the other documents. The cowboy slid one of the papers around and stared at it from his corner vision. "You know about these?"

The cold anger in Jake's eyes met the steel gleam in his. "Not yet. But I intend to find out."

Slim nodded at him and carefully reached into his back pocket. He pulled out his wallet and jerked the flap open then threw it face up on the bed.

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The ID card and badge glared at him. Jake felt cold fingers closing in.

Slim eyed him. "Jake Colder. Eight years U.S. Army, Special Forces. Divorced unfaithful wife four years ago. One child. No radical political affiliations. I'd bet the army'd still take you back if you'd let them." Slim paused to gauge Jake's reactions. "I've found you to be an honest man, Sheriff." He emphasized the last word. "I need to know if you're a man I can trust."

"I'll do the right thing, if that's what you're asking." Jake clenched his teeth. "I took an oath to protect and serve."

Slim raised the pistol and looked down the barrel at Jake. "Even if it means nailing your girlfriend?"

Jake gritted his teeth. "Yes."

"Give me your word."

He bit the inside of his lip. "You have it."

Slim nodded. "Good. I'd hoped so but I had to be sure." He lowered the pistol. "The snow's delayed my backup and Ms. Taylor's partner will be here soon enough. I may need more help than you're willing to give."

"I'll be there." Jake lowered his arms. "How deep in this is she?"

"Deep enough." Slim saddled the gun in his shoulder holster. "I don't know if she knew about any of this before she ran if that's what you're asking. She and her partner, Bill Martin, have been under observation for some time. I played hell tailing her. She wasn't an easy woman to follow."

"Marie says she's innocent."

Slim shrugged. "Maybe she is. But someone doesn't steal a quarter of a billion dollars and the account manager not notice."

Jake's heart twisted in pain. "That's what these accounts are? Embezzled money?"

Slim nodded. "Yeah. But I'd bet I'm more interested in that little piece of paper you're still holding."

Jake held the scrawled memo out to him and Slim quickly snatched it. Reading it, the man's face lit up like a floodlight.

"This is it." Slim reveled over it.

"You mind filling me in?" Jake's tone grew colder.

Slim looked at him. "The stolen money was to pay for an armament shipment. A militia group—the Back to America Movement, very secret, very well protected—were buying high-tech weapons from overseas distributors. From what we can tell, they were going to use them to start their own private war. The scary part is that they're well connected politically. We haven't been able to get anything to stick against them—yet. This may be the first."

Jake whistled through his teeth. "And you think Marie's involved?"

Slim nodded. "Maybe. Either that or she fell into the hornet's nest by accident. To her credit, she had no association with the Movement before Martin talked her into going into business for herself. It'll be hard to tell until we nail 'em." Slim gathered the papers together. "And until we do, your girlfriend's a prime suspect."

Jake took a deep breath. "What do you want me to do?"

"Right now," Slim held the papers out to Jake, "put these in your evidence locker. You do have one, don't you?"

Jake nodded. "They'll be safe enough."

"Good." Slim stuffed the papers back into the bag. "And keep Ms. Taylor close. I don't want her running again." Slim smirked and paused to look at him. "I don't suppose you'll have a problem with that?"

Jake's eyes narrowed. "I'll see she stays put."

"Good." Slim's caustic grin vanished as he zipped the bag. "If it's any consolation to you, Sheriff, I think Marie simply got caught up with the wrong crowd. If I can prove her innocence, I will." He put his hands in his coat pocket. "But so you know, when this goes down, I'm taking her in." The hard features of the man's face set as he pierced Jake with a glacial stare. "I expect you'll do the same if needed."

"I understand," Jake returned. "But if you want my help, you explain one thing." He paused a moment to give the words their full effect. "Who put the bullet hole in Marie's window?"

A look of regret flitted over the man's face. "It wasn't me, Jake. Or anyone in the Bureau."

"You know more than you're telling."

Slim pursed his lips. "I all ready told you too much. Keep in mind, I wouldn't have told you anything if I wasn't concerned about my backup. The snow's screwed everything." He paused. "This is a small town, Sheriff. I expect you keep this to yourself. I don't want your deputies knowing yet either. We've worked too hard on this. I don't want my hand revealed too soon."

"I will." Jake clenched his jaw. "How close is Martin?"

Slim glanced at his watch. "I don't know. He's supposed to call in an hour. We got enough time to get the evidence secured."

Jake's shoulders drooped. His mind whirled with thoughts, searching to find an answer. Slim patted him on the shoulder. "Sheriff, for what it's worth, I'm sorry."

Jake merely stared at the man.

"Katie likes her too." Slim hoisted the bag over his shoulder. "You know, I could be wrong about Marie." He took a deep breath. "Besides being incredible, there's one thing I can say about Miss Kate." He put a hand in his coat pocket. "She's a damn good judge of character. And she thinks a lot of Ms. Taylor."

Jake frowned. "So what do I call you?"

The man tilted his cowboy hat back with the press of his index finger. "Slim. Used it when I herded cows in Texas. It fits."

Jake nodded. "Well, we'd better get."

Slim's cynical smile unnerved Jake. "I'll follow you to the station," the agent said. Then he strode out of the room.

* * * * *

Marie's temple pounded. Another sign that her world had taken a turn for the worse. She felt the shove again.

"Marie?"

Jesse's voice reached her somewhere in the dark void.

"Here, put this on 'er head," an older, crusty voice whispered, and she felt small hands put a cool, damp washcloth across her forehead. Her eyes fluttered open. "Jake?"

"He ain't here yet, Miss." It was Cal. "I only stopped in tuh bring Jesse back." The older man bent over her, his face riddled with concern. "Not that it's any o' my business, Miss Taylor, but I wouldn't be drinking any of that rotgut at the saloon anymores."

Marie would have laughed except when she tried her head pounded harder. "Thanks, Cal," she murmured hoarsely and rubbed her temples. She sat up and looked into a younger pair of Jake's blue eyes. Jesse gawked at her with a grin as broad as the Missouri River. "Hi, Marie. Whatcha doin' in Dad's bed?"

"Ohhh." Her blood vessels thumped behind her eyes in protest. "Jesse, honey, I came in to borrow your dad's robe."

"Why?" His brows furrowed which, in turn, highlighted the innocent look on his face.

"Well," she rubbed his arm then held his small hand, "because I needed something to wear." Her head hurt too much to fathom an explanation.

His smile slowly returned. Mischief replaced the question in his eyes. "You're going to be my new mom, aren't you? Yes." It seemed more a statement of fact than a question. He threw a punch into the air and did a jig in the room. "Dad always said if I ever found a woman in his bed, it'd be my new mama."

Marie groaned and clutched her stomach. She thought she would be sick. Cal rushed to her. "Okay, Jesse, that's enough. Cain't yuh see Marie ain't feeling good." He got down on his knees and felt her head with the back of his hand. "Ma'am, you okay? Should I call Jake and tell 'em to hurry?"

"No." The queasiness in her stomach subsided. "I don't understand." She looked at him. "I only had two glasses of wine." Her equilibrium returned slowly.

"You eat before you went?"

"A little. But why would a few glasses cause me to hallucinate? I didn't even finish the second one. You...you don't think..." Her unease made her question if one of the miners had dropped something in her drink.

"Hallucinate?" Cal squinted his eyes at her. "'Bout what?"

"Oh..." She pulled her fingers through her hair then rested them on the back of her neck. "Jake's grandfather kept appearing from nowhere in front of me." She shrugged and her throat went dry.

"You met Gramps?" Jesse's eyes were like the proverbial saucers.

She forced a weak smile. "The first time I met him was at the fort. He's a very sweet old man, Jesse." She brushed the boy's cheek then looked at Cal, who gazed at her strangely. She crinkled her brows. "Maybe a little odd." She glanced over Cal's head and mumbled to herself. "Pretty young-looking to be Jake's grandfather, don't you think?" She felt tipsy as she cocked her head and looked into Cal's crinkled face.

The man's jaw dropped. He bobbed his head. "Go grab a lasso, Jesse. Jake'll be fit to be tied."

Jesse giggled.

"It was late one night after work. I'd decided to take a walk and he appeared from...nowhere...again." The pounding in her temple returned as Cal and Jesse looked at each other. "Don't tell, Jake." She frowned. "Gramps made me promise not to tell him." She hugged herself then glanced into thin air. She spoke as if no one was in the room, which seemed to fit with the mood she was in. "The last time I saw him he took his head off and held it under his arm."

"Whew." Cal let out a long whistle. "Lie down, honey. I'm calling Jake."

She settled into the pillows and closed her eyes. "Don't bother him, Cal. He'll be home soon." She didn't know why she knew that but she did. Then she closed her eyes.

* * * * *

"All right, Gramps." Jake turned in circles in front of the Officer's Quarters. The snow fell at his feet. "Come on out. If you're going to help, do it now." The cold wind blasted against him. "Dammit, old man. For once in my life, I need you." Jake felt the salty warm wetness in his eye make a track across his cheek. He brushed it away.

"Gramps..." His throat closed on him. "Please."

He felt the cool comfort of a hand on his shoulder and spun around. Gramps looked at him soberly. "You don't have much time."

Jake sighed in relief. "I know. Talk to me. Tell me what you know."

"She didn't steal that dang money."

"Then help me prove it."

"Cain't. Where'd you put her papers?"

"In the office safe." Jake frowned at him. "What do you mean you can't?"

"You got all the evidence you need locked up."

"The papers?"

"Yep."

Jake paced the old porch. "There was nothing in there but bank statements and instructions for an arms deal. And don't think about getting into them." Jake pointed a finger at him. "Did you know Slim was with the Feds? His real name's Jim Douglas."

"Aw, I knew he carried a badge. He seemed decent 'nough. Why?"

"He'll arrest Marie, that's why. Unless we can prove she knew nothing about the crime."

"Hell, Jake. She thought she kilt the sonofabit—well, yuh know what I mean. That Bill Martin guy."

"Who put a bullet in her car?"

"The men what that Martin feller had working for 'em. Jake, he's gonna kill her." Gramp's steely glare left Jake cold.

He pulled off his Stetson and slapped it against his leg. "Dammit, Gramps. Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"'Cause." The old man spat a wad of chew. "You're as hard-headed and stubborn as your great-great grandmother, Lord rest Josephine's sweet soul." He removed his hat and held it to his chest for a second, rolled his eyes skyward, then plunked the cap back on his head. "And don't cus' me, boy. I'm your elder."

"Gramps, I know how you feel." Jake held his hands up to plead. "I love you. You've been like a father to me since Dad died. But I don't want to spend the rest of eternity like you, waiting for the woman I want to live forever with."

The ghost lowered his head and kicked some snow off the ground. "Hell, Jake." He huffed then looked into Jake's eyes. "Yuh woulda thought the worst if yuh knew

upfront. I wanted you to git to know her first. The two 'o you were meant for each other."

Jake put his hands in his coat pockets. "I know that now, Gramps."

For a few moments, the wind ceased and Jake eyed the shadow of the man.

"In that case, son." The ghost clapped him on the back. "Let's go catch us a thief."

Jake smiled. For once, he wasn't at odds with his great-great grandfather.

* * * * *

Marie felt the warm, strong hand stroke the side of her head. She reached for it and snuggled against the firm wrist. It smelled like Jake. She murmured his name.

"I'm here, Marie." He brushed her hair from her face and kissed her brow.

Her eyes fluttered open. Contentment filled her, knowing he was by her side. "Jake." Her voice sounded thick, husky, probably as a result of the torrid dream she'd had of him. Her eyes focused as she looked around the room. "I fell asleep in your bed."

"I know." He tilted her head and looked into her pupils to examine them. "Cal told me what happened."

"Tell me I'm not crazy, Jake." She bit the soft part of her cheek.

The pad of his thumb traced a circle against her temple. "You're not crazy, sweetheart." He kissed her mouth with a certain possession.

She ran her hands up the front of his uniform shirt and relished the hardness of his chest. "I love you, Jake."

He gazed at her with a depth in his eyes Marie had never seen before. "Darlin', I love you too. No matter what happens, always believe that."

Jake grasped her and held her tightly to him. His lips brushed her temple then his mouth claimed possession of hers.

Her soft panting echoed between barely parted lips. Jake kissed her again and let his mouth travel down the delicate skin of her neck. Deftly, her hands explored the strength of his broad shoulders and the sinewy cords of his muscled back. "Jake," she murmured breathlessly, "where's Jesse?"

He slipped off the robe she wore, took the tender flesh of her shoulder between his teeth and stroked it with the tip of his tongue. He lifted his hand then brushed the hair from her face. The midnight blue of his eyes fired with passion. "He's with Cal. They're feeding the herd." His throaty voice stirred a chord deep within her.

"Will they be gone long?" Her taut body hummed as she ran her fingertips around the inside of his belt to the clasp of his buckle.

"Long enough." The azure pools in his eyes were unfathomable.

"Jake. Make love to me again." It was a plea. She lifted her chin and let her lips taste his and her hand stroke his cheek. Jake groaned and Marie felt him swallow as her

fingers skimmed his throat. She stopped at the first button she came to. "Please," her breath whimpered against him.

He held her savagely to him. "Are you sure you won't get pregnant?"

Her eyes misted. "I don't care. I need you right now. More than ever."

"But —"

She lifted a fingertip to his lips. "I want your children, Jake. All of them...if you'll have me when I'm through telling you what happened." Somewhere in the confusion of the morning, she had decided that she needed him more than anything else, and she was willing to risk everything to be with him. She would tell him the whole truth.

He held her face and looked at her with hooded eyes. "I know what happened."

Her skin chilled. She licked her lips, afraid. "How?"

"I'll tell you later when we have more time but know that I love you, Marie." He took her mouth with his. His work-hardened hand slipped between the folds of the robe and rested on the tip of her breast. "I have since I first saw you. And I always will."

Marie's eyelids fluttered then closed as she moaned softly and forgot the concerns that had risen in her. She trusted him. The realization hit her hard. She had never trusted anyone like this before. She licked her lips, tasted the sweet remains of his kiss and unbuttoned his shirt.

Jake nipped her neck, left a trail of soft kisses until he reached the tip of her bosom. He stroked the nipple with his tongue. A dizzying sensation flooded every one of Marie's senses. Her desire for him burned.

She floated in ecstasy being with this man. Reality lost all meaning as she somehow managed to unclothe Jake, desperate to hold his hard, warm body close to hers. Marie savored the skin of his neck as she took it into her mouth. She guided her hand over his chiseled biceps and raked her fingertips against him.

Jake pulled her to him. His engorged cock pulsed against her warm, moist center. She moaned again and cried his name.

"Marie..." Jake pulled her head back gently. His eyes pierced hers with longing and some other deep emotion. "Don't forget this." His voice thickened with want and desire. "Please. Don't ever forget."

He claimed her mouth as if tomorrow didn't exist. The tip of his manhood grew heavy. It wavered against her sex and caressed the nub and the lips of her slick labia. The feel of him drove the desperate need within her.

Panting, Marie bit the inside of her cheek as his sensual lips moved to her earlobe. His penis taunted her, teased as he eased the tip inside. The nerve endings in her pussy fired, ready for him.

Then, as if Jake could wait no longer, he penetrated her. She groaned. Her body welcomed his. Marie bucked her hips upward to meet Jake's urgent need. He pumped into her. Every stroke rose her higher, made her feel that they were as one. She had never felt so loved.

Her desire exploded, sweetly. And as Jake rode her willing body, this time Marie etched the memory of the precious act and savored every moment.

* * * * *

Hardly a soul dotted the barren landscape, no buildings, not even an occasional animal. Bill Martin cursed as the snow fell thick and heavy, half blinding him. The lines on the road were indecipherable and the signs barely readable.

A trucker flew by, trying to beat the worsened weather. Bill skidded to avoid him. He wiped his tepid brow and wondered if it had been a foolish plan to risk reaching Fort Bridger before dark. There was no place of comfort here, nowhere to pull off, and the last town was over thirty miles away.

Another trucker flew by, as if the driver tried to catch the first semi that'd passed him. The rig disappeared into the whiteout. Bill turned the wipers a notch higher as the flakes whipped against the glass. The two trucks had been the only other vehicles on the road for the last ten minutes. He cursed the last man for throwing more snow in front of his vehicle. After he breathed a little easier, he turned on the radio to see if he could pick up a weather report. All he got was static and some country music station that would fade in and out.

"Damn that bitch of a woman." He snapped the fucking thing off. It was Marie's fault he went through this. Bill pounded the steering wheel. He would make her pay big time for what he had to go through to get her. He kept score. For each inconvenience he suffered, he would mete out her punishment in trade.

Bill chuckled at the thought. His dick jumped in his pants, eager. He forced himself to focus on the road. Oh yes. His revenge would be sweet.

He flew by one green sign then another. Bill panicked. Had he missed his exit?

He slowed as another sign came into view.

Fort Bridger – 28 miles.

He relaxed in the seat. Almost there. Picking up speed, he hummed. Nothing could stop him now.

From nowhere, red taillights appeared in the thickly falling snow.

Bill slammed on the brakes. Glass shattered. He heard the loud screech of grinding metal.

His vision faded. "Damn," he cursed — before he lost consciousness.

Chapter Twelve

Time ticked by as Jim Douglas sat in his room and waited for Martin's call. When seven o'clock came and went, he glanced out the window and figured the snow had delayed the man. He let the old curtain fall back into place and sat on the bed. He pulled his badge out of his back pocket then stared at the metal symbol for a while.

He fingered the thing that had become his life. He'd been a federal officer for sixteen years now, survived two serious wounds and a disastrous marriage. He'd had his share of offers for promotions—mostly desk-jockey jobs designed to get someone ahead in the organization and allow the agent, in some form or fashion, to have a normal life. Those that required a pen and paper he'd turned down flat.

He was good at his work. He still relished the excitement of bringing in the next Baby Face Nelson or Al Capone. His skill and experience made him the lead in this type of undercover work. His success in this operation would get him his next field promotion—the head of the branch office in Wyoming, a prized position for someone with his age and experience. But the post was still a desk-jockey job.

Slim frowned. He seriously considered taking it. After all, he wasn't getting any younger. He knew deep down even his old zeal for the work had lacked lately. He reached for a picture Katie had given him of herself. He thought maybe these new feelings had something to do with the flashy brunette.

He recalled the previous night's events with warm appreciation. She was a rare woman. He traced the outline of her face with his thumb and considered what it'd be like to come home to her every night. Maybe have a small child of their own. He snorted a bemused chuckle as he thought about the sheriff's mischievous, tow-headed son. He liked the kid.

Slim smiled at the face on the picture and fantasized about a life he'd never known. A strange warmth spread through him. The night he'd spent with Katie hadn't been your typical one-night stand. He'd had a real heart-to-heart talk with her. Out of it all, he realized the woman wanted to have someone else in her life to care about too. She wanted at least one child and Jim wasn't too old to give her that.

He puffed a breath through his parted lips. After running from his father's ranch so many years ago, Jim now had a deep longing to return to the life he once lived.

He cleared his throat and blinked at the unusual moisture that had built up behind his lids. His Pa had died five years ago and left the ranch, a settlement in the family for generations, to the church. Apparently his old man figured Slim didn't want any part of the spread, not with the work he did.

Jim threw the wallet on the bed then looked through the window once again. The neon sign over the diner flashed in the cold darkness, a token of shelter in the remote

place. Slim thought perhaps he'd sacrificed too much for his daily thrill. God knows, his ex-wife could only put up with his fetish for so long. He stared at the diner and wondered if a woman like Katie could put up with it a mite longer.

As if on cue, the generous woman walked out the back of the restaurant to empty a small load of trash. He hoped she'd catch him watching. The lady had a tough exterior, mostly from having lived a hard life, but inside she had more love and caring than any woman he'd known. Katie was the kind of lady a man like him needed. The type who would stand by a man come hell or high water.

"Damn, James," he mumbled and shook his head at his musings. "Never thought it'd come down to this, did you." He watched her go inside. "And just after one night. Hell," he muttered and sat on the edge of the bed. "You want the woman."

Love hit him. He knew now how Sheriff Colder felt. The two men led empty lives. Yet the sheriff had found a woman who could change his—if she wasn't guilty. Slim huffed. They'd be hard pressed to prove her innocence. Still, Marie didn't seem like the type to steal the money and run.

Slim felt sorry for the sheriff. It would be hard on him and the boy. They'd come to rely on Marie.

His stomach rumbled and he glanced out the window again. If he took Marie in, he knew Katie would be lost to him too.

Vaguely, he eyed the silent phone and hoped the truth would come out. He glanced at the ceiling, stared for a while then started to pray.

"God, I know it's been a real long time..."

* * * * *

The boy's giggle tickled her ear as Marie awoke from her haze. The dark day had grown blacker. "What time is it?"

She rolled over to find Jesse hovering across Jake's bed. The boy stared into her face.

"Where's your father?" Her voice sounded raspy. She wiped her damp face before she sat up on her elbows.

"He had to leave. The snow's started up again and there's been some more accidents." Jesse stood tall. "Dad told me to keep an eye on you."

"Me?" She felt a little dizzy.

The boy got on one knee and touched her head with the back of his hand. "He said you weren't feelin' so good."

She smiled at the boy-who-would-be-man. "Thank you, Jesse, but I'm fine now."

"You sure?" His brows knitted. "You don't look so good. Gramps said he put a scare into you. He didn't mean to, you know."

"I know." She ruffled his hair. "At least, I think I know." Her face contorted in puzzlement. "Is your grandfather here?"

"Nope. Dad was purty upset. He and Gramps had words." The boy's face tightened with worry. "I can git 'em, if you want. Gramps, that is." He abruptly got up and ran into the hallway to yell for Jake's grandfather.

"Jesse," Marie called after him as a mist appeared in the room. "Je-Je-Jesse?" She shouted louder as the form congealed into Master Sergeant Thaddeus P. Colder.

She gaped as the ghost stood in front of her. His gloved hands rested on his uniformed hips. He scowled. "Now, Miss Marie, don't get upset agin'. I'm here to help."

"Gramps." Jesse hurried back into the room then ran to the apparition and gave him a big hug. "It's about time you showed. I was worried you'd left for good after you and Dad..."

"Hush now, boy," Gramps soothed. His voice even calmed Marie. He put his arm around Jesse. "Ain't no fight between me an' your Pa gonna break us up. We're family."

Jesse smiled at the strange man. Comforted, the boy gave him another hug.

"Now, son," Gramps patted Jesse on the back. "Go git that dinner heated up yuh talked about. Marie needs somethin' tuh eat."

"Okay." Jesse eyed the older man with admiration then flew down the hall.

"Marie." Gramps' attention turned to her. "We gotta talk. And this time," he walked toward her, "yuh gotta listen."

Marie tightened the robe around her. "You...you're a ghost." Her throat felt scratchy as she swallowed.

"That's right." He nodded once then stuck out his bottom lip. "There's certain advantages to that. Advantages you'll need here in a day or two."

"I will?" A lump formed in her throat. "Jake said he knew. Did...did you tell him?"

"Some." The old man's hard gaze stung her.

"But how did...?"

Gramps shot her his form of the Colder grin. "Like I said, one of the advantages."

"I didn't do anything wrong," she protested and jutted her chin in the air.

Gramps sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. "I know. So does Jake." He adjusted the bill of his cap. "But the law's the law and they're after yuh. They don't know yuh didn't steal that money." The hard gleam showed in his eyes again. "And Bill Martin don't care. He's on his way."

"What?" Marie's back straightened as a cold chill raced down her spine. "I've got to go."

Gramps shook his head. "I promised Jake I'd look after yuh. He won't let yuh run." The ghostly man stood in front of her. "And neither will I. Believe in yourself, Marie. We do."

She bit her bottom lip. "But I can't fight Bill. I tried."

"Yuh won't need tuh. That's Jake's job."

"But Bill is dangerous and he has friends who are even worse."

"Jake knows and he's gittin' ready."

"But what will he do?"

The old man chewed at something in his cud and looked down at her. "That's up tuh Jake." He knelt in front of her and touched her head. "Your job is tuh get well."

"But I'm not sick."

"Honey, these few months of shouldering your problems on your own have gotten to yuh."

"You're telling me," she mumbled.

Gramps snorted. "Yuh got a fever so don't git yourself all riled." He stared at her a moment. "I built a fire in your room. I suggest you go in there and relax."

"I need some clothes." Marie tugged at Jake's robe. "This is all I've worn all day."

"Here." Gramps held out her bag. "Try these."

She took the bag with some remorse. "Gramps, I don't want Jake and Jesse hurt on my account."

Gramps stood and chewed again then looked at her. "In some ways, Marie," he pursed his lips, "your leaving would hurt them the worst of all." He squinted and seemed to look at something far away. "Some things go beyond this world, darlin'. I know Jake's love is one of 'em." He turned and walked toward the door.

"Is love what keeps you here, Gramps?" Part of her couldn't believe she talked to a ghost.

The old man looked at her with a sorrowed smile. "I ain't leaving 'til they bury me next to the heart of my life." He huffed. "I know it sounds corny in this day an' age but I still love Josephine. I'll love her forever. Remind me to tell yuh about her sometime. Purtiest woman in all 'o Wyoming."

Marie smiled. A warm, homey feeling filled a void in her. "I'll remember."

The older man took another chew. "Now git dressed. We got some strategizing tuh do." He walked out of the room.

A sudden wind blasted the side of house. Normally the sound would send a chill through Marie. Instead, she snuggled into the sheets and laughed at the tender sensations that flowed through her. She'd become certifiably looney tunes now. As crazy as the rest of the family. But for some reason, she didn't care. Jake loved her beyond this life. That's what Gramps said and he ought to know. Jesse wanted her to be his mother. How perfect could life be?

Despite Bill Martin's threat, she felt safe. She knew then that she had absolutely lost her mind.

* * * * *

Jake sat in the station house and pondered the scant information he'd retrieved from the web. Slim had filled him in on Back to America. The FBI had a few infiltrators attached to the Movement and they were able to track some of the group's crimes even though they lacked firm evidence to pin on them.

The thought of a bunch like that made Jake cringe. The fact such a group could form in this country with such strength in numbers frightened him. There were enough problems in the world, particularly in this country, without something like this.

No way someone as tender-hearted as Marie could be part of this. Yet from the way Slim saw it, Marie's crime stood in cashing in on the Movement and using the money for herself. And her problem was she'd been caught by Martin. At least that's what the scoop on the BAM organization's grapevine said.

Jake glowered. The tale had to have been Martin's lies. Jake was sure Martin wove the story to keep his ass out of a sling. It wasn't every day you lost several million dollars.

Jake rubbed his forehead and tried to think. It didn't make sense. If Marie had been involved, she wouldn't have waited to use the money. And she sure as hell wouldn't have run to Wyoming.

Jake reviewed the screen again while he waited for Slim's call. The agent should have checked in by now. His brows furrowed deeper. He didn't like leaving Marie and Jesse alone. Not with Martin so close.

The phone rang and Jake jumped to answer it. "Colder."

"Jake, he ain't showed and I'm hungry. I'm headed for the diner." Slim's gravel-laden voice sounded like a mixture of frustration and disappointment.

"And where after that?" Jake asked.

Slim chuckled. "Miss Katie's if she'll have me. If not, I'll be here. I've asked the innkeeper to call you if I get any messages. Hope you don't mind."

"Nope. Have a nice dinner."

"I will. Sheriff..." Slim paused. Jake could hear him breathe on the other end of the line. "The man's dangerous. Don't try anything yourself. If he calls, get me right away."

Jake nodded. "I will. This is your collar, not mine. But I can tell you this, if he pulls anything, I'll find him a short rope."

"I understand. You oughta get Jesse to a safe place."

"He'll be with Cal."

Slim paused again. "You may need to hide Marie."

Jake grimaced. "I already thought of that."

"If you do, let me know where. I don't want anyone to mistake your intentions. You got my cell phone number."

"Right."

"Jake, I know how much this means to you, proving Marie's innocence."

"Let me put it to you this way. The man hurts anything of mine and he'll have me to answer to. That includes Marie." Jake felt the tension on the line.

"I understand," Slim croaked after a moment of silence. "I'll be in touch." He hung up.

Jake grimaced and replaced the receiver. He shouldn't have threatened but then again he wanted Slim to know where he stood. He'd kill the sonofabitch if needed.

Jake walked out of his office to get a cup of coffee. He met Kyle as he came in from another call. "How's it going?" Jake asked.

"Same." Kyle walked with him to the small kitchenette and warmed his hands on a heated cup. "Another passerby trying to rush through the weather. Took him to Memorial since the road to Evanston is blocked. The guy looked pretty cut up but the dude kept insisting he be released. The doc was with him when I left."

Jake nodded. "Leave the report on my desk. I'll look at it in the morning."

"You betcha, Sheriff."

Jake started to walk out but turned back to his deputy. "Remember, you and John are on call. I may need you later."

Kyle nodded. "Yeah, yeah, but you can't tell us why."

Jake pressed his lips together. "Nope." He frowned. "If I pull you in, make sure you're fully armed and protected."

Kyle nodded. "Sure thing, Sheriff."

* * * * *

The deputy watched Jake put on his coat and walk out the door, hat in hand. Something was up. Jake didn't usually keep things from them.

He shook his head and sat down at his desk. He lifted the receiver and made a call to his insurance agent. Kyle didn't like times like this. It made him uneasy. He wanted to make sure Alice and the boys would be taken care of in case something did happen.

The insurance agent reassured him everything he had was up-to-date. Kyle hung up the phone and touched the picture of his wife and kids. They'd been married five years since last spring. He wanted their life together to last a lot longer.

Clearing his throat, he put the framed photo down and pulled out a clean accident report from the desk. "Aw, it's probably nothing," he bemused as he slammed the drawer shut and scooted behind the typewriter. He inserted the paper in the old typewriter and began to peck at the keys. He'd like to know when they'd get into the modern age and put these on the computer. He knew Jake wanted to but politics and money held them back.

He sulked. "Accident report."

He spaced over.

"Name." Kyle scratched his head. The man hadn't carried any I.D. "John Doe."

He tapped the keys.

"Occupation – Unknown."

Kyle relaxed in the chair and shook his head again as he looked out the window. The outside pole lamp that lit the small parking lot blinked through the snow that fell with a fury outside. He puckered his mouth and let the air whistle past his lips. Jake's worry was probably nothing. After all, what idiot would go out in weather like this?

* * * * *

From his darkened room, Bill peered out the private hospital window, appreciating his drugged state. The snowflakes whirled against the lit building and danced against the black night in crystal circles as if they were ice fairies. The white drops bowed and curtsied then leapt into the air merely to float downward in the end. He actually smiled. He enjoyed the fantasy those minute, delicate creatures performed for him.

He chuckled, sure his insouciant attitude could be attributed to the morphine they'd shot him with. He'd tried to leave. If he hadn't passed out while the doctor examined him, he'd be gone by now.

His head thumped and he closed his eyes to remember why he'd driven through the winter storm. But he couldn't.

A sense of urgency gripped him. He grabbed the front of the drab hospital gown he wore to slow his rapid heartbeat. He grabbed for the oxygen mask he'd removed earlier and put it over his face then gulped the pure air. Soon his ragged breaths evened out again and his pulse rate lessened.

Fear gripped him. He didn't know why. He rubbed his temple. His family waited for him. Isn't that what he'd said? He moaned as his mind stretched through the empty darkness his memory had become. What family?

Bill huffed. There'd been no number to contact, no name to call him by. His wallet had been lost.

No. For some reason, he remembered he'd stuffed it between the front seat cushions, but why? He closed his eyes to fight the nausea that pushed at him to lose the tasteless dinner they'd served.

He needed to get out of there but to go where? A drop of moisture fell on his nose. He wiped the wetness off but the coolness remained. His lids fluttered open and he crossed his eyes to see what had perched itself on his snout.

He started laughing. Bill thought he sounded hysterical but who wouldn't under the circumstances? One of his iridescent snow nymphs looked alive. The mythical creature wore an old army cap. The wee thing pointed to the window where other nymphs waited. The others pressed up against the window and waved at him.

Bill smiled. For once, he actually felt a real goodness inside himself. These fantasy creatures were here for him. He pushed his IV stand out of the way and giggled like a boy as he rose to go after them.

* * * * *

Alone in the ancient farmhouse, Marie sat crossed-legged on the bed and huddled under the aged quilt. She shivered again from her fevered state and stared into the flames that licked the grate in the stone fireplace. The heat warmed her clammy skin. The golden glow burnished the handmade quilt and a sheen glimmered on the cherry wood furniture. She turned up the collar of the robe she still wore and hugged the blanket to her. With her fingertip, she outlined a few of the stitched patterns and examined the intricacies of the yellowed thread as she pondered her fate. Did Jake believe her innocence?

She frowned and rubbed her temple. Gramps said he did. And he'd asked her to stay at the farmhouse until Jake came to get her. Still, would Jake arrest her?

She lay down and put her head on the soft pillow then stretched her legs before she tucked them under the blanket again. Her car sat out front. Jake had brought it back but failed to give her the keys. She placed the inside of her wrist against her hot forehead. Even if he had left the keys with her, she'd probably pass out again before she walked five feet.

She'd had nausea and cold chills since she woke. Gramps said the fever came from a culmination of the stress and intrigue she'd dealt with for too long. She smiled weakly. He'd scolded her for handling her problems by herself.

She licked her dry lips and dragged her fingers through her unbound hair. She couldn't run from Jake anyway. Per Gramps, he wouldn't stop until he found her and she couldn't bear to see the pain in his face. She couldn't let him think she didn't trust him to get her out of this mess.

She closed her eyes and took in some shallow breaths. Trust was the single thing Jake had asked of her. Marie gazed at the fire again and realized now she had no choice. The independent freedom-loving woman had tied herself up in a love knot too big to remove. And she found she liked the comfortable feel of the invisible shackles.

They were a lot different from the ones made of steel she'd wear any day now.

Sadness overwhelmed her again. Cal had returned earlier in the evening to pick up Jesse at Jake's request. She'd given the boy a hug before he left. Now, she tasted a salty tear on her lip, afraid she'd never see the child again.

The hum of an engine resonated outside and interrupted her unhappy thoughts. Jake was home.

She sat up. Jitters started inside her again. Now that he knew about everything, what did he think? She made her way the few feet to the dresser and picked up her brush to fix her hair. She could at least look decent as she faced him.

In moments, she heard the old bedroom door creak, listened to the steps behind her. Jake's tall frame reflected in the mirror. He stood at the doorway, his handsome face drawn and weary.

"Hi." She put down the brush and faced him.

He gave her a small smile. "Hi." The deep, husky timbre of his voice filled the room. The sound accentuated the fact they were alone. He pressed his full lips together and tossed his hat on the dresser. "You should be in bed."

She shook her head. "I've slept most of the day. Jake." She worried her bottom lip with her teeth. "You said you knew. I-I need to know what you plan to do about that."

Jake pursed his lips. "Get back in bed, Marie. This can wait 'til morning."

"But by then Bill might be here. You can't let me stay. Bill wants to kill me."

Jake set his jaw. "Tell me what you know, Marie."

She wrung her hands together and paced. "I don't know where to start."

He walked to her and lifted her chin with the crook of his finger. "Why Wyoming? Why here?"

She bit her lip. "I was afraid. I unfolded the map and closed my eyes then said a prayer. When I opened them, my finger poked the map. Underneath it read Fort Bridger."

The back of his hand stroked her chin as his mouth quirked into a wry grin. The lines around his eyes deepened with a kind of melancholy shrouded merriment. "So either fate or providence brought you to me." He bent and touched his lips to hers. She sighed as Jake's arms encircled her.

"Jake." She pulled away. Her look implored him. "I thought I'd killed a man so I ran. I didn't mean to fall in love with you. I didn't mean for things to go this far."

"No, but they have." He took her hand and walked her to the bed then pulled down the covers. She sat on the sheets. He lay her down and tucked her in then sat on top of the coverlet beside her. "Tell me everything, Marie. From the beginning."

She told him what she knew. Everything. Jake's eyes narrowed with unmasked fury as she told him of Bill's deceit, his attempted rape and the threat to her life.

When she finished, her body shook. "I didn't know. Not until I questioned him about the accounts." Her bottom lip trembled. "Then he went crazy and told me all he'd been up to with BAM. He expected me to go along with him. He..." She licked the wetness from her lips. "He expected me to marry him. Have children dedicated to the cause. You didn't see his eyes, Jake. He's insane."

He gathered her into the safety and comfort of his strong arms.

"I don't want you or Jesse hurt because of me. I love you, Jake," she sniffed. "I don't want to lose you."

"You won't." His warm voice soothed her as he rubbed her back. "You see, I love you too. With that comes a certain amount of trust. And as far as being hurt, I'm a big boy." He looked into her face. "Your partner will have more to worry about than me."

His steely look turned cold. Marie had never seen that kind of anger in Jake before. She sniffed. Something lifted in her soul. "You believe me?"

He lightly kissed her lips. "Yes, but we need proof. The Feds won't take your word that you knew nothing about the crime."

"But I can get my clients' money back and more. I know what bank it's in and the account numbers. Bill can't complete the arms deal without the information."

Jake held her hand. "Trust me, Marie."

"But I have proof I'm innocent." A little dizzy, she struggled to sit and wiggled out from under the covers. She swung her legs over the side and hurried as fast as she could to the closet to retrieve her bag. "There's a receipt in here." She pulled out a handful of clothes and threw them on the floor.

The bottom of the bag was empty.

Panicked, she dropped the bag. Kneeling, she rummaged through her clothes. "But they were right here."

"Marie." He walked to her and grasped her arms to lift her. "I locked your documents in the evidence safe at the station. No one can get them without me knowing it."

She pulled her arm free and threw another piece of clothing she'd taken out down with a huff. "You spied on me." She wobbled on her feet. The wooziness got to her.

He picked her up and carried her to the bed. "Darlin', you gave me no choice."

She felt like a child. Was even as defensive as one but she couldn't seem to help herself. She was frightened. She glared at him. "What happened to that trust you talked about?"

"Marie, it may not seem like it right now but I do trust you." He laid her down and circled his arms around her then pulled her to him. "I'm a lawman. It's my job to investigate suspicious behavior." He winced as his eyes narrowed with regret. "You rode into town with a bullet hole in your window and no explanation. I needed to know."

"But those were my personal things. You had no right."

"I had every right." His voice held a soft edge, one that coaxed yet stayed true to his conviction. "There's such a thing as probable cause. From everything you told me and from what I'd observed, I had more than enough reason. Besides, you gave me access to your things and to your car. There's an unspoken permission in that."

"I told you those things as a friend." She choked on the words and worked to hold back her tears. She tried to rise but he held her steadfast.

"Friend or not, you knew my position in the community the first time you met me." His finger hooked around her chin. He pulled her face to him and forced her to look at him. "I won't argue with you, Marie, and I won't let you run. I love you too much to see you do that. You'll just hurt yourself more in the long run." He paused. His gaze bored into her. "I want you here and so does Jesse. We're a family or will be when we say our

vows. I want you to stand and fight. I'll be right by you when you do." The back of his fingers stroked the side of her face. "No matter what happens, I'll be with you. I want us to be together always. I don't care how many years it takes."

Marie covered her face with her hands. She burst into tears as he drew her to his shoulder and massaged her back. "Jake," she sobbed, "if I go to prison, I can't expect you to wait for me."

Jake lifted her head from his shoulder and held onto her arms as he peered at her with remorse in his eyes. "Look at me, Marie. I'm a lost soul. You're the angel who captured me that first time we met, the day you spilled coffee in my lap."

She worried her lower lip. The corner of his mouth rose. "I'm not backing away now. The vows are for better or worse. I'll be there in either case." He kissed her then pulled his head away to look at her as if to discern what she thought.

She slipped her arms around his neck and placed soft kisses to his ear then his cheek, trying not to sob. He hugged her against him. His light breaths caressed her neck. She held his face in her hands and touched her nose to his, gazed deep into his dark blue eyes. "I love you, Jake Colder." Then she touched her hungry lips to his and pierced his mouth with the tip of her tongue. "Your grandfather told me to have faith and trust you," she murmured between their lips.

Jake chuckled then nipped at her earlobe. "Where is that old goat?"

Marie giggled as his soft breath tickled her neck. "I don't know. I think he left shortly after Cal did. Jake..." She pulled away from him and put a finger over his lips to cool his ardor. "He's...he's really a ghost?" Her nose wrinkled as she asked the question. "I..." She shook her head to clear her confusion. "I'm not dreaming?"

Jake snorted. He took her hand in his. "No, Marie. And he's been the bane of my existence."

Marie's stiff shoulders relaxed. "You shouldn't feel that way. If it weren't for him, I would have left a long time ago." She let the tip of her finger rest on the top button of his shirt. "He convinced me there was a life for me here with you." She used the point of her tongue to outline his lips. He moaned and shifted beneath her touch. "He's a good man, Jake," she whispered against his neck as his breaths grew more shallow.

The faint, spicy smell of his aftershave came to her as Jake absorbed her face. His eyes turned the color of midnight.

"Gramps won't rest until he's lying beside his true love in eternity," he said.

"I know." The huskiness in her voice grew softer.

"That's another reason you have to marry me."

"Why?" Her brows knitted.

Jake pushed her to her back and pressed her shoulders into the pillow then rolled on top of her. "So I don't become a ghost."

She giggled.

"I want you, Marie. Through eternity." The desire in his face ran so deep it matched the depth of his love.

She touched his lips. The reality of his commitment for once made its way to her heart. She kissed him with all that she had, relished his warm embrace. She closed her eyes and felt him lift her. He placed her beneath the bed covers.

"Woman, you keep doing that and I'll have you tonight, sick or not."

She looked at him. His eyes glittered. "You'll get ill."

Her resistance fled when he smiled. "The vows are for in sickness and in health, too."

She held him tight. "Well then, who am I to argue with eternity?"

Jake couldn't have grinned broader. He stroked her face. His eyes caressed her with love.

He rolled off the bed and stripped. In moments, his sleek, hard body lay naked next to hers.

"Marie..." he rasped, "I know you're scared. We'll find a way out of this. Have faith."

She nodded. "I'll try, Jake. I'll try."

He slipped his arms into the folds of the robe she wore and wrapped them around her. His body comforted hers. He kissed her lips, her neck, as if he treasured her, for who knew how much longer they would have?

She did the same. Touched every part of him she could reach.

His hands scooped her breasts, pushed them together. He licked and sucked on one while his fingers teased the other.

His cock pulsed against her legs. She ran her hands through his hair, massaging the skin underneath. She loved this man. She'd give all she had to him while she could.

She groaned against him, grew wet with his touch. He fingered her, coated her labia and clit with her wetness. His heavy breaths titillated her neck, her ear.

His hands traveled upward. He held her arms, her shoulders as his stiff penis wavered against her sex. His tip stroked her nub and the slit of her nether lips. Blue eyes delved into hers. Jake never spoke. His look said it all.

He loved her, would do whatever he had to keep her.

His need of her soothed her. She knew how he felt. She would sacrifice all for him and Jesse.

He took her with the desperation she felt. Eased into her slick folds, plunged her depth and rocked her with his rhythm. He penetrated her hard and fast, as if there was no tomorrow.

She needed this, needed him. The friction of their bodies moved her, stirred the ember of desire into a raging flame. Her pleasure rose, the bond between them grew stronger. This was her man and she was his. They were inseparable this night, this time.

She came, hard and strong. Jake came right behind her. The guttural sound of his climax soothed her world-weary soul.

Breathless, they both stared at each other a moment. The desolation in his gaze matched the sorrow in her own.

"Go to sleep now." Jake leaned on an elbow and stroked the side of her face. "You need your rest."

She lifted her head and brushed his lips with hers. "You too." An errant tear slid down her cheek.

He wiped it off with his thumb. "I love you, Marie. I always will." He sent her a sad smile again.

She kissed the tip of his thumb. "I know." She pressed her lips together as she suppressed the worry she had inside. "I'll stay, Jake. Like you want. As long as you're by me, I can do this."

Pain mixed with love in his eyes. "Thank you. For trusting me."

She kissed him again. "I love you too, Jake. Always."

He kissed her then slipped next to her and spooned her into him. "I'll be by you," he promised with a whisper in her ear. "I'll do whatever needs to be done."

Marie let her lashes close and listened to the snow-filled wind howl outside. A gust blew into the chimney and stirred the cinders of the crackling fire. The wind only made the fire burn hotter and kept them safe and warm. She thought about that. To her, her problems were the wind and Jake the fire, in more ways than one. He would keep her safe. No matter what happened, he would be there for her.

She had never felt this loved.

Chapter Thirteen

Slim Jim walked into the motel room and shook the snow off his jacket. "It's about time ya'll showed up." He eyed his partner and a junior assigned as backup. "If you'd called any later, you'd be spending the night in the street."

Brolin MacDugal, a second generation Scotsman, raised an eyebrow. "I can't believe they don't have any more rooms."

Jim shrugged. "Normally they'd have plenty but with the snow, everyplace up and down the highway is full."

"And where, may I ask, were you?"

"None of your business," Jim countered. "What took you so long?"

MacDugal looked him square in the eyes. "I don't know that you've noticed but the roads have been closed. We had one hell of a tough time getting here."

"I've noticed, but the storm hasn't kept Martin from crawling into town." Jim put his hands on his hips and looked at them with the accusation. "He was supposed to call earlier but I still haven't heard from him." His eyes narrowed. "I don't want him to show unannounced. The guy's a wild hare. Someone could get hurt."

MacDugal shuffled his feet. "We've been following the BAM agents that trailed Martin. McPhearson and his crew are still tracking the guys. Seems the illustrious organization lost track of Martin and circled back. We came ahead to meet you—Slim." MacDugal's rigid face softened and a crooked grin spread across his face.

The junior man bit on his toothpick and snorted. "Yeah, Tex. You really fit in. Even those ladies at the greasy spoon knew you. Said you'd gone out with..." Steve Carter scratched his head. "What's her name, Mac?"

His partner eyed the younger man with practiced disdain. "Katie. And don't call me Mac. It's Mister MacDugal to you, Carter, at least when we're not undercover. And I'm the only one allowed to call 'Slim' here, Tex. He's Agent Douglas to you. Got it?"

The younger man removed the toothpick and bobbed his head up and down. "Yes, sir."

Jim laughed and shook his head. "Ya'll stick out like a sore thumb. Look at your clothes."

MacDugal straightened the lapel of his suit coat. "What's wrong with our dress?"

Jim snorted. "It's 'citified,' Mac. Unless ya'll have something else to wear, you'll need to stay in the room until we close in. Otherwise you'll be televising to the BAM men exactly who you are."

"Jim," MacDugal pressed him, "you can't follow all these folks by yourself. You've

been left here alone long enough. You need backup."

"Mac, you dress like that and you'll break my cover. This is cow country. I know cows and I know the people. You don't. And neither do you, Carter." He hooked his thumb at the rookie. "Yes, I need you as backup. But not until I'm ready."

His partner glared at him. "And when will that be? When you're dead?"

"No." Jim frowned. "I don't intend for the op to get that far. It'll just be for a couple of hours, maybe a day or two."

"Jim, Slim, whatever the hell name you're using, I won't be cooped up here that long. I've already been with this greenhorn longer than I can stand."

Jim glanced at the younger man who squirmed and loosened his tie. "I can flip burgers at the greasy spoon if you can get the owner's cooperation." He threw the tie over the back of a chair. "And I don't have any close affinity to wearing a suit." He walked over and eyeballed MacDugal. "Unlike some of us, I came packed for country living."

MacDugal huffed.

The light in Jim's eyes danced. "You're young enough, Steve. I can show you how to work the cows. Ever been on a horse?"

"A few times." The man nodded.

"Good." He slapped Carter on the back. "You come with me. I'll introduce you to the sheriff. Mac, guess you'll work behind the scenes."

His partner scowled. "Thanks loads, *Slim*." He eyed him with a crusty glare. "Now that we have that straight, do I have this right? You already got the locals involved?"

Jim lifted the corner of his mouth. "Had no choice. Martin called and I didn't think you'd make it in time."

MacDugal's brow arched. "Maybe you ought to fill us in."

Jim pointed to the bed. "I have good news—and bad." He gestured them forward. "Have a seat, boys. It's gonna be a long night."

* * * * *

Bill and his magical friends had stolen all the forks from the plastic breakfast packs they'd found that were shoved in one of the storage rooms. "Here, you hold them." One of the sprites held out a white plastic fork and twisted it in Bill's hair. Bill jutted out his bottom lip and looked about his person. Where would he put two dozen forks?

"Oh, all right." He chortled and stuffed them in his shirt but without anything to hold them, they fell out.

"Shhh," one of the fairies whispered. "The banshees 'ill hear us ifn' you're not careful."

Bill snorted with humor. He'd never had so much fun. As a child, he didn't have many friends. His parents were solid, church-going people and way too strict to let him

playact and believe in fairytales. As a boy, he'd missed the thrill of finding Easter eggs on a Sunday morning. Hell, he'd never even had the chance to fantasize about Santa Claus, although that was one hoax he'd held onto, if only for a little while.

Yet, here he was. In Fantasyland.

A gossamer wing fluttered before him to usher him out the door. Bill grinned. He felt like Peter Pan or something.

Bill picked up the forks and stuffed them in his underwear which, mercifully, the emergency room personnel had let him keep. He grabbed the IV stand and pushed it forward. Bill stuck out his chin and walked through the door as if nothing were amiss. His tiny friends flitted beside him.

A clacking noise sounded on the floor and echoed through the hallway. Bill looked to see the forks drop down his pant leg.

"Hide," one of the nymphs yelled. The tiny creatures plastered themselves against the far corner wall. Bill followed their lead. His IV slapped against the plaster.

A soft voice mumbled nearby. Bill and a few flying friends peeked around the whitewashed corner of the hallway and saw the trim blonde standing inches away. She wrote in a chart. Bill thought for sure a woman with such a pretty face shouldn't work so hard.

"Go ahead," the gruff voice of the little sprite on his shoulder suggested. "Give her a good pinch."

Clucking to himself, Bill reached out and grabbed a good inch of the woman's behind. She screamed. Bill and his buddies fell against the wall laughing.

The clipped sound of heels resonated on the tiled floor. Bill looked up and saw the blonde glare at him.

"Mister, what are you doing out of your room?"

As Bill stood, a fork popped straight up through the fly in his underwear. His eyes widened as it lifted and pointed straight to the ceiling.

"Ten'hut," the fairy with the cap shouted. Bill snapped to attention and saluted.

The pretty woman stood there, stunned. Slowly, she eyed him from head to toe. "Tara," her voice squeaked. "Call an orderly. Stat." She looked back at Bill. Her hazel eyes widened. "And make sure he's got psych training."

* * * * *

Katie paced in her small bedroom and looked at the lonely bed. Slim had gotten an emergency message on his cell phone and left her. She wanted to call him, see if everything was okay but she wasn't sure how he'd feel. She glanced at the phone for the hundredth time then back at the bed. She didn't know how long the man would be in town but she knew, with the little time he did have, she wanted to spend any free moments with him.

She puffed her cheeks. It'd been a long time since she'd met a man like him. It'd been forever since she'd felt the things she did now. She'd had other men. Most of them were just friends. She had more than a yearning for Slim, more than a sense of friendship.

She let her hand stroke the soft cottony sheets. Loneliness was an enemy she'd fought a long time. She recognized a comrade when she saw one. She hugged herself and rubbed the coolness of her flesh. The night in Slim's arms had been warm but it'd also been more. Love was an emotion she hadn't had in ages. And she'd never thought she'd find it here in the valley.

Slim's tender caresses haunted her. She remembered the taste of him. The man sent her senses reeling. She glanced at the phone with trepidation.

Its ringing cut through the quiet night. She reached for it and picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Hi, darlin'."

Her smile widened. She really liked the sound of Slim's voice. It did things to her.

"I didn't know if you were asleep, but..."

"Come over, handsome. I miss you."

"Yes, ma'am." If a voice could grin, it would sound like his. "I'll be right there."

"I'll be waiting." She hung up and fell on the bed, giddy about her newfound lover. He would come for her and tonight neither of them would be alone.

* * * * *

The morning sky shined a brilliant blue. The dawn's rays bounced off the new blanket of snow and illuminated the day. Crystal droplets hung from the trees and shimmered like lanterns through cut glass.

Jake stretched as he stood in front of the window and absorbed the splendor for a moment.

Then he gazed at the bed. His eyes took in the beautiful brunette who shared it with him. Marie's hair fanned over the pillow. Her full breasts pressed against the sheets. Her soft, firm back rose gently with each breath.

He'd never had a woman like her. He'd fight to the death to keep her. Marie was his—to eternity.

He'd already shaved. He buttoned his uniform shirt and tucked the ends in his pants. No one had called him last night and the fact worried him. He came to the bed to gaze at Marie and lightly stroked her cheek. She stirred. A small moan escaped her lips. Jake bent over and kissed her tepid brow. Thank God the flu was one of those twenty-four-hour varieties. The fever had broken overnight.

She stirred a moment then dropped back into sweet oblivion.

Quietly, he grabbed his boots and walked toward the kitchen. He picked up the

phone and dialed the motel to see if anyone had left Slim a message. The night clerk told him no and Jake left a message of his own.

Then he walked into the living room in his sock-covered feet. "Gramps," he called to the thin air. "You around?"

The old house creaked but old man didn't materialize.

"Gramps?" he whispered louder, and sat in a chair to put on his boots.

He heard a muffled yawn behind him and shifted to see the old man lean against the cabinet. His eyes were still closed.

"Whadda need, boy?"

Jake sighed. "I want you to stay here with Marie. Her fever's broke and I need to find Slim. We still haven't heard from Martin yet." Jake slipped on a black shiny boot and tied it.

"Hell, boy, yuh know Slim's at Katie's. Them two's inseparable."

"Gramps, since when did you start playing matchmaker?" Jake slid on the other leather boot.

The old ghost grinned. "Ain't doin' half bad, ifn' you ask me."

Jake finished tying his laces and leaned an elbow on his knee. "No one's asking you."

Gramps' chagrined look almost made Jake laugh.

The old man put his fists on his hips. "Yeah, well you don't hav' tuh look too far for the Martin feller either."

"What do you mean?"

"Been doin' my part an' keepin' the feller busy. He's stuck in some special room at the hospital."

"Memorial?"

"Yep."

"What ward?"

"Some general floor, I think they said. But they have him watched. Seems he's seen some mighty funny creatures last night."

Jake nodded to the old man. "Thanks, Gramps. I'll have dispatch connect me with Katie's on the way. We got to get the guy locked down."

"I'll be here awaitin'. Don't worry about Marie. She'll be fine."

Jake nodded and grabbed his coat. As he rushed out the door, his lone thought was to nab Martin and ensure he stayed behind bars.

* * * * *

Bill moaned and struggled to wake through the drug-induced haze. The light drilled through his eyelids and darted into his skull. His head pounded like hell and he

wanted to vomit.

A loud hum sounded. He felt something squeeze his upper arm. He turned his head and saw a blood pressure cup fill with air. The monitor attached to the cup clicked away.

He struggled to sit and found himself hooked to a set of tubes. The IV was still there and the oxygen mask had been replaced. He found the call button and pressed it. Soon a man clad in blue scrubs came in. His nametag listed him as a licensed practical nurse.

"I want out of here," Bill croaked, his throat dry.

The burly man crossed his arms. "That's up to the doctor. You know, Mister Doe, you caused some problems last night."

"Mister Doe?" A sharp pain shot behind his eyes and he grabbed his head. "Who the hell is Mister Doe?"

The male nurse rubbed his chin. "We didn't have a name. You never gave one to the admitting staff. Do you want to give me one now? It would help."

Bill gritted his teeth and tried to remember why he hadn't. "Bill Martin. Now get me detached from this contraption."

The man glanced at the blood-pressure monitor. "I'll get the doctor."

Bill raised the back of the bed as he ran his tongue around his parched mouth. He needed water. He poured a drink from the pitcher that sat on the rolling table next to him. He took a sip and put his thoughts together.

Snow-blinded, he had run into the tractor-trailer ahead of him. The rental car was beyond repair but the air bag had saved his butt. He'd stuffed his wallet between the seats then crawled out and around the car. He yawned. For some reason, he didn't want his name associated with the police report.

He closed his eyes as pieces of memory flew by. *Marie*. He was after Marie. She'd stolen the codes and his money. But who was after him? He remembered a car tailing him.

Back to America.

His skin chilled. He had double-dealt the deck. Some of the money he'd stolen he'd used to line his own pockets which, fortunately, he was able to pin on Marie. He needed to get the arms deal completed before they found out.

At once, as if a beacon of light flashed before him, his memory flooded back. Marie had spurned him and clobbered him on the head. He rubbed the scar near his hairline. For her betrayal, she would pay.

A prim, petite woman walked into the room. "Hello, Mister Martin. I'm Doctor Havelock. How do you feel this morning?"

"I'm fine and I want out. Now."

"Mister Martin, last night you didn't even know your name."

"I know my name, Doctor, and I know my rights. You can't keep me here."

"Do you remember anything about last night?"

"Vaguely. I have extreme reactions to certain drugs. Apparently you administered one that had an effect on me. What happened was not my fault."

"That was a very unusual effect." The bitch's sensual mouth pouted in disbelief. He didn't give a damn. He wasn't sure what had happened yesterday. There were some odd things he saw but he chalked it up to some weird dream that stemmed from the drugs they'd given him.

He shrugged and gave the woman a congenial smile. "I'm an unusual man. Now if someone can disconnect me, I'd like to get out of here."

"We took a CT scan of your head. There's been some recent trauma. Care to explain it?"

"No, I do not." He clenched his jaw. "I was under medical care. I'm perfectly fine now."

The frown stressed her pretty features. "You passing through, Mister Martin?" She arched an eyebrow.

"Yes."

"On your way home?"

"Yes."

"I recommend you see your family physician upon your arrival. No driving. There's a small airstrip not far from here. I strongly urge you to take a cab and get there. We can make arrangements from here if you wish." She ripped off a prescription sheet with her recommendations written on the paper. "You were very lucky, Mister Martin. I'll have outpatient processing come see you. There are still insurance forms to fill out."

"Thank you, Doctor." He took the paper from her and folded it in half. "Now, the tubes?" He lifted a mocking brow.

She stuffed her pen in her pocket. "Be patient, Mister Martin. I'll send a nurse by shortly."

Bill ground his teeth in anticipation.

* * * * *

Marie shivered. Jake's warm, sensual body was gone and the fireplace had long since grown cold. Marie stood before the bedroom window. She stretched and let her nude form bathe in the warm, amber sunlight. Yawning, she wrapped her arms around herself. She still felt pleased from the evening before. Her nerve endings tingled as she thought about Jake's powerful body lying next to her. Made her wet and ready all over again.

She sighed and wished she could be as sure as Jake that everything would be all right.

Goose bumps rose on her arms. She rubbed them then picked up Jake's robe from

the end of the bed. She guessed Jake had put it there.

She smirked at the strangeness of her life. Here she was, screwing the local sheriff, the man she'd tried so hard to run away from.

A man she had committed herself to.

It felt good. Right. With all the experiences she had in life, she knew how rare that feeling was. How rare a man like Jake was.

No matter what, she was glad they'd found each other. Even for a short time.

She slipped on the soft garment and went to stand at the window again. She soaked up the crisp, winter scene. Its serenity let her reflect on her life since she'd fled D.C. and helped her to sort through her thoughts and emotions.

The sound of someone clearing his throat came from behind her. She swirled around to find Gramps standing near the poster bed, his eyes clamped shut. "Yuh decent?"

She giggled. "Yes. At least as much as possible for just getting up."

He cracked open one eye which stared at her briefly. She guessed she met his standards of propriety as he quickly popped open the other. "Mornin', Granddaughter. Yuh sleep well last night?"

Marie bit her lips together to keep from laughing. The old man would never give up. "Yes, Gramps. And you?"

"Aw..." He waved a hand at her. "I don't sleep. Not really." He rubbed a palm across his face. "But I'm lookin' forward tuh the time I do. I cain't make it without my darlin'."

"Josephine?"

He nodded and removed his cap then sat at the foot of the bed. "We was gonna be married a year after her husband died." He looked at Marie solemnly and ran the cap loosely through his fingers. "Yuh know there was such a thing as respectable decency back then. It tweren't proper tuh marry much sooner. Had tuh hav' a good period o' mournin'. After all, took folks awhile tuh git tuh town."

He looked back to the cap and continued to worry it. "Damn Indians attacked 'fore we got the chance." He squinted one eye and looked at her, the other one wide open. "Yuh know I ain't never had anthin' agin' ole Red Thunder but why'd he hav' tuh go stirrin' up trouble right then?" Gramps stroked the insignia on the cap as his voice grew hoarse. "'Course, he apologized after he realized who he'd buried his hatchet in. Damn redskin still owed me fur the last game o' cards we'd played. Told him he was just trying to renege on his debt and showed 'em my bear-killin' grin." Gramps flashed his pearly whites. "Like ol' Davy Crocket."

Marie suppressed a snicker behind the back of her hand.

He snorted. "Red Thunder fell over. The man died laughin'."

Marie bit the inside of her cheek. He returned a sad smile. "Josephine died years later and the kids buried her next to her husband. Wasn't 'til they found her memoirs

they'd knowed they was mine and not that rotten son-of-a-gun's." He looked up. A tear glistened in his eye. He plopped the cap on his head. "Hell." He pressed his surly lips together. "By then the old army gravesite they put me in was lost, buried under a field of cow manure."

He slapped his hands against his knees. "'Course, it'd cause a scandal even then ifn' they'd found me and buried me proper, but it wasn't worth embarrassing the girls. They'd been properly wedded and bedded by that point."

Marie blushed.

He cleared his throat. "'Course, I made all their weddins'. An' mighty fine they were too." He nodded curtly. "Gonna make yours and Jake's."

Marie bit her lip. "If we make it that long, Gramps."

"If? Li'l lady, I'm tellin' yuh, the question isn't if, it's when." He firmly set his cap. "Now Jake charged me with watchin' yuh but I gotta go check on that Martin feller, so don't yuh go takin' off anywheres. Don't want that no-good-sonofagun tuh git outta sight, but I cain't lose yuh either. Jake'd hav' my hide."

"Gramps?" The ghost disappeared. Marie waved her hand in the thin air. "Where is Bill?" she whispered dejectedly then dropped her hand as a cold eerie chill overcame her.

* * * * *

Noon hit before they finally released him and not a moment too soon as far as Bill was concerned. He hopped into the rusty cab as he saw some BAM goons enter the hospital. He knew that management had kept tabs on him, knew they'd probably send someone to follow him, but he hadn't realized the tail had been so close.

Yet he should have. Top brass wanted their money and they wanted the arms. Bill would have to get them both in order to survive. As it stood, his life was only worth a plug nickel – unless he could find Marie. *Fuck*. His desperation to locate her had made him reckless. *The bitch*. He needed to get out of town fast.

"Are there rental cars at the airport?" Bill kept his voice even.

The cabby glanced in the rearview mirror. "Nope. The closest place is in town but it ain't far from there. Don't got much to choose from." He looked back at the street. "Don't you got a flight to catch?"

Bill relaxed into the upholstery. A leer lingered on his lips. "I canceled it." He reached into his empty pockets and remembered he'd ditched his wallet. "You know where they impound the cars in this county?"

The gruff man smacked his lips against the chew of tobacco. "Yep. The feller's a friend of mine."

Bill nodded. "Let's visit him first."

* * * * *

It took them awhile with the road conditions but the cabbie reached the lot in one piece. Bill's rental vehicle and his bags were in the back lot. A quick call by the yard manager to a cousin at the local police station took care of any legalities. Bill thanked the operator and secured the keys then walked over to the area the man had indicated. It didn't take him long to spot the folded wreck. Bill scratched his head. The doctor was right. He had been lucky.

Bill opened the door. When he reached between the cushions, he found his wallet. "Guess what, Doc," he snorted as he mumbled to himself, "my luck's holding." Bill's fingers slid over the soft Italian leather. He pulled out the billfold, opened it and thumbed through his pile of greenbacks. Assured all was well, he shoved the billfold into his back pocket and got the rest of his things from the trunk then hustled out of the yard.

Bill jumped into the taxi and threw a large bill at the cabby. "Take me to the nearest car rental. Pronto." He needed to hurry. If he could find a way to get out of this hick town, so could everyone else.

His single advantage now was time.

Chapter Fourteen

"What do you mean you lost him?" Jake glanced between Gramps and the road as he drove the cruiser toward Katie's.

"I mean I cain't find him."

"But you said he was under surveillance in the hospital."

"He was. Guess he got his memory back."

Jake scowled. "Can't you use some other, er, skill? I mean, you're dead. Isn't there some specter hotline or something you can tap?"

Gramps cleared his throat. "Well, I kinda pushed it to the limit. If'n I try agin, they'll ban me."

Jake growled, frustrated that his ability to protect Marie was threatened. "Did you look through the records? Did they discharge him?"

The ghost's face squeezed up like an old prune and he lifted a hand to rub his stubby jaw.

"Gramps."

"I'm thinkin', boy. I just don't know. Like I said, he's gone and we ain't the only ones lookin' for 'em."

"What?" An alarm sounded in Jake's head.

"There's some nasty galoots followin' 'im. They look like they mean business."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"I was gittin' around tuh it. Hell, I ain't never done police work afore'. I'm a soldier. Why don't you ask me tuh shoot 'em? I can do that."

Jake blew a breath between his thinly parted lips. "How many?"

"Three at the hospital askin' for 'em. That's all I know."

Jake rubbed his face and growled with frustration. "Gramps. Go home. And this time stay there. I've gotta find Slim."

"You betcha, boy." The spirit faded. "Yuh know, I kinda like this detective stuff. Shoul'da tried this earlier."

Jake rolled his eyes as the last of Gramps disappeared. He rubbed his forehead with his free hand and tried to concentrate. Martin would contact Slim first. From that point on, they needed to be ready.

* * * * *

"So you knew there were others."

The lawman about trembled with fury. The sheriff had come straight to Jim. His agents had already been in the seedy motel room strategizing.

Jake's anger didn't surprise Slim. If it'd been him, he'd be furious.

"Is there anything else you're not telling me?" The sheriff's eyes narrowed.

Jim had to give Jake credit. The man held together pretty well. "Sheriff, I'm not holding information back to upset you."

"I'm aware of that. I think it's more you don't trust my professional integrity."

MacDugal piped in. "You're fucking our prime suspect and she's guilty as hell. Don't you get it, man? You've already been compromised."

Jake balled his hands into fists, trying, Jim suspected, to not hit the arrogant Scotsman. "If I remember my law right, and I'm sure I do, a suspect is still considered innocent until proven guilty – in court."

"Yeah? Well, mister, our job is to get enough evidence to nail the guilty and we got plenty on her."

The sheriff's face hardened. "I can see you're only interested in a collar, MacDugal, not the truth."

The government agent pointed to the sheriff as he looked at Jim. "Slim, Jim, whatever the hell name you're using, in my professional opinion, he's unreliable."

"Mac," Jim snapped, "that's enough. He stays. This bickering is getting us nowhere. And keep in mind, Ms. Taylor is a suspect. Don't render judgment, okay? If the defense finds out, you might affect the outcome if this ever goes to trial."

"Is he gonna haul her in? You know we need to, whether she's guilty or not." MacDugal's voice rose as he pointed to the bigger man again.

Jim cut his eyes toward Jake then back at his partner. "He already gave me his word."

"Shit." MacDugal threw up his hands in frustration.

The sheriff's gaze grew blacker.

"Mac," Jim grimaced, "if you want, the two of you can take it outside. Frankly though," he pulled out his wallet, "my money's on the sheriff."

"Hey," Carter, who'd been a wallflower up until now, piped in. "I'll take some of that action. Any odds?"

MacDugal snarled as a knock sounded on the door. The sheriff glanced through the peep hole then mouthed *Katie*.

"Get in the bathroom you two. We don't need to broadcast." Jim huffed. His small, serene room had become another Grand Central Station.

Mac grumbled and followed Carter into the john.

Jim stood beside Jake as the sheriff reached for the knob. When he'd opened the door a crack, Katie's beautiful face peered through.

"Hi, lover." She nudged the door open and stepped through then threw Jim a kiss.

"Didn't think you were alone." She turned and smiled at Jake. "You two coming to the diner tonight?"

"Not me." Jake adjusted his Stetson. Jim could tell the man tried to hide his frustration. "Marie's still recuperating."

"Uh-huh, and I'd like to know what from." She bit off her smirk and sliced her eyes toward Jake as she sauntered farther into the room. "I can't believe you told Gus she quit. Just like that." She snapped her fingers. "Totally outta the blue." Her eyes sparkled as she reached Jim. "Do you believe that, lover? Like he was married to her or something."

Jake shifted uncomfortably. "I got to go."

"Wait." Katie stopped him at the door. "I'll fix you something to take home. Marie's recoverin'. She isn't going to want to cook for two men."

Jake shook his head and grabbed the doorknob. "I'll cook."

Katie made a face. "I thought you wanted her to get better?"

Jake growled under his breath. "Call me." He gave Jim a hard look that was meant to lance through him then shut the door.

"Humph." Katie shifted her hip and put a hand on it. "What's wrong with him?"

Jim stood and wrapped her in his arms. "You love me?" he whispered against her ear.

She giggled from the ticklish action and brought her shoulder to her neck. "Yeah, you sweet ol' cowboy, but I don't know what I'm gonna do about it."

He rubbed her cheek then lifted her chin with the palm of his hand. "I'll let you know what you can do soon, Katie, if you'll be patient with me."

Her look grew serious. "Slim, I'd wait for you forever."

He felt like a thirsty man who'd finally found water after crossing miles of desert. He kissed her as if he'd taken his first drink. "That's what I wanted to hear, hon." He listened to her labored breaths.

Katie licked her lips. "Slim, I..."

He ran his thumb over her soft mouth. "I know. I feel it too." He touched his forehead to hers. "After this last roundup, I want to do something about it, Miss Katie."

"What?" Her breathy voice stirred him.

"Let's say it'll be on a might more permanent basis." Katie's eyes glistened as he kissed her again. "Now go on, woman." He led her to the door. "I'll see you in a few minutes."

Her face beamed as she took off for the restaurant.

As Jim eased the door closed, he watched her take the last few steps before she went into the back of the diner.

A long, drawn whistle sounded behind him. "So she's who you've been holed up with."

Jim jumped. He hoped his men hadn't overheard his conversation with her. He didn't want them to think he'd gotten soft. "Let it go, Mac."

"Not bad if you ask me. What do you think, Carter?"

The younger man shook his head. "I think he's smitten, MacDugal."

"Smitten? What the hell kinda word is that? Sounds like a damn panty-waist, college-boy word."

Carter rolled his eyes in disgust.

"It means keep your hands off, MacDugal," Jim charged. "She's personal."

Mac frowned. "Ain't it a little risky to get cozy in such a small place? You could jeopardize the whole stakeout, much less the woman. Highly irregular procedure, partner, if you ask me."

"No one asked," Jim's deadpan voice warned. "I didn't plan this. It just happened — in the line of duty I might add. Besides..." His jaw set. "I mean to keep her out of this. As soon as Martin contacts me, I'll cool it with her."

MacDugal laid his native brogue on thick. "Faith, mon. I think yous a wee bit late for that." The agent laughed then headed back to the john.

Jim squirmed beneath the solid accusation.

* * * * *

"Marie. Marie, I'm home." Jesse's rambunctious voice carried through the thick walls.

"I'm back here." She folded another piece of laundry and struggled to keep her anxiousness in check. She didn't want Jesse to know about the trouble that brewed around her. She didn't want him scared.

Seconds later, she heard his footsteps as he ran down the hall.

"You feeling better?" He'd grabbed onto the doorjamb and swung into her bedroom. His wide-eyed innocence warmed her heart. She winked at him. "All better. Weren't you supposed to be at Cal's?"

"Yeah. Dad wanted me to stay with him while you were sick but I couldn't wait any longer. I wanted to see if you were all right for myself."

Marie hugged the boy, touched that he worried about her. Inside, her heart about broke knowing how much he cared — and how much she would miss him.

But Bill would be here soon — how soon she didn't know. Certainly Jake would tell her when her former partner arrived, wouldn't he? Still, there was no reason to take a chance. Jesse could be in a lot of danger if Bill came there. He wouldn't think twice about hurting the boy. Marie winced. She was certain her illness wasn't the only reason Jake wanted Jesse to stay away. She straightened and folded another towel. "Does Cal know you're here?"

"Naw, not yet. He ain't home yet no ways. He'll still be out herding cows."

"He *isn't* home yet. Period."

The boy screwed up his pert nose. "*Isn't*," he corrected.

"I should call your father."

"Why?"

"Well..." She couldn't tell him that there was a maniac after her. "Because he'll think you're at Cal's."

The boy's face screwed up in a tight knot. "Okay. But I have to tell yuh. Miss Scott asked about you agin."

"A-gain," Marie corrected as she strolled to the kitchen to get the phone.

"Again." Jesse threw her an impish grin and followed her. "Don't know what Dad said to her but she's green with envy."

Marie pressed her lips together to keep her smug thoughts to herself. "I'm sure whatever the discussion was it's none of our business."

"Marie," he came into the kitchen with her, "you love my dad, right?"

She smiled as she picked up the receiver. "Right."

He fiddled with the drawstring on his jacket. "Can I ask you another question?"

His face became so riddled with concern Marie put the phone back and knelt in front of him. "Of course."

His sweet blue eyes squinted and his lips thinned. "You think you can come to love me too? Like...like I was your real son and you were my real mom?"

"Oh, Jesse." She hugged him tightly. "I love you more than you could ever know. You and your dad have made me the happiest I've ever been. You helped me to remember what life's all about." She ruffled his hair. "I want nothing better than to be your real mom. Sweetheart, I can't think of a son I'd want more." She rubbed his back then held him away from her. "But I do have some problems. I don't want my issues to take me from you but they might anyway." She frowned. "It's something that neither I nor your dad can do anything about. Can you understand that?"

He frowned. "But you don't want to go?"

She shook her head. "No."

He gave her a toothy grin as a tear welled in his eye then he hugged her neck. "I'm glad you came here."

She held him tight. "I am too." She pulled away and brushed his cheek. She loved the boy. How could any woman in her right mind have ever left this child?

Jesse's eyes gleamed with hope and unshed tears, yet Marie worried. She needed to get the boy someplace safe. "Now, I need to call your dad. Why don't you start on your homework?"

"Okay." Jesse kicked the toe of his shoe against the tile and made of face of disgust. Marie would have laughed if she hadn't felt the need to hurry.

When Jesse went to the family room, Marie made her call. The phone rang a few

times before anyone answered. The deputy on duty told her Jake wasn't there. Now what would she do?

Out of nowhere, her stomach rumbled. Her appetite had returned. "Tell Jake I'm taking Jesse to the dinner with me," she told the man.

When she hung up she wrote a quick note to Jake then rushed to get Jesse. She was sure Katie would watch the boy until Cal could pick him up.

* * * * *

Two fucking hours. It took two fucking hours to get on the Goddamned road. Bill was pissed. Because of the weather, he'd had to wait over an hour for a vehicle. Then he'd been another twenty minutes getting to the point of his accident. It'd taken him all day to leave the bloody town.

He scanned the landscape. He knew the reason why. There was nothing out here. Nothing. The blinding snow had hidden that fact. The exceptions were a few antelope and some passing trucks. Bill had never seen so much rugged open space. "And people really live here," he murmured to himself. The better for him. In a rough wilderness like this, a stiff would be easy to hide if need be. Hell, if Marie didn't cooperate, he'd have no choice. But still, he'd have her body to fuck if nothing else. He'd promised himself that much, especially after all he'd gone through because of the cunt. Bill whistled, pleased with himself. After so many months restraining himself as he worked with the bitch, his quest neared its end.

The sun made its descent as he neared Fort Bridger. Bill still hadn't gotten in touch with cowboy Slim, but from what he'd been able to gather, there was only one hotel in town. If Slim stayed there, he'd be easy enough to find.

Bill passed a green sign that said his exit was ahead. He slowed and turned onto the sloped road that took him under the highway. The area was as barren as the last hundred other miles he'd traveled. He slowed at the stop at the bottom. Another arrow pointed the direction into town. Bill looked at the empty pastures and sneered. Did anyone really live in this place or did the cows own it? He snorted then headed toward the town. He rubbed his belly to dispel the gnawing in his gut. Other than a gas station, there hadn't been anywhere along the road to stop. Bill hoped that, wherever the town was, there'd be at least one place to eat.

He allowed himself a smug grin. His hunger churned—in more ways than one. Revenge would taste so sweet.

* * * * *

Jake felt a little more settled now they had a plan. Still, there were too many uncertainties. The Back to America henchmen were on the loose and the men Slim used to track them had taken a wrong turn after they lost BAM's trail in the storm. Now the rest of Slim's men wandered around the countryside north of Casper, a town at least a

hundred miles away. He'd talked to them over Slim's cell phone, got them pointed toward the highway. It'd be hours before they got into town.

Jake pulled out of the motel lot and sped off. Wyoming was a wide and empty place for those who didn't know the country. And even for those who did, loneliness still lurked here. He, for one, had grown tired of it.

He stepped on the gas as he reached the town limits and scowled. From what he'd seen so far, the FBI had a good case against Marie, even though most of it was circumstantial. Jake rubbed his brow. He couldn't really blame MacDugal for questioning his integrity. If he reversed their roles, he probably would too, although he wouldn't act like an ass.

Somehow, Jake needed to find proof of Marie's innocence. She'd mentioned the papers in her bag. He'd have to get a closer look before anyone else touched them.

He drove by the whitened pastures and pulled onto the long dirt road to the ranch. Inside, his fury burned. As a professional man, what he did in the line of duty was always within the limits of the law. Still, a part of him would like to find Bill Martin and beat the crap out of him until the truth spilled from his ugly mouth.

Jake barely slowed as he took the bumpy road in stride. He'd breathe easier after they proved Marie's innocence. Until then, he didn't want her alone.

* * * * *

"Was that your Dad?" Marie asked as she and Jesse came around the other side of the restaurant.

"Yeah, I think so."

Marie grimaced and wondered if she shouldn't go after him.

Jesse tugged her hand. "Come on. I'm hungry."

She glanced at the cruiser now some distance down the road. "Let's hope your father gets my note." She took his hand as they walked for the door. This might be the last time she could indulge the boy.

The bell on the door jangled as they walked in. Katie greeted them. "Well, you must be feeling better. Jake just left. He said he'd cook for you but I think it'd be better if you stayed here and ate." The waitress leaned over and murmured to her, "Can't believe you quit. It'll only be me and Gus tonight."

"Quit?"

"Mmm." Katie straightened and squinted an eye. "That's what I thought. I told Gus the sheriff had something to do with it," she commented with playful sarcasm and led them to a table in the bigger room in back. A wall separated the room from the main part of the restaurant, although a person had to go through it to get to the bathrooms. Marie waved to some of the patrons in the main section as she and Jesse followed her friend to the back.

"Katie, I hate to do this, but I should get back. I, er, need to talk to Jake. Jesse's

supposed to be with Cal tonight. Would you mind watching him?"

"Course not. But it's still early. Like I said, you might as well sit down and get something to eat." Katie leaned to her and whispered, "You're gonna need your strength with that man." She winked at Marie.

Marie blushed. She wasn't about to dispel the idea. It was better she thought that Jake and her wanted to be alone.

Katie put them at a table near the dividing wall that gave them almost complete privacy. Marie guessed her friend wanted to talk without the cook catching on. "Well," Katie started again as she plopped the menus down on the table. "I think Gus'll be relieved to know it really wasn't you that quit. He needs you but we can always find someone else."

"If things work out maybe I can come back."

"If things work out?" Katie's mouth curved into a playful taunt. "Okay, give." She bent over and whispered. "What things? Did he ask you yet?"

"Ask me what?"

Katie scoffed. "Jesse, close your ears a minute."

The boy grinned and cupped his hands on either side of his head.

Her friend squatted down and put both elbows on the table. "Marie, you know exactly what I mean. That man can't see straight he's so in love with you, and you have a flush about you that says you want him too. Now I know Jesse's spent the last few nights with Cal. Don't try to tell me that the both of you haven't already tested out the honeymoon. I can see it about you, and Jake too for that matter, although something seems to be bothering him." She stood. "If you ask me, it's about time you two got together." She put a fist on her hip. "Now is there a ring coming or not?"

Jesse looked at Marie. His blue eyes popped wide open. She didn't know how to answer that, not until the quirks in her life straightened out. She glanced at Katie who wouldn't leave without an answer. "We've talked. I don't think we're quite there yet."

Katie smacked her lips. "Well, hurry it up. I'd like to go to a wedding before Christmas."

Marie pouted. "It isn't as easy as all that. I have some things I need to work out first."

Katie nodded. "I know, sugar. I can tell." The older woman put a hand over hers and squeezed it. "If you need to talk, you know you can come to me." Lines of worry creased her face. "You're a friend, Marie. A good one. 'Sides," she pouted, "you know men are a funny sort sometimes. I think..." She shook her head. "Well, I think Slim and I might make things more permanent."

"Oh Katie," Marie gasped, happy at least someone's life went well. "That's wonderful."

"Well, I don't know for certain but I can tell you one thing, any promises I make will come with a ring on my finger."

Jesse giggled.

"And don't you go telling anyone, either." Katie squinted with mocked sternness. "This is special girl talk you're being privy to. Keep in mind we don't let just anybody in on these." She winked at him and tousled his sandy-colored hair. "Now what do you all want? Got some fresh apple pie back there." She winked again at Jesse, who threw her his toothy grin.

"We probably need real food first. Something quick. I really need to go," Marie countered.

Jesse's smile diminished.

Katie took their order as the door jangled again then left for the front room to greet the newcomer.

Marie was ecstatic for Katie. She also felt a little guilty, leaving them so short-handed. Jake had told her she wasn't scheduled. He hadn't mentioned the reason why. Of course, with Bill on the way...

Engrossed in her thoughts, Marie didn't focus at first when the new customer poked his head through the entrance to the larger room and scanned the interior but her instincts kicked in quick. *Bill*. Marie grabbed her menu and opened it in front of her face. She held her breath, tried to still her shakes and hoped her ex-partner hadn't seen her. She heard his footsteps walk off. She peeked over the menu.

Somehow, Bill Martin had found her.

"What's wrong?" Jesse's face screwed up with anxiety.

"Jesse, go get Katie. Quietly, please," Marie whispered.

He shrugged and looked behind him. "Okay." He slid from his chair.

"Hurry," she urged then remembered the rear exit door next to the bathroom. Her car was on the other side. "Never mind," she whispered. "You stay here. Tell Katie..." She grabbed her purse and recovered her keys. "Tell her she has to call your father. The man that just entered, he's looking for me. Tell your father but stay away from him. He's dangerous, you understand?"

The boy's eyes widened as he nodded. "I'll do it."

She grasped his hand. "Promise me, Jesse, you won't go near him. Please? I don't want you getting hurt."

"I promise. Marie?"

From the look of him, she knew he was frightened but she hadn't any choice.

"Take me with you."

She shook her head and rubbed his hand between her fingers. "I can't, Jesse. It's too risky. That man means to hurt me. I won't let you get caught between us."

He stared at her, his eyes moist. "Marie, you're gonna leave forever, aren't you?" His angelic mouth trembled.

She bit her lip. Her eyes filled with tears. "I have to, sweetheart."

"Am I gonna see you again?"

She trembled, gripped with fear, and gazed into his honest blue eyes. She had to tell him the truth. "No, Jesse. Probably not."

He lifted his chin. Tears streaked his face. "I thought you were different but you're just like my mother. I don't want you anymore."

"Jesse..." Her heart broke at the hurt she'd caused. "I love you, hon." She stood and hugged him fiercely then kissed his cheek. "I always will. Please..." She stroked his cheek. "Don't ever forget that." The restaurant door jingled again, welcoming another customer. With the distraction, she ran out the back.

Jesse licked the salty tears from his lips then blew his nose with his shirtsleeve and wiped the drops away. The strange man that scared Marie came into the room. The guy looked as if he needed the men's room. The back door had almost closed and Jesse thought the man noticed Marie's long brown hair as she fled. The stranger sprinted to the door and caught it before it shut completely. The man stood there and stared outside.

At that moment, Jesse caught a glimpse of Marie's car in the open space between the man and the door then he heard the engine gun as she raced away.

The stranger held the door and chuckled then looked at Jesse. The man's eyes were black and cold. Jesse shivered, thinking he saw the face of the devil himself. His throat went dry. The man meant to kill her. Jesse said a silent prayer that Marie would make it far away.

The evil man walked toward him then stopped as Katie came in with his soda.

"Where'd Marie go?" she asked and looked around the room.

"Don't know." Jesse shrugged. "Said she had something to do and for you to call my dad." Jesse steeled himself and eyed the man back with a black look to let him know Jesse meant business.

The man grinned like a snake then slithered into the other room. "Katie," Jesse whispered after he thought it safe. "Marie says that man is trouble. She wants you to call my dad right away. Can I go in the kitchen with you?"

"Sure, hon." Worry showed on Katie's face and she led Jesse to the cook. "Gus," Katie took off her apron, "watch Jesse real close. There's a guy up front Marie says is trouble and she's taken off. I'm going to the motel office to call Jake. I don't want him overhearing me."

"Who is he?" Gus' gruff voice demanded.

Katie took the cook to the door of the kitchen and pointed with her chin. "The dark fella in booth two."

Gus nodded. "Hurry. I'll watch Jesse."

She rushed out.

* * * * *

With the roads clear, the motel began to empty. Jim had finally gotten Mac and Carter set up in the room next door and, as a precaution, got his place rigged for sound. All he'd have to do is give them the signal if Martin contacted him.

He finished the job himself after he'd sent the two men out to a roadside gas station for a quick bite. They'd been cooped up in the small space for too long without anything in their bellies and Jim was afraid they'd broadcast themselves if they went in the local restaurant.

Hungry and eager himself, he got ready to depart for the diner when he saw Katie hurry out the back of the restaurant and run for the clerk's office. "Katie," he called after he opened the door and waved her over, "where you running to?" As she came closer, he noted the dread in her eyes.

Breathless, she licked her lips and walked into his arms. "Slim, we gotta get Jake. Marie's run off. Says this new guy in the diner is looking for her. I don't know what to do. Jesse's terrified. I never saw the boy like that."

"Calm down, honey." He drew her into his arms. "You stay here and let me go check it out first."

"But Slim," she grabbed his arm and stared up at him, "shouldn't we call Jake?"

"I don't think so..." He'd turned his back for a moment to the open door and ushered her inside but then felt the jab of hard metal against the muscles of his neck.

"I don't think so either, Mr. Hancock." The male voice sounded smooth and schooled.

Jim raised his arms.

"Or should I say, 'Slim'?"

Jim turned cautiously. Finally he'd come eye-to-eye with the notorious Bill Martin.

* * * * *

Jake read Marie's note and cursed under his breath. "Gramps?"

He listened for the old man. His reply was the few creaks and groans that were normal in the old house. Where the hell had his grandfather gone? Hopefully, it was with Marie.

He tossed the letter on the table and picked up the phone to call the diner. He let it ring several times then looked at the clock. They'd have a full house by now. Jake cursed under his breath and hung up. He didn't like the idea of Marie and Jesse out in the open, not until he knew exactly where Bill Martin and the BAM guys were. It was too risky.

Quickly, he dialed Slim's room. His gut talked to him again and he didn't like what it was saying.

* * * * *

"Slim will do." Jim studied the dangerous man and kicked himself silently for not hearing the creep sneak up. He must have followed Katie along the row of rooms. *Damn.* "How did you know?"

"Safety at small motels is sometimes lacking. I asked for your room number before I checked in." He leveled the gun at his chest. "Now, move inside. We don't want to cause a scene." Martin waved the tip of the pistol at them as Jim pushed Katie behind him and stepped back.

The businessman entered and shut the door.

"You must be Mr. Martin." Jim stretched his taut body in front of Katie.

The man nodded. "Yes. I'm glad we've finally met. Sorry about the delay."

Jim shrugged. "No problem. But you don't need the gun."

"Hmmm." Martin's brow rose. "Maybe not but I've had enough problems already. I can't afford for anything else to go wrong. When your girlfriend ran out, well, I didn't mean for us to meet like this but she seemed in too much of a hurry. I thought I'd better take a look for myself, just in case. Have a seat." He pointed to the bed.

Jim didn't move.

"Please."

Martin's feigned manners annoyed Jim.

"I have no intention of shooting you but I didn't come this far to have my plans ruined now. As you know, I've come for my wife."

Katie gasped. Her hands shook as Jim guided her to the bed and sat beside her. "I don't believe it," she mumbled.

"Believe it or not, I don't care," Martin spat. "Now where is she?"

"Don't tell 'em, Slim." Katie's grip tightened on his arm.

"You." He waved the gun at Katie. "Be quiet and make yourself useful." He reached in his pants pocket with his free hand and brought out a penknife. "Strip the pillows and rip the cases up."

Katie froze next to Jim.

"Now!" Martin yelled.

She flinched but stood stalwart.

"Do as he says, darlin'." Jim rubbed her arm then slid her hands away. She sniffled and took the knife then moved to peel away the covers of the bed.

Jim stood and raised his hands as he focused on Martin. "You don't need her. Let her go."

"I think not." He sat in a chair beside a small table near in the window. "I told you, I'm not taking any chances. She already knows what I'm about. Behave yourselves and you can go when I leave. Now where is Marie?"

Jim clenched his teeth. "I'll tell you after I get my money."

Martin laughed. "Don't be ridiculous." He leaned into the plastic seat. "I have the power here. After I get my information, I promise to complete the deal." He pointed the gun at Jim's head. "I want my woman, cowboy. Where is she?"

"Want, or need?" Jim arched his brows.

The corners of Martin's mouth turned downward as he stroked his chin then he noticed Katie already had several strips ripped. He ignored Jim's jibe and swung the gun toward her. "Tie him up. Tight."

Katie's look pleaded with Jim, asked what she should do. Jim repressed the anger that gripped him, pissed that Katie was afraid. "Do it, hon," he tried to calm her. "It'll be all right. You'll see."

She did as he asked and muffled her teary response.

Martin tested the knot she'd made then forced Katie to the end of the bed.

"Sit down. Away from your girlfriend here." The man waved the pistol's tip at Jim and pointed to the covers.

Jim took a few steps then sat near the headboard. After Martin stashed the gun in a holster at his back, he retrieved the knife. Giving Jim a wide berth, he tied Katie's hands behind her and knotted some extra strips around her feet.

"Now perhaps we can get to business," Martin hammered then stalked toward Jim. He stopped midstride when the phone rang.

All motion froze a moment. The two men eyed each other with unmasked fury.

The phone rang again.

Jim broke the silence. "If I don't get it, the ranch hands will come looking for me."

Martin's eyes narrowed. "Make it short." He grabbed the back of Katie's hair and yanked her head back then pulled out the pistol and put the barrel to her temple. "Or else."

"I get your drift." Jim's eyes narrowed.

"Good." Martin holstered the gun then closed the gap between him and the bed stand. As the phone rang a third time, Martin lifted the receiver and put the end against Jim's ear.

Before Jim answered, he took in the sight of the prick. Martin's eyes were cold as ice—yet around him was the smell of fear.

Chapter Fifteen

"Gramps, are you here?" No one seemed about the old army post, but Marie held her voice below a whisper just in case.

The elder man popped in front of her. "Now calm down, Granddaughter, I've been with yuh."

"Gramps, he's here." Marie wrung her fingers. "He almost caught me at the diner. I had to leave Jesse there. I thought he'd be in trouble too if I took him with me." She paced on the ancient brick sidewalk. "I don't think he saw me." Her body shook. "He almost killed me the last time. Then his friends shot at me and barely missed." She broke down and sobbed as Gramps grabbed ahold of her.

"Straighten up, Marie." He shook her lightly. "You knew this wouldn't be easy. Yuh know where Jake went?"

"No. He took off when we got to the restaurant, like he had a call or something. He didn't see us."

He held her at arm's length. "Look, Marie, I want yuh tuh go back tuh the house. Martin just got in tuh town. He don't know where you're livin'. If, by some evil chance of fate, he comes tuh Jake's, remember our plan. Hightail it out the back and make your getaway while he's in the house. Hide in the barn if you have tuh. And saddle one a' the horses in case yuh need it. I'll find Jake."

Her bottom lip trembled. "Gramps, what if he catches me?"

"Look, he ain't gonna hurt yuh. He needs those papers and yuh don't have 'em. Stall. Get 'em tuh come tuh the fort. I'm stronger here." He hugged her for a brief moment. "Yuh can do this, Marie."

She nodded. "Can you get Cal to pick up Jesse? I want to make sure he stays well away from Bill."

"I'll take care of it, now git. We don't want that horse's tail end to find yuh."

She stood on her tiptoes and kissed his cool cheek. "Gramps, in case I don't get the chance to say it, thanks for everything."

He eyed her hard. "Marie, you're gonna git the chance for that and more. You're a brave woman. Now don't worry and git goin'. I'll be around to protect yuh."

She bit her fingernails. "Don't forget about Jesse. I'm more worried about him than myself. Gramps," her unshed tears muffled her voice, "watch out for Jake too. I don't want him hurt because of me."

"I will." He placed his hand over hers. "Now git, gal. Quickly."

She nodded then ran to her vehicle.

"Damn mess, already." Gramps shook his head as he faded from sight. "Knew I'd have tuh stick around for this."

No one would hurt his family today. Not if he could help it. But it was about time fireworks started.

* * * * *

"You hear from Martin yet?" Jake knew his voice sounded like gravel as he spoke to Slim but he was anxious. He couldn't find Gramps and Marie was gone. He hoped to hell she wouldn't try to leave the state.

"You could say that." Slim sounded distant.

"What does that mean?" Jake's voice echoed his frustration as he glanced around the kitchen.

"Well, the roundup's gonna be a mite sooner than planned. Talked to the boss about it."

Slim was purposely obtuse. "When?"

The other man hesitated. "I'll let you know."

Jake huffed. "Is Katie in the room?"

There was a pause. "Yeah."

"You haven't told her yet, have you?" Jake asked.

"No."

Jake heard the heavy sigh and decided he'd interrupted a brief lovers' fling. Slim still shielded Katie from the truth. "Marie's gone. She left a note saying she and Jesse went to the diner but I'm not so sure. I can't get Gus on the phone. You been there yet?"

"Nope." A small catch hitched in his voice.

"How 'bout Katie? Has she seen them?"

The man paused a moment. "No." The response seemed more clipped than brief.

"My gut tells me something's up but I can't put my finger on it."

"Listen to it."

Slim's voice sounded strained. Was there a ring of desperation in it? Jake's instincts went on alert. "I'm going to look for her. Get me through the station if you need me."

"Sure." Slim's voice wavered slightly. "I'll be in touch."

Jake hung up. A curious niggling in his gut told him there was something more. After checking his pistol, he hopped into his cruiser and rushed to town.

* * * * *

Jim saw the hit coming but with his hands tied behind him all he could do was duck. The blunt end of the pistol caught him behind his ear then slid across his face. He tumbled onto the mattress. Katie's shriek rang in his head.

"Bitch, you want to see your boyfriend dead then scream again." Bill Martin slammed the phone down and stooped over her. Jim was conscious enough to see him slap Katie off the bed. She inched toward the wall and huddled against the plasterboard, shivering.

Anger burned in Jim. "You sonofabitch," he mumbled past the blood that oozed from his lip. "Let her go. She has nothing to do with this."

"Stop wasting my time." The angry man hovered over him and threatened to punch Jim again. "I told you to make it short, not warn whoever that was." His abuser leaned into him, ready to strike.

"You wanted me to sound casual. I did." Slim's gaze pierced the man. "Takes a lot to hit a woman, doesn't it, Martin?" He spat a thickened lump of blood at him. "You damn coward."

He moaned when the man returned the insult with a punch to his gut.

"Who was it?" Martin questioned.

Jim glared at him and was backhanded.

"I asked you a question."

"Leave him alone," Katie pleaded.

Martin tensed as he marched over to her. He lifted her up by the scruff of her blouse then slapped her.

"That's enough," Jim growled over her cries.

The man stopped and glared at him. "Tell me or it'll get worse for her."

"She lives with the sheriff." Jim bridled his outrage but his voice still held a threat.

Martin snorted then dropped Katie and stalked toward him. "So, my wife's with the sheriff. How convenient for her. Hmmm," he purred and stroked his chin. Martin raised his hand, ready to strike Jim again. "Where does he live?"

Jim paused. He hoped like hell MacDugal and Carter would hurry back.

"You know," Martin sneered as he lowered his hand and wiped his face. "I bet any one of these folks can tell me. It'd only be a matter of time." He grabbed Jim by the collar. "You wouldn't want me to hurt anyone else, would you?"

"Don't, Slim," Katie bravely piped up from the floor.

"I said shut up," the man raged and walked toward her.

Jim moved quickly to trip him. The bastard fell on his face. "I said, leave her be. I'll help you but not if you hurt her."

Martin jumped to his feet. "Get up, cowboy." He yanked Jim off the bed. "You'll tell me where that prissy bitch is right now or you won't like what I do to your lady's face." He pushed Jim onto the floor near Katie then pulled his penknife from his pocket.

Jim grimaced. "Let her go and I'll tell you where your 'partner' is."

"Partner?" Bill Martin backed into the chair and roared with laughter. "Oh my." He covered his face with his hand. "Partner? Man, where did you ever get that idea? She's my wife."

Jim shrugged. "Ain't that the same thing?"

"Not really," Martin narrowed his eyes. "What did she tell you?"

"Not much."

Martin stood and whacked him on the head again with the pistol.

"Look, mister," Jim pleaded, trying to stay conscious. "I'm in this for the reward, remember? That picture I had wasn't great. The face was blurry. I had to be sure she knew you so I asked around, casual like, all right? She never suspected a thing so don't get touchy. I'm on your side."

"Slim?" Katie's wide-eyed innocence made him uncomfortable. "You...you didn't track her down for this animal?"

Martin paced toward her like a cat ready to kill.

"Katie, stay out of this. This is man talk." The command in Jim's voice halted Martin.

A snide grin of approval made its way across the creep's face.

Jim bit his swollen lip. Fear crept into Katie's eyes. She shot Jim a look that said she'd never seen him before. She opened her mouth to speak but thank God, the look he gave her quelled her. Martin was nuts but Jim couldn't explain that now. Somehow, he had to get her out of this.

"Women always do cause problems, don't they, my friend?" Martin scorned. "Hell, they're only good to lie under a man." Bill dropped on the bed and ran a hand across the messed covers then he looked at his lap and steadied himself. "Hmph. I was hoping Marie would behave." A scowl etched his face. "But she had to go and poke her nose into things that were none of her business." His wild-eyed stare sent cold chills down Jim's spine. "She'll have to be punished now." He lifted the knifepoint toward Jim. "She betrayed me and she'll pay." His eyes narrowed. "Make sure you don't make the same mistake."

Jim cocked his head. He worked to ensure his voice sounded even. "It's a deal then."

The man looked at Katie. "She stays until the job's done."

Jim twisted his body, working it against the wall to get to his feet. "I understand." Jim grunted from pain as he struggled to rise then turned sideways to Martin and lifted his bound hands off his back as best he could. "You intend to keep me tied up? Be kinda hard to explain it."

Bill's eyes narrowed as he studied his face. Suddenly the knife sliced through the layers of cotton. "Draw a map." Martin folded the blade and put it away then pulled a piece of paper out of his pocket and placed it on the table. "You don't look pretty enough to go out."

The man handed him a pen and Jim drew on the white sheet. Per Jake, Marie wasn't at the house. If that was so, she'd fled. The risk was minimal.

Besides, he needed to get Katie out of this. Hopefully, giving directions to the ranch would buy them some time and at least he'd know where Martin was, temporarily.

In a few minutes, Jim handed the instructions to the scum. "There's only one way to go on the last road. You can't miss it."

"I didn't want it to go down this way, buddy, but your girlfriend left me no choice." Martin's voice held the threat.

Jim jerked a single nod.

Martin pulled an envelope out of his jacket. "Just to let you know there aren't any hard feelings, here's the reward money I offered." He dropped a packet stuffed with bills on the table and handed Jim the strips of cloth. "Tie up one hand, turn around and put both hands behind your back. Please." Martin reclaimed the pistol and aimed.

If Jim had been alone, he would have taken the chance to overcome the man. Instead, he did as instructed. He didn't want to risk a misfired shot hitting Katie. He felt the tug on the strips and figured Martin had holstered the gun again.

"I can't let you wander around 'til I'm ready to leave. Sorry." The repulsive man knotted the strips tightly. "You'll have to stay here." Martin spun Jim around. He shoved some of the cloth in Slim's mouth then secured another strip around his head. "I'll call the motel after I leave town and let them know where you are."

Martin stuffed Katie's mouth with the sheet. When he tied the ends, the bastard set the lock and walked out.

Jim heard the man's grating laugh as the door scraped closed.

* * * * *

Marie paced the old bedroom again, waiting. "Gramps?" Still nothing. She sat on the bed and stared into empty space.

The winds gusted and the old house creaked. The sounds reminded her how very alone she was. "I can't stand waiting." She threw her hands in the air then rose and marched in the other direction. She'd never been one to sit and do nothing. She pressed her lips together. She wouldn't run again. Jake and his spiritual predecessor had convinced her that would be a tragedy.

Unbidden, she remembered the warmth of Jake's arms and she hugged herself with the imagined embrace. His urgings had been more than words, they were a binding commitment that had tethered her heart. A deep peacefulness settled over her. For once she knew exactly where she belonged. She needed to be beside Jake and his clan. No more thoughts of running. She would stay and fight. She plopped on the bed. Marie had made up her mind. If Jake and his grandfather were willing to risk everything for her, she ought to be able to do battle for herself. After all, she wasn't some princess in an ivory tower.

She jumped off the bed and stomped down the hallway to the front room to get Gramps' old infantry pistol. Juggling through the jumbled mess in the drawers of the cabinet, she looked for the key to the locked case. *Nothing*.

She frowned. Where could it be? This was Jake's private domain. Like his bedroom, she'd not disturbed the place except to do general cleaning. She reached over the top of the hutch and ran her fingers along the edge. Dust collected on the tips until she heard a tinkling sound. She touched the key and knocked it behind the case.

"Damn." Marie pushed against the old oak furniture and grunted as the massive piece inched forward. When she'd moved it a bit, she knelt down and patted the floor. Her arm scraped against the underside as she reached farther back. Her shoulders heaved with relief when she fingered the key and hooked it with her nail to pull it closer.

The metal landed against the backside of the short thick leg and Marie fingered it several times before she got it free. Soon the iron rested in the palm of her hand. Her breathing grew easier.

Clasping it, she sat on the Oriental carpet and stared at the ancient piece. This might give her access to her single source of protection.

Marie stood and leaned her backside against the cabinet to slide it back into place. When she finished, she unlocked the glass front and pulled out the handgun. She held the heavy pistol and extended her arms, both hands in front of her, and pointed into the empty air. She wasn't even sure how to use a pistol except that Gramps had told her the bullets were in the drawer underneath.

She slid the drawer open. The bullets were there but she debated whether to use them. "Marie, you know nothing about guns." Except that Gramps said it was easy.

A scratching sound came from the outside door in the TV room across the hall. A shiver rolled up Marie's spine. Was it the heavy wind around here? She didn't know.

"Gramps?" she whispered and peered around the doorjamb to the room she was in. What took the ghost so long? Marie scanned the other room. It was empty. She heard the noise again.

"Jake?"

The glass pane shattered. The sound stunned her. A gloved hand came through and juggled the door lock. Marie's scream froze in her throat. Frantic, she grabbed the shells with one hand and fingered the chamber with the other, looking for the clasp that opened the barrel. "It's supposed to be right here." Her voice faltered.

Frenzied, she held the pistol against her chest. The cartridges clattered around her. Her heart hammered against her ribs. Her hands shook as if she'd had an epileptic seizure. The door slammed against the wall and jarred the few pictures that hung on it.

Bill stood in the doorway. His eyes burned with hate. The rancid sneer on his face mutated into a lewd grin.

"D-d-don't c-come near m-me." The gun gyrated wildly in front of her as she pointed it at him.

"Marie," Bill snorted as he opened his coat and put his hands in his front pockets, "put that thing down before you hurt yourself."

"Y-you're n-not going t-to get a-away with this, Bill. I've told the sher-riff about you." She couldn't control her fear as he sauntered toward her.

She cocked the trigger and stepped back.

He stood in the entrance to the room, saw the shells on the floor. "Babe, even if the piece was loaded, that thing is so old, if you fired it, it'd probably blow up in your face."

She straightened. Her eyes widened with each of his words. He knew she hadn't readied it.

Quick as a snake, he lashed out and grabbed the barrel then pointed it upward. His other hand surrounded hers and twisted the gun free. The shriek she'd held in spewed from her as the force of his action made her stumble backward. She fell on the floor.

Deftly, he unlatched the barrel and spun it, noting the empty chambers. He leered at her. "As I thought. You never were one to invest in violence."

"And I suppose you're an expert?" She rose to her elbows, her voice caustic and thick with anger.

"Babe..." He squatted in front of her. The crooked, upturned lips marred what was once a handsome face. "I've been an expert since the age of twelve." He tossed the gun aside then put his gloved hands on her calves and slid them up her legs. "I've been dealing since I was sixteen. A bit young, I agree, but the rules weren't so fastidious then." He rested his palms on her knees. "The question now is which should I take care of first?"

Her brows narrowed.

A hideous laugh erupted from him at her response. "Business, sweetheart..." His fingers glided down her thighs then cupped her buttocks as he pressed his torso between her knees. "Or pleasure."

His bruising lips squashed her scream.

* * * * *

"Thank God you're here." Jim said with relief after Jake untied his gag and hands then took his knife and sliced through the layers of strips around his ankles. "It was Martin."

"Alone?"

Jim nodded and rushed to help Katie. "I sent him to your place since Marie and Jesse weren't there," he shot over his shoulder. "I ran out of time. My men aren't back yet and I needed to keep Katie safe."

"Understood." The sheriff gave him a brusque nod. "I'll call the station."

Jake left and Jim heard him get on the cruiser's radio.

"You okay, hon?" He examined the bruises that swelled on her. She nodded in shock as he freed the last binding.

"Slim?" Her voice sounded soft, shaky. "You're not the normal cowpuncher, are you?"

He huffed then grinned tightly. "No, ma'am, but that doesn't change anything between us." He took care to place the soft strokes against the side of her face. He hated Martin for what he'd done to her.

"Is Marie going to be okay?"

Jim knew his eyes clouded with mixed emotions. "I don't know," he said honestly. "All I know is, I need you, Katie." He placed a featherlight kiss on her bruised lips. "But mind you, I won't have my woman flirting with anyone but me."

"Oh, Slim." She threw her arms around him. "I don't want anyone but you."

"Good." He held her away from him. "Then you don't mind being married to a federal agent?"

Her eyes widened. She smiled and kissed his palm. "No. As long as it's you."

"Slim, we got to go." Jake walked up behind him. "The station house is trying to contact your men. They'll meet us at my place."

Jim eyed Jake from his spot on the floor. The man was in a hurry and he understood why. He kissed Katie's hand. "Go home and wait for me, honey. Have a friend sit with you. I'll be back. And don't mention any of this to anyone. It could get someone killed."

"I understand." She nodded and left.

Jim stood and faced the sheriff. "What about Marie?" His voice turned cold.

Jake's jaw clenched. "I have an APB out for her. Between the state troopers and my men, we'll find her."

"Then let's go." He reached into the dresser and removed his 9mm Beretta. After he checked the clip, he followed Jake to the cruiser.

* * * * *

Her knee went up swift and sure and nailed Bill right in the crotch. "Bull's eye," Marie mumbled as she pushed his moaning body off her and ran for her bedroom. She might not be one for violence, but you didn't live in a big city for long and not learn something about protecting yourself.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway as she flew into the room. She locked the solid door behind her and grabbed her purse then threw open one of the bedroom windows. A thud hit the door as she put a leg through. The wood cracked behind her as she reached the outside.

Marie stumbled in the snow as she rushed toward the driveway. Frantic, she tossed aside non-essentials from her purse in the drifts as she searched for her set of keys. She reached in again and one of the jagged edges stabbed her. She grasped the key ring as she made the vehicle. Her feet and fingers had grown numb as she pushed the keyless entry to unlock the car. Bill jumped out the window and ran toward her as she threw open the driver's side door.

She hopped inside but Bill was faster and grabbed the door before she could close it. He yanked her out and threw her in the snow bank then took the keys.

"Bitch, you won't be getting away from me that easy. I've wasted too much time trying to find you." His hair bristled in the gusting, frigid wind and his face had a wild, obsessive quality about it. He shook his head. Her keys glittered in his outstretched hand. "You'll never leave me again, you slut. You're mine." He stalked toward her. "And you're going to stay that way."

He jumped for her. Marie managed to roll away as he fell face first into the snow. She scrambled to her feet and ran for the barn, scolding herself for not listening to Gramps about saddling a horse.

Bill followed close behind. She could have sworn she felt his hot breath on her neck. She flew into the weathered stable and tried to slam the gate behind her but Bill pushed through.

She dashed into Red's stall and jumped him bareback but Bill caught her and pulled her off then tossed her into a pile of hay.

He laughed and put his hands on his hips as he scanned the barn. "Pretty cozy." Naked lust lay on his face. "Appropriate, too." He unhitched his belt. "Finally. Time for the stud to teach the brood mare her purpose in life." He pulled his belt free then knelt over and locked her hands in his grasp. "Now tell me where the papers are." He shoved her hands behind her back.

Her body shook. Marie tried not to be afraid.

"Cooperate, babe, and I won't hurt you." Bill leaned toward her, his damp breath heavy on her neck.

The barn creaked as the icy wind slammed against the side. The sound of the gust absorbed her scream.

Marie struggled but Bill soon had her hands bound with the slick belt. His hard mouth covered hers. She cringed as his palms slid across her nipples. She tried to bite him but he pulled back and chuckled at his quick reaction. "You were supposed to have my children, babe. Now what am I going to do with you?" He ripped her shirt open. His mouth fell on top of her lace-covered breasts like a ravenous wolf.

She closed her eyes against the onslaught. She twisted and heaved her body to throw him but he barely moved. His wet mouth touched her skin. She felt his knuckles press on the crotch of her pants while the same hand struggled with his zipper.

"No," she yelled. He'd freed his cock then unzipped her pants and slid his fingers into them.

"Then tell me where the documents are," he shouted. "We don't have all day."

She bucked again to get him off her until he unexpectedly stopped moving.

A lump formed in her throat. She eased her eyes open. Except for the frill of her bra, her chest lay exposed to the cold and her pants were undone. Bill sat on top of her, his fly open and a gun to his head.

She held her breath. Some of the men who stood behind Bill were the same thugs who had chased her on that warm summer night in Georgetown.

"Nice to see you again, William," the man with the gun gloated. "Sorry to interrupt your fun but we have business to take care of first, don't we?"

"What do you think I was doing, Evan?" Bill's steel-colored eyes narrowed in contempt. She eyed him as he raised his arms.

In the cold weather, Marie saw Bill sweat.

Chapter Sixteen

Jake replaced the mic in the cradle as he sat in his cruiser and watched the door of the motel room. He'd had no choice about the APB. Finding Marie was the only way to protect her. He had confidence in his men. They may be cowboys but they were professional. If Marie was still in the county, his men would find her. If not, his last hope was the state troopers they worked closely with.

He was grateful Cal was on his way to get Jesse. Jake had to reassure the boy he wouldn't let anything happen to Marie and neither would his grandfather.

Jake watched the federal man as he stood in the doorway. Katie had grabbed him one last time and bussed a quick peck on Slim's cheek, murmuring to him. Jake huffed. At least someone was happy about the way things were.

In seconds, Slim jumped in the vehicle. "Let's roll," he panted.

Before he got the last "I" out, Jake was already on the roadway.

* * * * *

"Couldn't find anything in the house, boss." Another man rushed into the barn. "The car's clean too."

"Great." The man named Evan ran his hand across his buzzed, straw-colored hair then waved at Bill and Marie. "Get up. We need to get out of here before the sheriff comes home."

Marie sat up and freed her hands from the belt. She pulled the ends of her blouse closed as Bill eased off her then she zipped her pants.

Evan turned to the newcomer. "Cason, go get her a coat. The rest of you, ditch her car. It'll keep them searching for a while. Run it out in the pasture near where William here parked. I think there's a creek in that stand of woods nearby. You can dump both of their cars there. We'll swing by to get you. We don't have much time." He nodded to the other men. "The sheriff could be back at any time, so move it."

The two men who accompanied him rushed out but Cason hung back for a moment. "There isn't much we can do about the inside of the house but what about the broken window?"

Evan shrugged. "What about it? Put a tree limb through it or something. The damn wind around here is strong enough to send something like that flying. It isn't going to fool the sheriff, though. I imagine with all the damage to his home he'll still look for this woman. Make it fast. Got it?"

Cason executed a quick jerk of his chin then disappeared. Evan turned to Bill. "Well, William. Looks like another mess I'll be bailing you out of. You're gonna owe me big-time. As to the lady here..." He squatted and put his free hand under her chin then stroked her cheek with his thumb. "We'll have to see what we're going to do with you."

Marie shuddered. Determination glimmered in the man's light hazel eyes.

"Come on." Evan helped her up. "I'll escort you to the truck."

Cason met them at the white four-wheeler with her coat. Evan swung the rear door open and she noted that her bag sat on the backseat. The man picked it up and threw it in the heavily tinted rear then pushed her into the far back beside the bag and a ton of camping gear. The ringleader ushered Bill onto the back seat and crawled in next to him.

The sun had dipped below the horizon. Marie could hardly see through the windows with the little light left. She put on her coat and boots then leaned against a rolled-up sleeping bag, listening to Evan speak as Cason drove off.

Evan held the gun point low as he interrogated her ex-partner. "Too bad you got her involved in this, William." He glanced back at Marie. "She seems like a nice lady."

Bill turned his head and glared at her. "If she hadn't pried, she wouldn't be in this mess."

Evan chortled. "Neither would you. Goes to show how little you know about women. Always said you spent too much time with the ammunition and not enough time with the aim." He leaned against the door as Cason veered off the main path then relaxed as the car straightened. He casually placed his arm on the back of the seat. "You get my drift?"

"No." Bill shook his head. There was a hard look in his gray eyes.

"William, you need to focus on the end result, not the means. Management thinks so, too. They say you've wasted too many good resources. Quite frankly," he glanced at Marie again, "I agree. This little lady is a prime example. You probably could have milked the system for some time with all the false corporations we have set up. And maybe you coulda' gotten a little of what else ails you in the process. Instead, you rushed the plan and blew the deal. Not too much recourse for that, is there, William?"

Marie watched a drop of sweat roll down Bill's temple.

"Lucky for you," the man continued, "management likes me. I'm effective. I get things done. They've left the decision up to my good judgment to determine whether to give you another chance."

Marie couldn't keep her eyes off Bill. Whatever happened to him would surely impact her. She watched her ex-partner's Adam's apple rise as he choked off his reply.

"Keep that in mind before you think of running," Evan said as the car stopped. "If we get out of this okay, you might get your old job back. You're good with those foreigners." Evan's smile didn't reach his eyes. "I think you and the gunrunners have a lot in common." He looked at Marie. "Especially when it comes to how you use women."

The female species isn't chattel, William, and, God forbid, they do have a mind of their own."

Bill's ire rekindled. His eyes narrowed into slits and glittered as he glared at Marie from over his shoulder. "Yeah." He drew a breath then turned to the other man.

Evan chuckled and got out as the other two men climbed in on either side of Bill. Both wielded guns. Evan slid into the front seat, his voice deep. His bearing exuded command. "Let's get outta here, Cason. Preferably, someplace quiet."

Marie shuddered again.

* * * * *

"There's tire tracks all over the place. You recognize any of them?" A few errant rays still lit the sky as Slim's voice filtered across the shadows in the driveway.

Jake nodded and ran his hand over the jamb of the broken window. They'd arrived moments before and saw the house had been damaged. They moved inside with care and found his home vacant. The curtain of Marie's bedroom flapped in the wind. The shattered bedroom door and broken window were no accident.

"Yeah, and there's a few more of them than there were an hour ago." Jake strode over to Slim. "These are Marie's." He pointed to the marks. "She'd come back here."

Jake lifted his head. There was a deep depression in the snow bank. He walked over to it. Footprints went from the window to the leveled spot. The contents of Marie's purse indented the glazed surface. Jake scanned the grounds. A trail of boot prints led to the barn.

A quick glance at Slim let Jake know that the other man had come to the same conclusion. Slim jerked his chin toward the barn door and they both drew their pistols. Taking as much cover as they could, they circled in concert around the old building.

They entered cautiously. At first glance, the building looked empty. They both checked the stalls and found nothing but the old gelding loose, munching at the hay pile. Jake walked over and absently petted Red's mane, acting a hell of a lot calmer than what he felt inside, but he needed to keep his emotional control. Marie needed him now more than ever. He looked around. The barn was a mess. He had to think. Where would Martin have taken Marie?

"She had quite a struggle," Slim commented, and pushed the brim of his Stetson to his hairline.

Jake clenched his jaw to control his rage. "If he's hurt her..."

"Don't say it," Slim cautioned then lowered his voice. "If we have to kill him to protect her, we will. Martin isn't stupid. He might hurt her, but he won't kill her as long as he thinks she can get him those codes." The agent sucked in a breath. "Jake, Marie needs you. And right now she needs the sheriff part, not the man. I need you to be one hundred percent professional."

The frustration in Jake threatened to swamp his good sense. He nodded at Slim, grateful he'd been there to curb Jake's anger. "I will be. I promise you we'll nail this guy."

Slim nodded then walked away to give him a moment. The FBI man grabbed some of the straw to entice the horse back into the stall then locked him in.

Jake looked at the dirt floor and ground his teeth. His heart raced. Fear grabbed him like it never had before. Slim was right. *Marie had to be alive*. He couldn't lose her. He loved her. And right now Marie needed him now more than ever. She needed him to be the professional he was.

Jake forced his breathing to slow and the tension in his body to ease, yet to himself, he swore that when he found Martin, he'd make the bastard pay.

Calmer, Jake looked closer at the pile of hay and realized blots of snow lay on top of it. He stooped over and picked up a blade of straw. There was no blood, thank God. He rolled the stem between his fingers and scanned the pile. It didn't take long before he found something else—a blue plastic button with the string still attached. He waved Slim over.

"Marie's. I'd bet on it." Jake lifted an edge of the button with the straw, his voice taut.

"I don't like it." Slim straightened as worried creases developed on his brow.

"Yeah." Jake said, barely audible as he stood. He bit the inside of his cheek to restrain his fury. He didn't like it either.

Slim put his hand on Jake's shoulder. "We'll find her. I promise. Martin won't hurt her unless he doesn't get the documents." Slim frowned. "From the tracks, it looks like the other BAM guys may have found him here."

Jake nodded. "Let's go." He didn't want to discuss it anymore. They needed to find them.

Outside another vehicle arrived. Jake and Slim hurried out to find Deputy Thorsen there, then another car pulled up behind him.

"Kyle, keep the other cars back," Jake ordered. "We need to follow these tracks as best we can."

The deputy stepped forward and waved to the other men as the headlights shone in his eyes.

Jake took a deep breath of the frosty night air as the cars backed out of the way. Only one person could find Marie now and he wasn't really in this world. Jake peered reflectively at the western horizon. A ribbon of deep blue glowed along it. A solitary star shone through. From the recesses of his mind, Jake remembered the first star of the night was the wishing star.

It was a child's game but he closed his eyes anyway. Jake made his one request and then settled on his next move.

* * * * *

"It's at the fort." Marie sat in the grimy dirt of some hidden alcove off the abandoned side road they'd taken. She gulped the air made fetid by Bill's nearness. The night had grown pitch-black except for the flashlights held by the other men. She squirmed again to test the rope they'd used to tie her hands behind her.

Again, Bill had threatened to rape her. Better, he'd said, than marring her pretty face—another one of Bill's ideas. But the man Evan stopped him from a full-blown assault.

Her ex-partner hovered over her. "Where at the fort?" The other men hung back as he stroked her hair then grabbed it and yanked it violently toward him, pulling her to her knees in the effort.

She squirmed and leaned forward a bit to alleviate the pain. "I buried it in one of the far off sections. It's under at least two feet of snow."

At her forced words, he pulled her closer to the vee in his pants then pushed her face against the limpid token of his masculinity. Her warm pants, driven by fear, made it stiffen.

Bill loosened his hold on her hair. "That's more like it," he purred. "Exactly where you belong."

She snapped her chin up in disgust and bared her teeth.

He jerked her hair again. "Don't even think about biting me."

Marie heard Evan chortle. "Let's go, Bill. We recover the papers and then you'll have all the time in the world."

"Up." Bill wound his hand around her tresses and tugged hard. She moaned. The pain shot like pins into her skull. She came to her feet.

Evan strolled over and grasped Bill's arm. "Get in the front. I'll sit with the girl." He loosened Bill's grip on her hair and took her elbow. Bill glared at him sideways then sauntered off.

Evan watched him get in the truck then looked at Marie. "Miss Taylor." He kept his voice low. "I'm sorry you were dragged into this. We..." he eyed the truck, "the organization had a much different tack in mind. It wouldn't have involved any civilians. Unfortunately..." He rubbed his hand along her upper arm to her shoulder and rested it there as his free hand reached out to hold her. "You are, let's say, compromised. You're an intelligent woman. I'm sure you know your life is in danger. Cooperate with me and I may be able to get you out of this alive." He glanced at the ground and moved in front of her to block her view of the truck. "We have our own 'witness protection' program, a place in Montana made for a woman like you." He squinted as he peered at her. "Think about it." He lifted his chin. "At least you'd be safe there. And if you behave, you'd probably have some freedom after a while."

She wanted to retch. Instead, she looked down as he grasped her arm and led her to the vehicle.

* * * * *

Most times, Jake was pretty good at keeping his temper but today wasn't one of them. He'd been pushed far enough. "Look, MacDugal," Jake growled, "I'm leaving to follow a hunch and I'm leaving alone. The last thing I need is someone blowing my idea. Now stay put."

"I'm tellin' you, Jim, he's gonna stash her away somewhere until this blows over. He probably rigged this thing himself."

Jake came nose-to-nose with the tall, brawny man. "MacDugal, if I weren't in uniform, you'd be on the ground. Let up."

"Gentlemen," Slim interceded, "we don't have time for this." He turned to Jake. "Go do what you need to do, Sheriff."

"You're making a mistake," MacDugal interrupted.

"Then it's my mistake, Mac." He cut the man off sharply and sliced his eyes toward the other agent. "I'm in charge," he stated, then turned to Jake. "You find anything, call us pronto, agreed?"

Jake didn't like playing second string in his own county but it was a federal bust—still, he wouldn't let them put Marie in any more danger. "Fine. I'll be in touch." He tipped his hat to Slim then shot a glare at MacDugal. Swerving, he marched toward his cruiser.

"You want me to deck him later for yuh, Sheriff?" Kyle's wry grin held him.

He glanced back then smirked at Kyle. "Just don't let them follow me."

Kyle nodded once and pressed his mouth into a thin straight line.

Jake jumped in the cruiser and drove off. He hadn't any time to lose.

* * * * *

The BAM men drove onto a side road that bypassed the main entrance to the fort then turned onto another gravel road that led to the outskirts of the large original boundary. Marie couldn't tell where on the grounds they were. Her view was blocked by the tinted windows.

They stopped after awhile and opened the tailgate. Marie crawled out into the moonless, starry night to find they'd entered the area she'd described. Several birch trees swayed. Scattered across this section of the grounds stood a few of the smaller buildings that had been used for various purposes throughout the years. She grimaced, worried if Gramps would find Jake in time.

Bill approached her and untied her hands. "Show us where."

She scanned the whitened, drift-covered land. She shook her head. "I have to think." She stepped in the deep snow. "I buried them before the landscape changed."

Bill grasped her arm and jerked her around. "Don't play games, Marie." He gritted his teeth and shook her once sharply then lifted her face to his. His voice lowered. "Let

me make this very clear. Both our lives depend on this. If you screw up, even in the slightest, these guys will have no mercy. I know them. Trust me on this."

She gulped shallow breaths as she tried to remember that Jake would find her. "I-I'm thinking." She licked her lips and peered with all the bravado she could muster into Bill's gray eyes.

He let her go. "Hurry up. I'll be right behind you." Then he waved his arm open as if to usher her on.

Bill held the flood lamp higher. Marie practically shoveled her way through the cold mounds as the snow soaked into her shoes. She finally rested against a pine tree some distance away. Cason and one of the other men had followed them. Each carried a light as well as a small, folded shovel.

"This might be it." She pointed to a large spruce that grew alongside a stand of birch trees. "I thought the pine boughs would help cover the area where I dug." The two other men looked at her then at each other and walked ahead to the place she indicated. They planted their lanterns and stuck the shovels in the snow.

Bill held his light high. Slowly the men exposed the bare ground underneath the tree limbs.

Gramps hadn't shown yet and Marie's worry grew. She backed away from the group. She wanted to find a spot where she could call for him.

"Where are you going?"

She gasped as Bill latched onto her arm. "I need to use the restroom." She buried her hands in the jacket to conceal her trembling.

"You can hold it." He pulled her back into the circle of light.

"But..."

"Do any of those buildings have a bathroom?" he asked her as he pointed in the general direction from which they came.

"Some of the larger ones. I don't know about these." She pointed to the ones nearest them. "I don't think they're used anymore."

"Good." Bill slanted a small grin across his face then took in the other men's progress. "That means they'll be empty and no one will go looking around them." He leaned to her and whispered, "I might have use for that later, if this works out right. I'm going to have you, Marie, willing or not. Do you understand?"

Marie nodded. She hoped he didn't see the dread in her eyes.

She looked away and watched the other men. Their shovels barely penetrated the frozen earth. Her tension lessened a notch. This would at least chew up some time.

A few gusts burst over the treetops. Marie worked to ease her mind and reassure herself that Gramps was doing all he could. She counted the stars that shone in the patches of sky between the trees and prayed fervently for the army to come over the ridge—literally.

"There's something here." One of the men spoke.

The cloud in Marie's mind evaporated. She stared at the ground where Cason pointed his shovel. They'd dug a few inches and a dull thud sounded as they hammered the shovels on top of the unidentifiable object.

"Well?" Bill looked down his nose at her. His eyes judged her like a vulture.

She shrugged and tried to appear nonplussed. "It might be it."

One of the men scowled as they both edged around it. Quite a bit of earth had covered the thing. Cason chipped away at the icy ground until an edge popped up. He pulled at the solid, flat panel, which looked something like a box top with a rounded edge, then held his lantern to it and glanced underneath.

"Solid ground," he snarled and flipped the panel over. Shadows crisscrossed the rotten piece of wood. Someone had etched words on it. Marie hovered over the piece and carefully brushed the letters. "Killed eighteen something." She couldn't read the rest. She looked at the men who stared at her. "I think this is a headstone."

Bill held the light still for her as she read the remainder. "Master Sergeant Thaddeus P. Colder." She'd found Gramps' grave.

Bill knocked the marker from her hand. "We don't have time for that. Where's the papers?"

"Martin," Cason cautioned, "this is the grave of a patriot. We modeled the Movement after men like this. I won't disturb his resting place unless the lady knows better so ease back and let her think."

Marie's eyes widened as Cason glared at her. "Think hard, Miss Taylor. If you know something we don't then tell me now and there'll be no retribution. If we're wasting our time, we'll find out. And I can tell you, Evan doesn't like to be duped."

Her throat went dry. She lifted her chin and pointed toward a spot another two feet to the side. "Maybe it was farther under the tree behind you. I'm not sure. I was in a hurry when I hid it. I'd heard someone coming and I didn't want them to find me." Cason gave her a look that said he didn't believe her then he and the other man moved to the place and started to dig.

"Why'd you hide it at all?" Bill growled in her ear. His gruffness aggravated her.

She glared at him. "Because I was going to live at the sheriff's house and I didn't want any precocious boys or nosy law officers poking through my bag. I had enough trouble explaining the bullet hole in my window. I don't think Jake would have been so understanding if he'd found all those financial statements. How well do you think it would have gone if I had to explain all those papers?"

He shook her again. Hard. "You said you'd told the man."

Marie swallowed. "Only about you trying to hurt me. That money was stolen from *my* firm. The man's a law officer. Do you think I want to go to jail for something you did?"

Bill sneered. His wary look raked over her. "So how did you explain the damage to your window?"

She huffed and crossed her arms then turned toward the men who shoveled the hard-packed dirt. "I let him think it was a jealous boyfriend."

Bill hooted with that demented laugh of his. "Damn."

"Keep it down," Cason urged. "We may be far off from most of these houses but we're still within the town limits."

Bill let his chuckle linger but with a lowered voice. "And that, my darling, is much closer to the truth."

Shivers crawled over Marie's skin but she refused to look at Bill. Instead, she stared intently at the work of the other two men, worried. *Where was Jake?*

* * * * *

Jake skidded into a slot on the gravel lot of the fort and hurried toward the officer quarters that served as the ghost's cabin.

"Gramps," he whispered harshly. "Where the hell are you?"

The specter popped in front of him, his cap set for battle. Gramp's mouth formed a thin line and he'd planted his fists on his hips. "I've been waitin' fer yuh, dagnabbit." His brows furled. "Of all the infernal times to not tell me where yuh was goin'. Marie sent me off tuh find yuh and you're nowhere tuh be found. I shoulda been protectin' her. Where in hell have yuh been?"

"We don't have time for that." Jake's voice grew louder.

"You're tellin' me," he interrupted.

"Gramps," Jake panted. His intensity stalled the old man's tirade. "I think Marie's been kidnapped by Martin and we still don't have the means to prove her innocence. If she's with him, she's in trouble. My men are working with Slim and his team to track them down. So help me God," he looked at the sky and rested his hands on his hips, "if he hurts her, I'll kill him."

"Son, she's right over there." Gramps pointed his thumb over his shoulder. "Martin's the one holdin' 'er."

"What?" Jake looked up and saw the small lights that flashed about deep in the woods. "By all that's holy, Gramps, why didn't you say so sooner?" He unsnapped his holster and pulled his pistol as he rushed with stealth toward the scene.

"But, son..." Gramps called after him.

Jake turned and put his index finger to his lips. "Go get Kyle," he mouthed to Gramps.

"But..."

"Gramps, please."

"I've never talked tuh Kyle. Jake..." The younger man had already slipped deep into the woods.

Gramps shook his head, forever amazed at how quietly a man of Jake's size could travel. "Moves like a Modac brave, he does. Red Thunder'd be proud of yuh if he saw this. The crazy coot, running up on a stack of men alone." The old man rolled his eyes and mumbled as he faded. "Boy's lettin' his feelings git the better of 'em, he is. Coulda warned 'em."

He spat a chew of tobacco. "I'm gonna scare that deputy outta his born skin. How am I supposed to git 'em tuh hear me?" He shook his head then disappeared.

Snow crunched softly underneath Jake's boots, yet he sidled up to the scene without detection. Two men he didn't recognize picked at the hard ground and Martin stood near Marie, holding her arm. He inched closer, trying not to trap himself in the deeper drifts of snow.

"Excuse me, Sheriff." Jake swerved to see two men standing at a distance behind him. The tall, middle-aged man held a gun with a silencer pointed at Jake. The other, younger man aimed a rifle and scope. He heard Marie gasp as the digging stopped.

The older man chuckled as he waddled through a drift to approach him. "I can see we surprised you. Won't you join us? Maybe you can jog Miss Taylor's memory."

Jake's eyes narrowed. "I doubt it."

"Let's try anyway." The man's lips thinned as he pointed the police-issued Beretta. "Move it."

He relieved Jake of his firearm and beckoned him to join the others by waving the tip of the gun barrel. Jake stomped over to the lit area and wanted to kick himself for falling into such an obvious setup.

"You recognize any of this, Sheriff?"

The voice came from the elder man but Jake stared at Martin. "What is it you want to know?"

The unidentified man's eyes narrowed as he looked Jake over. Jake got the feeling this shithead was more astute than the others. "I thought that was fairly obvious. We're after a set of documents Miss Taylor says she'd buried under the tree. We can't seem to find them but I'll give her credit, the ground's too hard to dig very deep and the snow doesn't help either." He lifted his chin. "You wouldn't happen to have seen them, would you? It would save us some time."

Jake hooked his thumbs in the back of his belt and snarled. "Then what? You don't really expect me to believe you'll let us go?"

The other man rubbed his chin. "I've already made a deal with the lady although I'm sure she doesn't like it very much. However, I think the idea will grow on her after a while. You, I'm not sure about."

He retrieved Jake's handcuffs and put away the pistol. "The organization we belong to is made up of patriots, people like you who have seen a better way." He snapped one of the cuffs around Jake's wrist and pulled his arm toward his back. "Folks who are sick

of this country being run by foreigners, vagrants and bureaucrats." He grabbed Jake's free hand and secured it firmly behind him then tightened the metal bracelet around his wrist. "They're hard-working, dedicated and are called on occasionally to serve." He shrugged his shoulders and strolled in front of Jake. He held his palms up as he turned one way and then the other to get his men's attention. "Like us." The man grinned. "You get paid for the work and the benefits aren't bad, either."

"I don't think I'd find anything beneficial from the association," Jake hammered, "so save your breath."

"Hmm. It'd be a shame to lose you." The man's pudgy bottom lip stuck out. "Think about it. Maybe I can have you and Miss Taylor relocated together." He frowned. "I don't like terminating law officers but I will if necessary. Now," he pulled out the pistol and aimed it at Marie, "tell me where the papers are and you can at least be secure in the knowledge that Miss Taylor will survive."

Jake analyzed the scene. As long as Marie was involved, any attack would be out of the question. Even if she could escape, the snow would slow her down. Jake stalled. "What makes you think I know anything about them?"

The man snorted. "My gut. And I'm sure, like you, I always listen to it."

Jake shifted his weight then looked at Marie. "I have them. I secured them without Miss Taylor's knowledge. As far as she knew, she still had them."

"Evan, maybe we should get out of here," Martin grumbled. "Don't you think someone's going to look for him?"

The leader scratched his neck. "He was alone and I'd suspect he didn't know we were here. I doubt he even knew we had Miss Taylor. In this small town, he probably thought he was frightening off some kids. Of course, if he'd been to his place then maybe he thought he'd nabbed the vandals. Isn't that right, Sheriff?"

Jake glared at the man.

Evan sniggered. "Still, you're right. We should move out. Sheriff," he waved his arm in the direction he wanted Jake to move, "after you."

Chapter Seventeen

"You all right?" Jake murmured into Marie's ear as he glared at the back of Martin's head. He'd been placed into the back of the SUV with her. She nestled alongside him as they traveled the bumpy dirt road. Marie's lips trembled.

"That sonofa—" Jake forced his professionalism to the forefront. "Martin didn't hurt you, did he?"

"No." He could barely see her head shaking in the dark. "The other men showed up and stopped him. Jake, he's insane. I'm scared," she mouthed in barely a whisper. She leaned into him and her soft breath brushed his chin. Her hand came up to rest on his chest.

"Shhh." He kissed her temple. "It'll be all right. Gramps is on his way."

"I brought them here to look for him. He said he was stronger here." Her voice choked.

"I know. He was near the old officers' quarters waiting for me. I rushed ahead and didn't listen to him. Now look how I screwed this up."

She lifted her chin. "It wasn't your fault." She kissed him.

He pressed his face to hers. "Everything will work out. Trust me, darlin'."

She pressed her lips together. Jake kissed her again then leaned against the frigid window. "Try to relax. You use more energy when you tense up."

With a ragged sigh, Marie laid her head on his chest. He rubbed his chin in her hair, and glanced over the seat. The others had lulled into their own issues and for the moment ignored the prisoners they held in the back. Jake closed his eyes and listened. He hoped to get a clue as to how they operated and what they thought.

At least the drive gave them some time.

* * * * *

"We found her car."

Deputy Thorsen crossed his arms as he reported the information. The situation didn't look good. Jim glanced around at the small searchlights that flashed in the dark. MacDugal snorted. The deputy glared at him as Mac mumbled his conjectures under his breath.

"You hear from the sheriff yet?" Jim asked.

Kyle Thorsen adjusted his hat. "No, sir. But I'm sure he'll be back."

"Yeah, right." Mac's gruff voice cut through the darkness then died as Mac turned his back to them.

The deputy's lips narrowed. "I'll call dispatch and see if they've heard anything." The tall, broad-shouldered man tramped toward his cruiser. Jim followed and slid into the passenger seat as the other man sat behind the wheel.

"Rosie, this is Thornsen. You copy?"

"Copy, Kyle. What do you need?"

"The sheriff. You hear from him yet?"

Static played over the radio.

"Rosie?" The deputy clicked the button to listen for her reply. The scratchy noise floated through the speakers.

"Hell." Thornsen mumbled under his breath then pressed a button to scan for a clear channel. He glanced at Slim. "Sorry. I wish we could get more modern equipment." He cleared his throat then turned his attention to the radio. The scanner light turned green and stopped. Kyle clicked the button on the mic again to speak.

"Rosie, come in."

A low hum reverberated over the airwaves then the timbre of a man's voice came through. "This is dispatch."

Kyle's brows knitted. "Who's this?"

"Ah, Rosie switched over tuh us after she lost yuh. She said the sheriff's at the fort. He needs yuh tuh hurry. Those scum suckers are there, hidden in the back under the trees."

"Who is this?" Kyle demanded as he started the car.

"Dag blame it, boy." Gramps' face popped through the radio. "It don't matter. Jake said tuh git your behind tuh the fort. He needs yuh. The bunch of them kidnapped Marie and that durn fool got hisself caught."

Jim about jumped through his skin. The deputy plastered himself against the seat and babbled as his eyes popped wide open. Jim reached his hand toward the strange light and felt a coolness as he touched it. The ghost turned toward him.

"Well?" The voice of the translucent image raised an octave. "Whaddayuh sitting there fer? Git your men and let's go. I'd like some grandchildren afore the end o' the age and I cain't git 'em if those two pass over." His brows crimped. "Yuh know what I mean?"

Jim bobbed his head.

The whiskered vision frowned and his army cap seemed to glower with him. "Look, Jake can explain me later. Meanwhile, he needs the two of yuh. So move it, soldiers."

The image popped out as quickly as it had appeared.

"Holy sh—" Jim murmured then pushed his cowboy hat up his brow and rubbed his forehead. "I'd heard rumors..."

"Yeah." Stunned, the other man reached for the empty air and wiggled his fingers through it. He shook himself out of his daze. "C'mon. The sheriff said we needed to move."

An odd contentment poured through Jim. "Yeah." He grabbed the door handle and wondered if he'd lost his mind. He glanced sharply at the deputy. "You did see that...didn't you?"

The other man stared at the radio. "Yes, sir," he responded, a snap in his voice.

Jim's steely comportment kicked in. "Radio the other officers and have them meet us there. With Martin, they'll be five of them, and by now I'm sure they're armed. Tell them to run silent. We don't want to scare the vigilantes off. Who knows where the hell they'd go in this wilderness?"

A woman's voice crackled over the speakers. "Kyle? You copy?"

Rosie's voice cut through the confusion and Kyle grasped the dropped mic. "I'm here."

"I don't know where the sheriff is."

"Forget it. Get every car available and have them sent to the fort pronto. Tell them to run silent. We have a 10-33 in progress."

Jim stepped out of the car. The frigid blast iced his cheek. He pasted a lopsided grin on his face, enjoying the coolness. "Now I'm sure I've seen it all." He gazed placidly toward the stars then hurried toward his men.

* * * * *

They holed up in an abandoned utility building not far from the fort. It was a nondescript metal structure set off from the main thoroughfare yet Jake noted it had enough dirt roads around it to make a reasonable getaway if needed. The BAM men shoved them into a corner and gave them a blanket to cover themselves. One of the men draped it over Marie. She leaned into Jake and shivered.

Jake took a breath as he racked his brain and hoped Gramps would be there soon. Inside, a camp heater burned and gave the place some warmth. From what he'd overheard, Martin hadn't planned this well. The other man, Evan, was behind it. The rest had simply followed Martin to the source.

As soon as the thought came to him, the big man walked up and knelt in front of Jake. "Okay, Sheriff," Evan started. "We don't have much time. You can make this easy, or you can make it hard. It's up to you."

"And what am I supposed to get out of it?" Jake raised an eyebrow.

The corner of the man's mouth rose in a half-smirk. "I promise the lady's safety and yours, if you're willing to join. I can't offer more than that except my apologies." His mouth thinned and his eyes grew dark. "Like I said, it isn't the organization's policy to involve civilians like this. Unfortunately," he took a glance across the room at Martin

then lowered his voice, "some of the members haven't followed the rules." He dropped into a whisper and his face turned to stone. "They'll be dealt with soon enough."

Coldness seeped into Jake and he knew it wasn't from the weather. This particular man had his own sense of fair play. Whoever didn't abide by it would suffer the consequences.

Jake cut his eyes to Martin then back at Evan. "Why are you telling me this?"

The half-smirk appeared again. "It's kinda obvious to most of us what you think about this lady. Thought you'd like to know that she'll be avenged, whatever you decide." He stood and scrutinized Jake slowly through the small slit he'd made of his eyes. "I'll give you a few minutes to think about it." He smiled at Marie. "Maybe Miss Taylor can convince you." He walked off.

"Jake, what are you thinking?"

Marie's gentle voice filled his ear when Evan was far enough away but Jake's gaze was on Martin. Her ex-partner glared at him.

Jake lowered his chin and looked at her. The brim of his hat covered most of his face. "Stall as much as I can. Whatever I say or do, you go along with it, hear me? My main goal is to get you to safety."

"Jake..." Her voice wavered but strength shone in her face. "I won't stand by and let you get killed on my account. This was my fault. I'm the one who didn't keep my eyes open. I'm the one who fell for Bill's lies, not you." She blinked. Her lids brimmed with tears. Her voice choked as a teardrop escaped and rolled down her cheek and over her lips. "I love you, Jake. You can't leave Jesse alone."

"Shhh." He bent toward her. As he touched his lips to hers, he tasted the salty wetness. "We're both going to get out of here alive. Gramps will be here soon. I'm sure of it." Her eyes glistened. He put his forehead to hers. "Have faith, Marie...and do what I tell you. Promise?"

She nodded then wrung her hands.

"Lean on my shoulder and rest," he murmured, and caught a glimpse of Martin from the corner of his eye.

Martin's look grew pitch-black.

* * * * *

"They were here." Jim kicked over the wooden headboard half hidden in the snow-covered ground. "And we're still too late."

MacDugal crouched and ran some of the dirt through his fingers. "Hard to tell but they probably found what they were looking for."

Kyle Thorsen sighed. "Looks like the tracks lead to the back road of the fort."

"Hmph." Mac snarled. "The sheriff met them here, Jim."

The deputy scowled at him.

MacDugal snorted. "Oh, 'scuse me. I mean 'Slim'." He slurred the name for emphasis.

"That's enough, Mac," Jim growled as he brushed past him. His partner had been trying to rile the officer ever since he knew he could get under his skin. "Let's find where these tracks go." He turned his back but overheard Mac again.

"You know he's gone, don't you, Deputy? Ran off with our suspect," MacDugal jeered, his voice low and slow.

The sound of bone striking bone rang through the quiet night. Jim swerved to find Mac sprawled over a pile of snow. A low moan came from him and he held his jaw in his hand.

The deputy rubbed his knuckles and gnashed his teeth. "When you've known Jake Colder a mite longer," he gritted out, "you'll realize he's not the type to run from anybody." The deputy glared at Jim. "You've ridden with him. You should know better."

Jim suppressed a grin and shook his head. "I know better."

The police officer shuffled his feet then scowled at Mac. "You can file charges in the morning."

"Oh hell, kid." Mac stretched his neck to loosen it. "You think I'd admit you got the drop on me? I just wanted to see what you're made of. Forget it."

Jim snorted at the stunned look on the deputy's face. "If you two are finished dancing, it's time to go. I'd like to get to your boss before something happens to him and that lady of his."

The deputy snatched his hat from the ground where it'd fallen during the scuffle and stomped off.

Jim turned to Mac and snorted. "I warned you."

He offered his partner a hand but Mac slapped it out of the way. "He caught me off guard." His old, hardheaded friend stood and brushed himself off.

Jim patted him on the back. "Let's hurry, Mac. Before it *is* too late."

* * * * *

"So what's it going to be, Sheriff?"

The man with no last name spoke softly and crouched in front of Jake as Marie slept against his shoulder. Jake studied the BAM leader. Evan's temples were gray and he had streaks of silver in his light brown hair. His erect shoulders were relaxed, as if comfortable with the burden of command. Yet his calloused hands were eager, used to hard work and ready for action. He was sure they'd seen plenty of it.

Jake looked him in the face and nodded twice. He didn't want to overplay his hand. "Tell me more," he responded in kind.

Evan's stare took the measure of Jake. "Like I said. We'll set you up at one of our safe houses. It's more of a place than a house. You'll do the same kind of work but you'll be well paid for it. No one will know who you were or where you came from. It'd be you and the little lady. Cozy like." He inspected his hands then brushed his nails over his coat as if to buff them. "But keep in mind," he said evenly and held the hand up to examine the tips, "it'd be better if you tell me the truth upfront." The gaze of Evan's ice-blue eyes pierced him before Jake could get his guard up. "As I can tell you from firsthand experience, those who thought they could buy some time ended up wishing for the quick death of an execution."

Jake's mouth dried and his eyes narrowed. The age lines in the older man's face deepened and revealed a face that had witnessed too much of the shady side of life, a soul that had accepted the harshness of the path it had chosen.

"I understand." Jake took in the seriousness of the other man. "You don't give me much choice."

Evan huffed then nodded. "You have my sympathies."

Marie shuddered in her sleep. The radical's look softened. "She needs you to protect her." His voice seemed to ache with pain. "All women need someone to protect them." The furrow of his brow shifted and Jake thought he gleaned a modicum of concern. The man turned his attention to Jake. "The organization is dedicated to protecting men and women like you two. It isn't perfect but it works for the good. I think you'd believe in it if you'd give it a go. If anything," he tilted his chin toward Marie, "give her a chance. You really don't want that slime Martin to get to her, do you?"

Jake frowned. "You promised to make sure he got what he had coming to him."

"I will, my man. I will." Evan lifted his chin. "Now what's it going to be?"

Jake eyed him for several moments then he glanced at Marie and put his parted lips softly in her hair. Jake inhaled a deep breath. When he lifted his chin, he looked at his captor. "I want a ranch and some horses. I want our privacy and I'll do what's needed when the time comes. And I don't want Martin to know where we are. I'll kill him if I see him again."

The other man's eyes clouded when he'd first looked at Jake again but with the threat, they now gleamed. "Sheriff, could you kill a man in cold blood?"

Jake swallowed. When he finally spoke, his voice sounded coarse. "I'll play your game."

A hint of softness rounded Evan's eyes but his voice grew flat and matter-of-fact. "Expect to be called on at some point, probably soon." He rose. "Now where are those documents?"

* * * * *

When Marie awoke, she found herself lying on a small pillow. Through the dim lights, she recognized Bill asleep in the other corner. Evan and the driver, Cason, played cards at a small portable table. She scanned the darker interior. No one else was left. And Jake had disappeared.

She sat up. Anxiety seeped into her.

"So, Sleeping Beauty awakes."

Evan spoke to her. The peaks of his face were highlighted by the scant light. The effect made his face more ominous. She rubbed her temples and tried to tamp down her fears. "Where's Jake?" Her voice cracked.

Evan's lips moved and a few white teeth gleamed against his dusky face. "He's fine. He's on an errand. As soon as he's back, we'll be on our way."

Marie held her breath a moment. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Evan shook his head as he threw a card on the pile then drew another one from the deck. The corner of his lip turned upward and the play of shadow and light against his face made the smile look twisted. "You'll find out soon enough. Now go back to sleep. We have a long trek ahead of us."

Her head throbbed and her feet were freezing. Marie lay down toward the wall. She didn't want the man to see her cry.

* * * * *

Jake eyed the station house. The place was strangely quiet. As he approached, his mind churned. He touched his holster. Evan had unloaded his gun and given it back to him. A sheriff without his pistol would have been suspicious.

He stopped in front of the building a moment as he considered his options. If he made a move, it would have to be soon. He glanced at the SUV that had brought him there and assessed the critical details. The driver stayed behind the wheel. The hum of the running motor broke the silence of the night. The BAM man had parked at the far end of the small lot. The overhead light had broken and it was dark in that direction. Jake made a mental note to have it fixed if he ever got out of this, budget constraints be damned.

From his corner vision, Jake gauged the man who'd accompanied him. The guy was the taller of the two vigilantes, beefier. If Jake took him, he'd have to make it fast before the guy could react.

The station door swooshed as he opened it and the cold air bristled in. The other man followed closely, his gun hidden deep in his coat pocket.

"Howdy, Pat. Everything quiet?"

"Yep." The deputy yawned and kicked his feet up on the desk. "All 'cept whatever you and those Feds are into. They were lookin' for you a while ago."

Jake felt the tension rise in the man behind him. The guy unzipped his coat. "They found me." He nodded sharply. "This is one of them." Jake marched toward his office. "We'll be a few minutes."

"Okay by me." Pat closed his eyes then leaned further back in the chair. "Wake me when you leave."

Jake snorted in reply and slid the key into the lock of his office. The militiaman stood close behind him. Jake puffed his cheeks and blew a breath through his parted lips as he budged the door open and flipped on the light. After he stepped aside, Jake waved his hand for the other man to enter. The guy inched closer and discreetly angled the gun toward him.

Suddenly, the glass in his office window broke. The BAM agent swerved and pulled his pistol.

Jake didn't question his luck. It was now or never. In a flash, he jumped the man, locked the armed hand with his and pounded the militiaman's wrist against the edge of the doorjamb. At the same time, Jake thrust his elbow and nailed the guy in his throat. From the gristly sound, Jake knew he'd partially crushed the man's windpipe. Jake pressed the stunned body against the door. The BAM agent struggled to suck in air. Jake circled the man's elbow, locked it out and trapped the armed hand against Jake's coat. The crunch and the man's moan let Jake know he'd broken his arm. In moments, the vigilante's struggle ceased. The BAM man passed out and drifted toward the floor.

When Jake looked up, Pat stood beside him, his gun drawn. "Hurry." Jake bent over, retrieved the pistol and set it on his desk. "Get him in lock-up. There's another one outside."

"But..." Pat stood frozen and wide-eyed. "I think you killed him, Sheriff."

Jake picked up the man. "He's not dead yet but he will be if we don't get the guy outside first. We can't call the EMTs until we do. It would put them in jeopardy. Now come on. I need help."

Pat opened the passage to the jail cells and Jake laid the body on a cot. "There's an SUV in the parking lot. I'll go out the back and circle around it. Meanwhile, you go outside and pretend to have a smoke. I need the distraction to slip outside unnoticed. When you hear my signal, go back through the building and out the rear door. Circle to the other end. You can cover me from the side of the building."

"But, Jake, I don't smoke."

"Pretend." Jake stressed as he rushed down the hallway. "Grab a pack from Rosie's desk. She's trying to quit anyway." Jake hopped into his office and reloaded his pistol. Pat followed. When Jake looked up, his deputy stared at him pale-faced. "Hurry. And put a vest under that coat of yours—in case. You can take care of everything else after I leave."

"But..."

Jake ignored the protest. He turned and eased out the back.

A frigid gust nailed him as he opened the door but Jake's total focus was on rescuing Marie. He plastered himself along the dark side of the wall until he heard Pat go out the front, then he darted for the cover of the trees that lay forty feet away from him.

As he reached the wood's edge, he heard Pat clear his throat. Jake slid into the darkness and made his way around the perimeter of the grounds. Closer now, he peered through the trees and into the passenger's side window, rapidly calculating what he would need to do to get his target. His luck had held. Jake was sorely tempted to take a clean shot. But shooting a suspect without trying to bring him in first would be against his code.

He briefly struggled with his values then faith kicked in. He scanned the area. The man in the vehicle watched his deputy with a pistol drawn and hidden low under the dash. Jake noted Pat's position and saw the red ash of the cigarette burn as the deputy took a drag then went into a coughing fit.

"Gramps?" Jake's voice was barely a whisper. He was sure his office window wasn't broken by accident.

"I'm here."

Jake's shoulders sagged with relief when he heard the voice behind him. "Can you give me a distraction?"

"You betcha."

Jake nodded. Under cover, he eased toward the rear of the vehicle and whistled a birdcall.

Pat exhaled the smoke and dropped the cigarette. He crushed the tobacco under his boot. The deputy strolled into the building. When Jake heard the call sign returned, he knew Pat was in position. He nodded to Gramps.

The old man popped into the car and materialized in front of the BAM man. The militia member yelled loud enough to wake the dead—right before he jumped out of the vehicle. When the militiaman turned, he ran right into Jake's Colt 45.

"You have the right to remain silent," Jake said as he pulled the gun out of the man's shaking hands.

When his rights were read, Pat frisked him then hauled him to a jail cell.

Then Jake dialed Slim.

* * * * *

Jake waited on the fort's grounds for Slim and the others. He had set their staging area near the place where the militiamen had dug. The others were to meet him there.

Jake paced again. They had a plan—a loose one, but it was the best they could do under the circumstances. The FBI wanted the vigilantes alive and given the men, equipment and time constraints the Feds and his men worked under, there was only one reasonable way to do that and protect Marie. Dressed as the BAM men, MacDugal

and Carter would be in the SUV when they drove back but Jake would go into the shack alone. The risk was too great to have the others enter the building with him. Outside, the darkness would hide their identity, but inside there was enough light that they would be recognized immediately. If that happened, there would be a scuffle and Marie could get hurt. They would have the same risk if they rushed the building—except the BAM men would be dead. You rushed a place with guns blazing. You don't expect the bad guys to survive. And Slim was against killing the men outright although at this point, Jake didn't give a damn. When it came to Marie's safety, he wouldn't hesitate.

He pressed his mouth in a thin line and shook his head. There were too many loose ends but it couldn't be helped. Though Jake had been inside, they had no way of seeing what had happened since he left. There were no windows. The interior was small. If something blew up, the men inside could easily react. Marie was their hostage. Jake didn't want them to use her to bargain for their freedom. He wouldn't put her in any more danger than she was already.

A cold gust hit him as he ran the plan through his head. The others would try to lure those left in the building outside. There were three of the perps—Evan, the leader, Cason and that shithead Martin. Hopefully, Evan would send the others out. If not, Slim would have to move quick to help Jake bring them down.

The wind gusted again. The cold air helped to keep him focused. He looked around, restless. "Where the hell are they?" He wanted to get this going. It was less than a mile from the shack. If he didn't show up there soon, Evan would get suspicious.

The snow crunched several feet behind him. The FBI's van came into view. Slim stepped out of the vehicle and came to him.

"You ready?" Slim asked.

Jake nodded. "As ready as I'm going to be."

Slim shook his head. "I don't like this but I agree with you. I don't think there's a better way."

Jake walked toward the BAM vehicle he'd driven over. Slim followed. "Neither do I but we don't have any choice. Is MacDugal ready?"

The two agents exited the FBI vehicle. "Almost." Slim looked at his man. Mac scowled as he stood near the militia's SUV. When Mac saw them, he walked toward Jake.

"This is the stupidest idea I've ever heard." MacDugal was almost exactly the BAM man's size.

"It's our best option." Jake pressed his lips together. He wasn't about to argue. He'd beat the crap out of the man if he needed to get him to cooperate.

"Dressing up like one of them and going in there is shit. We're just decoys, sitting there ready to be shot like a bunch of fucking ducks. I won't do it."

"You'll do it." Jake took a step forward, hands on hips. "Or I'll beat the tar outta—"

"Mac." Slim put his hand on Jake's forearm to stop him. "We don't have time. It doesn't matter whether the Taylor woman is guilty or not. We need her for our case and we need to make sure she gets out of there alive."

Jake tensed. He knew Slim felt it.

MacDugal grumbled. "Where are the fucking clothes?"

Jake jerked his chin toward the SUV. "On the front seat."

The man yanked the door open and pulled out the garments then entered the FBI's van to change. Carter followed him after the man lanced a concerned glare at Jake.

Jake sighed and Slim's grip relaxed on his arm. "Who did you say the leader was?"

"Some guy named Evan. A large man who's seen better days."

Slim nodded. A desolate look breezed over his face.

Jake's brow rose. "You know him?"

Slim pursed his lips. "Maybe." Then he swerved and walked away.

Jake headed to the SUV. Time was critical. They needed to move.

* * * * *

Marie heard the truck's engine. She sat up and eased herself into the corner. Jake was back.

The wind picked up and the old building creaked. Her swollen eyes were blurry but she heard one of the men stir in the murky light. She blinked to clear away the sleep in her eyes and watched Evan nudge Bill with his foot.

"Wake up, Martin. Time to go."

It took her ex-partner a few moments to register his surroundings then he sat up and stretched. "About damn time that cowboy got here." He looked at Marie and scowled. "I can't wait to give him his."

"Humph." Evan unsnapped his gun holster. "I'd like to see you go toe-to-toe with the sheriff."

Her ex-partner leered at Evan as Bill rose and donned his jacket.

Cason drew his handgun and headed for the entrance. He cracked open the metal door and carefully glanced outside. "It's them." He turned to look at Evan when he spoke.

Evan nodded. "Get the equipment packed."

Cason grabbed his coat as Bill sauntered over to Marie and knelt on one knee in front of her. "You slut," he whispered to her, just loud enough for her to hear. "You slept with the fucker, didn't you?" He raised his arm as if to backhand her.

"Martin," Evan called. "Leave her alone. Get your ass over here and help."

"Yes, sir," Bill sneered then leaned into her, his voice even lower. "You know I won't let him have you, don't you?" He brushed the back of his hand against her cheek and stood.

She steeled herself. She wanted to puke at his touch, tell him what a bastard he was, but then the step out front creaked and the door opened wider.

Jake stood in the entrance with her bag. He glanced her way then at Bill. His eyes narrowed at her ex-partner.

"Where are my men?" Evan pulled his pistol and held it on Jake. Cason stopped packing the gear and swerved with his hand on his holster.

Jake stepped in and shut the door behind him. "Something moved out there. They're checking around back."

Evan gave him a disgusted look. "Probably a deer."

"More likely a moose." Jake stepped forward, his face somber.

"These guys are city folks. They find a moose and they'll pee their pants."

Jake handed Evan the bag. "Here's what you want. I suggest we leave before too long. My men will be looking for me." The lines around his lips turned downward. "I don't want them involved."

Evan slid the handgun in his holster again. When Cason saw that, his body relaxed and he went back to packing.

Evan plopped the bag on the table and unzipped it. The corners of his mouth eased upward as he flipped through the papers. "It looks like they're all here." He snorted as he looked at Martin. "Even the accounts Miss Taylor moved the rest of the money into."

Bill grimaced. "She's the investor. That's why I couldn't find the cash. I only ran the computer so we could keep our activities hidden from her. If she had known about any of this, she wouldn't have cooperated and we would never have made so much."

Evan glowered as Cason lifted up some of the gear and walked outside.

The door flapped. The wind screamed through the opening. Marie shivered and pulled the blanket tighter around her.

"I'll take your pistol now, Sheriff." Evan held his palm out and waggled his fingers. "Sorry, but I can't trust you yet."

Jake hesitated. Marie thought his body tensed for a brief moment but then his hand went to his side and he gave the BAM leader his pistol.

A thump hit the side wall.

Jake pounced. He took Evan but Evan's instincts must have been honed from years of experience. Evan countered but he was too late. Jake had him in a hold and wrestled him for his gun.

The gun dropped and skidded in Marie's direction. Marie went to reach for it but Bill grabbed her and yanked her back. He hurried and picked up the firearm.

Jake and Evan still struggled. Marie flew for the door but Bill was faster. He caught the tresses of her hair before she could reach it. She screamed as Bill wrenched her to him and locked his arm around her neck in an iron grip. He put the cold muzzle of the gun to her temple.

"Let him go, Sheriff," Bill commanded as Slim and some other men broke through the door, guns drawn.

Jake stood and released Evan. "You hurt her, Martin, and I'll see you pay for it."

Marie winced as Bill's grip tightened. She could barely breathe.

Slim relaxed his crouched stance and glanced from Bill to the BAM leader. "Evan."

The big man nodded. "Jim. I should have expected it'd be you."

Slim Jim's brows narrowed. "Let her go, Martin. It's over. There're more of us than there is of you. One way or the other, you won't get away."

Evan drew his pistol as the others focused on Martin. "I'm afraid he can't do that, partner." He stepped away from Jake. "You know why. This has become my life's mission." He pointed the pistol at Slim. "Put your guns down."

"And let you shoot us? No deal."

"All right." Evan didn't take the time to argue. "All of you, back out. You too, Sheriff. I want to see you in the middle of the clearing out front." Slim gave his men the signal and Evan picked up the bag of papers as Jake backed away.

Before Jake left the building, he glared at Bill. "Remember my warning, Martin."

Marie felt the goose bumps as they rolled up Bill's arm and his hold loosened. She sucked in a breath as Jake stared a moment longer then left. She had never seen such deadly force in Jake's eyes before.

Evan strode to the side of the open doorway and laid flat against the wall. "Send my driver in here, Jim. Give him the keys."

"Can't do that, Evan."

He signaled to Bill to move toward the door. Marie squirmed as he held her between him and the firearms of the FBI.

"I'll say it again," Evan called. "Send him in."

"I can't, Evan. He's not walking."

Evan let his head fall against the wall. "Damn." He peered around the corner again. "You tricked Cason, didn't you, Sheriff? Cason wouldn't have left the building if he knew those men belonged to you. Cute move, mister, dressing them up as mine."

Silence.

Evan huffed. "What about the other two men, Sheriff. Where are they?"

"One's in jail. The other's in the hospital. I think he'll make it," Jake answered.

Evan scoffed and yelled out, "You play rough, don't you, Sheriff?"

"When it comes to me and mine, yes." The edge in his deep voice accentuated his threat.

Evan chuckled softly in response. "I understand, son." The BAM leader's face transformed and his gaze seemed to turn inward. Then he spoke to Bill. "You move out first. I'll cover your back." Evan's face grew dark. "And no funny stuff with the sheriff. You go off half-cocked and you'll get us all killed, you got it?"

"Yeah." Hate tinged Bill's voice.

Evan eyed him a minute then called out again. "Jim."

Slim said nothing for a moment then replied, "I'm here."

"Put Cason in the truck and get it started for me then move away."

Slim didn't answer.

Evan jerked his jaw toward her and Bill pulled Marie to her toes. She felt the cold metal against her temple again. "Do it now, Jim," Evan warned. "I don't want to hurt her but I will if I have to."

Marie heard Slim speak in the distance. "Mac, take care of it." The other FBI agent grumbled as he walked away.

After Evan heard the doors open and the truck start, he looked at Bill. "Is Cason in the car?"

"Yeah," Bill growled.

"Good."

Evan called again as he peered around the corner of the door. "We're coming out, Jim. Tell your men to lower their guns."

Slim raised his hand and gave his men the signal then Evan nodded at Bill.

"Okay, babe." Bill shifted the gun to her back. "Move with me." He practically carried her down the steps. Evan followed close behind.

They passed outside of Jake's reach and all at once Bill lifted his gun arm and aimed at Jake. "No," Marie yelled. With a force she didn't know she had, she reached around to push Bill's arm away.

The shot fired into the night sky.

Jake was already in motion. In a flash, he'd wedged himself between her and Bill then locked Bill's arm out and forced him to drop the gun as well as his hold on her.

"You idiot," Evan yelled at Bill when she stepped back. The FBI had surrounded the BAM leader and he had his hands in the air.

Jake whipped Bill around and locked his hand to the middle of his upper back. "Slim," he spoke between his clenched teeth, "have someone get this scum before I do something I'll regret."

Kyle Thorsen came over to place his cuffs on him. Kyle grasped Bill's wrist as Jake released him but Bill jerked free and threw his weight into a punch at Jake before he got shackled. Jake sidestepped him, his fist was a blur as it landed on Bill's chin with a crack.

Marie gasped as her ex-partner flew backward. He fell into Evan and both men tumbled to the ground. Bill's eyes closed as he lay on the bigger man.

Evan sat up. Contempt for Bill crawled across his face. "Damn idiot," Evan growled.

Bill's eyes fluttered open. He moaned. Evan rolled to push him off and struggled to stand as he looked at Jake. "That," Evan kicked Bill in the shoulder, "at least gives me some satisfaction." He eyed Jake for several moments then looked at Marie. "Take good care of her," the BAM leader's voice choked as an FBI agent took him away.

Jake pulled her to him and her arms flew around him. She let her tears flow and they soaked his shirt. "Oh, Jake..."

"Shhh." He rested his chin against her hair. "It's over now. Everything will work out fine." He kissed her temple and for a moment, she was at peace.

Slim walked up with the bag of papers.

"So what's his story?" Jake asked Slim.

Slim sighed. "Ex-FBI. My mentor. His wife was brutally murdered by a drug dealer he'd staked out. He left the force after that. We'd heard rumors he became a vigilante." Slim's eyes narrowed. "I can't blame him."

Jake nodded as if he understood then Slim pulled out the documents. A small piece of paper fluttered out. "What's this?" He picked it up. It was the mailing receipt for the package she'd sent to Washington.

"My life." Marie took it from him. "I mailed copies of all the papers to your headquarters in D.C. I even made copies of the statements where I put the cash. Didn't you get it?"

Jake took the slip, looked at it then handed it back to Slim as MacDugal walked up.

Marie frowned. "I included a letter that explained everything."

"Great," Mac snorted. "It's probably sitting on someone's desk."

Slim puffed his cheeks and blew out a steady breath. "We'll find it. In the meantime, Miss Taylor, you need to come with me."

Jake's arm stiffened around her.

"Jake, I don't need to tell you what needs to be done," Slim said.

Jake's jaw set. "Don't tell me you're going to charge her?"

"I don't have a choice." Slim shrugged. "With this piece of paper and the other evidence we've collected, she'll probably get off." Slim took a deep breath. "I have my orders, Jake."

Jake bit his lip and nodded then Slim turned to her.

Marie's knees buckled. Jake held her tightly to him to support her.

"Marie, I'm sorry," Slim said. "I promise I'll do what I can to help you but we need your testimony. At minimum, you'll be placed in a witness protection program, at least

until the trial is over. If you're cleared then you'll be free to go, unless we still perceive a threat from the BAM organization. Then we'll keep you in the program."

She glanced from Jake to Slim. "Can we be alone for a moment?"

He looked at Jake. "Sorry, Jake. You have five minutes."

Marie bit her lip as Jake's arms comforted her.

It was the shortest, most precious five minutes of her life.

Chapter Eighteen

The day was unusually warm for November. A gentle breeze swept across Jake's haggard face as he stood alone in the field dotted with old headstones. It'd taken two months to get the special permits to move Gramps' remains. Alone, he'd dressed in uniform for the occasion, out of respect for his great-great grandfather.

He watched as wispy clouds glided across the azure sky. It'd been almost that long since Slim Jim Douglas had hauled Marie away and put her in the witness protection program. A month had passed since her acquittal. Slim had called to tell him that much. Evan had given testimony that showed her innocence. Not too surprising, Jake thought, considering the man's motivation. He'd wanted to protect women from scum. That, coupled with the other evidence, cleared her. Now only the BAM threat kept her away from him and in the program.

He stared absently at the hole in the ground. The trial was about to conclude and Marie could be in her old life then, if the threat went away. Perhaps she'd rethink a move to Wyoming after everything that happened. He couldn't blame her. She'd had a lucrative career, lived the plush life. Why would she want to spend the rest of her days in a desolate place with him?

Loneliness swamped Jake, made him empty inside. He wondered if he'd ever see her again.

He felt a cool tap on his shoulder. Jake looked up and into the face of the man who had been his guardian angel for so many years. He forced a small, but honest smile. "You say goodbye to Jesse?"

The centenarian nodded. Jake could see the sadness etched in the lines around Gramps' face. "Yuh know I'll miss yuh, boy."

Water welled in Jake's eyes and he found it hard to swallow. "It'll be good to know I'll have someone waiting for me." He stood toe-to-toe with the spirit and hugged him.

Gramps cleared his throat. His voice wavered a bit as he spoke. "Take care of yerself, and Jesse. That boy won't have anyone to watch after 'em now."

"He has me." Jake gritted his teeth as he fiercely held onto Gramps and patted him on the back. Releasing him, he took a step back. "You ready?" He tried to steady his voice but failed miserably.

Gramps' tender grin comforted Jake. "Don't worry, boy. She'll be back. And sooner than yuh think."

The wall Jake built around his heart crumbled. "I hope so, Gramps." He looked downward and kicked the hard ground with the toe of his boot. "Because I don't think I'd ever be able to rest if I didn't lie beside her, kinda like you with Josephine."

Moistness rose in Gramps' eyes and he turned his head toward the horizon. "There's always tomorrow, Jake."

With a sad nod, Jake eyed the old man, overwhelmed with the love and respect he felt for the person who was about to leave him. He turned and watched the edge of the sky and saw in his mind's eye what his great-great grandfather had taught him about life.

For moments, neither of them spoke. Then the cry of an eagle pierced the silence. Jake and his grandfather stared as the winged creature circled higher then disappeared into the rays of the sun.

"Must be Ol' Red Thunder callin' me. I guess that's my cue."

Jake dropped the hand he'd raised over his brow to shelter his eyes from the sun. He nodded at Gramps then lifted the box of the remains that had been dug from underneath the aged pine tree at the fort. "I'll miss you, Gramps."

The old man grinned again. Gramps walked over to Josephine's grave and laid a bouquet of white roses on it he'd brought with him. "She always did like them flowers best."

Jake nodded. He lifted the box then lowered it reverently into the ground. The hole wasn't deep. It didn't need to be as there was little left of his patron's remains. Jake took the shovel that sat nearby and began to cover the hole with dirt.

Gramps faded as he leaned against his old headboard and laughed. "Josephine, honey, I'm comin'." He hooted again and looked at Jake. "Son, I can see her."

Contentment settled in Jake. He returned the old man's grin and shoveled another pile into the hole. Gramps' spirit shimmered in the sunlight and Jake heard him whoop as his arms reached into the air.

It could have been his imagination but Jake would have sworn he saw a petite woman grasp his grandfather and lay a big one on his lips. "I love you," he heard a woman's gentle voice say, then Jake put another spade of dirt on the pile.

After a few more shovels, Gramps and his great-great grandmother faded completely.

A tear trickled down Jake's cheek and somewhere on the wind he thought he'd heard Gramps' voice sing, "I'll see you agin'."

Carefully, Jake smoothed the soil over the spot and stood. He looked at the neatly carved headstone he'd ordered. It sat next to the old wooden one. He sighed, relishing the one thing he had left of Gramps. His love.

The gentle caress of the breeze reached him again. Jake inhaled the winter smell of the grasslands. This was his world for now and he wouldn't live in it without the woman who'd become his partner in this life. He lifted his jaw, determined to find Marie again. If he had to, he'd take Jesse and leave Wyoming to start a new life with her.

Behind him, he heard a snuffle and the crunch of snow under feet. Startled, he turned then froze, thinking he'd seen another vision.

Less than thirty feet behind him stood Marie in the jeans he'd bought her. She bit her lip and twisted a tissue in her hand. The rims of her eyes were red and swollen. Slim grinned next to her. Katie stood several feet behind him under a tree. Slim nodded at Jake. "Trial was over yesterday. Nailed all of the ones that were here and at least made a dent in the organization. We got here as soon as we could. I'd hoped we wouldn't miss this."

The weight of Jake's worries evaporated. In a few steps he closed the gap between himself and Marie. He pulled her into his arms and she kissed him wildly. Jake held her like there was no tomorrow. He fingered her face, ran his hand through her hair. "I can't believe you're here," he whispered against her soft skin.

She giggled.

Convinced she was real, Jake lifted her off her feet and brought her mouth to his. His lips burned and hungered for her. He drank her in as if it were his first kiss. "You're here," he murmured against her moist lips. "You're really here."

She touched her soft mouth to his. "To stay." She ran her fingers over his cheek and pushed off his chest so she could look into his face. "That is, if my old job is still available." A twinkle shone in her eye.

He cuddled her closer and rubbed his nose against hers. "It is if you promise to love, honor and cherish me so I can do it back."

Marie's lips turned upward. Her cheeks flushed. "I hoped you'd say that." Her voice broke. She hugged his neck and kissed him hard.

"You two hungry or are we the only ones who realize we're on this planet?" Slim called to them as Katie chuckled. Marie smiled at him then they went to join the other couple.

The girls walked off, making plans. Slim strolled along beside Jake. "Took that job in Cheyenne," Slim started then shook his head as he watched Katie. "Don't know what we're getting into." He looked at Jake. A big grin spread across his face. "But I know I can't wait."

Jake nodded in agreement as Marie turned around and winked at him then sauntered her sexy behind down the road. For him, the wait was over. He glanced back at Gramps' resting place. "You go ahead, Slim."

Slim looked at him then back at the small burial plot. "You sure?"

"Yeah," he said and scanned the horizon, "I'll be right there."

Slim walked off.

Jake turned toward the gravesite and pushed his hands in his pockets. "Thanks, Gramps," he whispered.

"Yer welcome, son."

The airy sound vibrated. Jake glanced around as a breeze whistled through the trees then his eyes settled on Marie. She waited for him down the long drive. He ran to her and into her waiting arms. He brushed his lips down her temple to her cheek. When he brought his mouth to her lips, he murmured against her, "I love you, Marie. Forever."

Her eyes shone. "I love you, too, Jake. For all time."

He held her close with one arm and tilted her chin toward him with the hand of the other. "Marie, I know what kind of life you lived before you came here, how successful you were." He swallowed. "You know with my pay I can't offer you that. All I can give you is the love for our lifetimes. Are you sure you want this, to stay in Fort Bridger with me?" He peered into her eyes. He needed to know the truth.

The corners of her mouth twitched upward. "Jake Colder, you make it sound like I'll be a kept woman. Does this still mean you don't want me working at the diner?"

"No, I..." He didn't know what to say. He wanted her to be happy. "Only if you want. I told you once I'd do whatever you wanted to keep you here."

She reached up and kissed him. "Jake, all I want is you. Wherever you are, then that's where I want to be." She caressed his face with her fingertips. "You and Jesse are the family I've never had. That is more important to me than any fortune or glitz and glamour." Her eyes shone. "You've made me whole. Reminded me what life's about. Gramps was right. I need you. I don't want to live without you. Besides, if I want to start up my company again, I can do it here. With you." She quirked a brow. "Will you mind that? Because if I do, I'll be making a lot more than you will."

His anxiety fled. He cleared his throat and glanced away a minute, content inside. "Well, if it makes you happy." He couldn't help it. He grinned. "I guess my male ego can handle it. As long as I know you're mine."

She fingered his cheek. "Always, Jake."

He cradled her to him. "I'm never letting you go again," he warned then took her lips with his.

"And I never want you to." She choked as she whispered against his mouth. "I love you, Jake. So much."

He nodded. He knew how she felt. "Tell you what..." He pressed his forehead against hers. "Let's skip lunch. Katie and Slim will understand. There's someplace I want to take you."

"Where?" she squinted accusingly.

"If I told you, it wouldn't be a surprise." He swept her into his arms and carried her like a babe. She reacted by looping her hands behind his neck. "Have I ever told you I like holding you like this?" he asked.

She smiled. "No, Mister Colder, you haven't." She looked around. "So where are we going?"

"You'll see." Jake carried her along the path to the interior of the fort. "I've thought about this ever since—" He glanced at her. "Well, you'll find out soon enough."

She tugged against his neck as she pulled her face to his ear and nipped the lobe. "Sheriff, why am I getting this feeling that your intentions are not what they would call honorable?"

Her breath caressed him. He captured her mouth with his, savoring her, then he whispered against her sweet lips. "They will be when you marry me."

When he reached the gazebo, he held her tight and bounded up the stairs.

"Mmm," she twisted her mouth and suppressed a smile. "You want to dance again?"

He grabbed her rear and eased her down his body to her toes. He let her sexy form stroke the front of him then held her against him with the cheeks of her ass. "You could say that."

His hardened penis pressed against her.

Marie looked around then stared at him eyes wide open. "Here?" she squeaked.

He grinned. "You said outside and in public. I can't think of a better place."

"But...it's the middle of the day. What if somebody finds us? Jake, your position in the community..."

He interrupted her by squeezing her rear cheeks then nodded. "Guess that's a risk we'll have to take." He peered into her face. "I love you, Marie. You said you wanted to try this. I told you then I'd do whatever I had to in order to keep you."

"But..."

He kissed her to silence her protests. "I need you, Marie," he whispered between pecks. "I want to show you that."

She moaned and tilted her head. Her eyes fluttered shut. The sound of her arousal made his cock hard as a rock.

"Oh, Jake..." Her sex-laden voice made him bolder. He ran his palms down her back, leaned her over one of his arms and slid his hand to her front to cup her breast. His thumb flicked over the tip as he savored the skin of her exposed neck.

"Jake..." She rubbed her hips into him.

"I'm here," he murmured against her skin, "I'll always be here for you."

"Yes," she uttered as her breaths grew shallower and the tempo increased.

He toyed with the buttons on her shirt, teased her at first then popped the fasteners open. Her silky skin was like heaven to him. He eased his fingers under her bra and played with her nipples then tugged and pinched them ever so slightly, in the way he'd come to know she liked.

She sucked in a breath. He tucked the cup of the bra under her breast and pulled her flesh out then bent and took the tip in his mouth and laved it.

She mewed and pressed her pussy against him again. Jake slipped his hand to her crotch and rubbed over the vee a few times then hastened to undo her pants.

"Jake..." Her mouth nipped at his neck. "It's been too long."

"I know." His cock jumped. He slid his hand down the inside to her clit and rubbed. "God, Marie, you're so wet." He nibbled at the skin of her chin then her lips. "You know how much I love that about you? How wet you get? How you taste?"

Her eyes were heavy with lust. "You like my taste?"

"Hell yeah." He pulled her pants off her hips. Picking her up by her ass, he set her on the railing and lowered himself between her knees. "Hold onto my shoulders," he schooled her.

Her fingers gripped into him as he touched his mouth to her. "Mmm," she moaned again and arched her hips to his face.

He licked her, penetrated her with his tongue. He felt her shake, knew it was her body responding to him. "Use a hand to pull your breast, darlin'. I want to see them. I want to see you make love to them."

She did.

He watched her as he tongued her. He loved seeing the lines on her face while she was pleased. He clamped down on her legs to hold them in place and let her slip down a bit to lean against the rail. "Go ahead and use your other hand. Expose yourself to me."

She looked at him with heavy-lidded eyes, her lust thick in them. She released his other shoulder and parted her blouse. In moments, both breasts were exposed to the breeze. The warm air blew against them. The nubs pebbled. She ran her fingers over them, caressed and tugged at them. "Mmmm." She released a husky sigh again.

"God," he moaned himself. He'd have to take her soon or come in his pants.

Her wetness bloomed. Her musky scent grew thick. He inhaled her aroma then licked her, nipped on her clit and nibbled along her labia. When he'd sucked on both sides, he penetrated her with his tongue again. Her hips bucked against his mouth as he sucked her, thrust his tongue in and out of her and savored the taste of her.

"Oh Jake." She pulled at the shoulders of his shirt.

He stood. He was so needy he fumbled as he opened his belt and unzipped his pants. She was more than ready. He shoved into her. She took him. All of him. Ground her hips against his crotch as the muscles inside her vagina clenched around him.

He pumped her – hard. She cried louder with each pass.

"Jake," she panted as her climax spiraled upward. "God..." She buried her head in his shoulder to muffle her loud, sensual moans as she came.

Jake couldn't hold back anymore. He groaned right behind her, released his cum into her – made them one.

For a moment, they held each other like they were frozen together.

He was the first to ease back. He wanted to look at her. He smiled. "You're mine now, Marie. I hope you won't regret it."

She sputtered then smiled. "I never will, Jake." She stared into his eyes. "I love you."

He pressed his forehead to hers. "I know this is a hell of a way to ask. I should probably get on my knees but for some reason saying what I want to say and being inside you at the same time seems right." He bussed her lips with a light touch. "I love you, Marie. I'll love you forever. I have since the first time I saw you." He swallowed, taken by the light that shone in her eyes. "This is a formal plea from my heart," he whispered. "Will you marry me?"

Her eyes watered but this time Jake knew it was from happiness. "Yes, Jake. And I'm in for the forever part too."

He wrapped his arms around her and held her tight then took the lips she offered to him. "I want to get married as soon as I can get the paperwork done, if that's okay with you."

She nodded. "When are you going to tell Jesse?"

He smiled. A cool breeze blew. He pulled her blouse closed. "As soon as we're dressed and out of here. He should be home from school soon."

"Or sooner..." A voice on the wind muttered.

Jake jumped. Marie laughed. She wrapped her arms around him and laid a big kiss on his lips. "To forever, Jake."

Jake grinned like a kid. He knew a gleam shone in his eyes. "To forever, then."

He kissed her. When their bodies parted, he dressed her and she, him. And Jake knew he'd never be alone again.

About the Author

This award-winning author, after writing and producing a neighborhood play at the tender age of six (earning all of twenty cents), took a sabbatical of many years before she found the love of creative writing again. Now, having earned her MBA and CPA, and raised four children (three as a single parent), Lise brings her adventurous spirit and extensive experience to her captivating stories.

Lise has traveled to several countries, studying the cultures and enjoying native ways of life, and has explored our world from the watery depths of the Caribbean to the heights of the Rocky Mountains. Having married her hero, an ex-82nd Airborne paratrooper, she devotes her time to writing, educating the couple's thirteen-year-old and her own personal accomplishment—body sculpting.

The author welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her author bio page at www.ellorascave.com.

Tell Us What You Think

We appreciate hearing reader opinions about our books. You can e-mail us at Comments@EllorasCave.com.

Also by Lise Fuller

See Lise's mainstream fiction titles at Cerridwen Press (www.cerridwenpress.com).

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