

DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER ~ I

PEGGY HUNTER

DIAMONDS ARE FOREVER
BOOK 1:
DIAMOND IN THE
ROUGH

by

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Dedication

For Jo Jo.

You are, and will always be, a dear friend.
Thanks for putting up with my constant ranting
while I worked on the Diamond series.

Chapter 1

“What can I get ya?” the bartender asked.

“Scotch, neat,” Alexander Diamond replied as he leaned against the bar and looked out over the crowded ballroom.

When his drink arrived, Alex tossed a few bills on the counter. He snickered softly when the bartender tucked the bills into his pocket, ignoring the fact it was an open bar.

Money. It was always about money. Those who had it had no problem using it to get what they wanted. Those who didn’t had no problem taking it from those who did.

So what in hell am I doing here? He belonged at his father’s eightieth birthday party about as much as a toothache belonged in a toothpaste ad.

“I wish you would mingle.”

Alex glanced over his shoulder and saw his mother standing at the bar. *Oh yeah.* He suddenly remembered why he’d agreed to attend his father’s gala event. He drained his glass and plunked it down. He folded his arms on the bar. “I agreed to be here,” he said glibly as he nodded to the bartender, a silent signal for another drink. “I never said I’d mingle.”

When the bartender placed a glass of white wine in front of Elizabeth Diamond, she took a sip. “No matter how you

feel about him, Edward Diamond is your father. He deserves your respect.”

“My respect? Are you kidding?” Alex nodded his thanks to the bartender when his Scotch arrived. When he turned back, his mother had disappeared into the crowd.

Alex bit back a sarcastic laugh as he tipped his glass to his lips. Was his mother any better than the rest of them? She’d been divorced from the old man for almost twenty-five years yet she was still his lapdog. Why? Because Edward Diamond continued to give her money. Elizabeth lacked for nothing. The old man made sure of that when he dumped her for a younger woman.

Since Elizabeth married him for his money, the breakup was easy...as long as the money continued to flow. For Alex, his life went into a tailspin.

Alex drained his glass and set it on the bar. When the bartender picked up the empty glass and gazed at him, Alex shook his head. He’d done what his mother wanted; he’d come to his father’s birthday bash. There was no reason to stay one minute longer. Home beckoned; he hated being away for long.

“Alex!”

Fuck!

“How the hell are you?”

Alex smiled at his half-brother. “I’m good,” he said.

Zach slapped his shoulder and smiled widely. “Did you see the old man? Hard to believe he’s eighty.”

Two years younger than Alex, Zach was the product of his father’s short-lived second marriage. He was a nice enough

guy and had done well in their father's multimillion-dollar business in Toronto.

"Yeah," Alex said through clenched teeth. "Amazing."

"How are things on the ranch?" Zach asked.

"The ranch is doing well," Alex replied, "but suffers when I'm not there. I was just leaving."

Zach frowned. "You can't leave yet. Max is around here somewhere and wants to see you."

Five years younger than Alex, Max was the only son from his father's third, and even shorter, marriage. Alex had only met him once or twice over the years. They were strangers to each other.

Alex clapped his hand on his half-brother's shoulder. "I'd like that but I really have to go."

"Not just yet," Zach replied. "Give me time to find Max. He's been sniffing around Dad's administrative assistant so if I can spot her, he won't be too far away. Besides, you can't leave until you've talked to Dad."

Oh yes I can! He had no inclination to talk to his father.

"Stick around," Zach said.

Alex sighed heavily as Zach shouldered his way into the crowd. Okay, so he'd stay until Zach brought Max back. The least he could do was chat with his youngest half-brother.

Then, damn it, I'm out of here!

Alex turned back to the bar and smiled when he found another glass of Scotch sitting there. He leaned his elbows on the bar and took a sip of his drink.

"Is this seat taken?"

Alex's gaze slid over just in time to see the petite woman, with ridiculously blue eyes, scamper up onto the stool. "It is now," he replied, his eyes washing over her from the red stilettos on her feet to the long honey-colored hair that cascaded over her bare white shoulders. The strapless red sequined dress she wore accentuated her breasts and cinched tightly around her tiny waist. Though Alex didn't want to acknowledge the fact, his cock stirred and tightened against the fly of his pants.

Alex offered a lazy smile. "I'm Alex."

She nodded. "Leigh-Ann," she supplied. "But my friends just call me Leigh."

"Am I a friend?"

Delicate shoulders shrugged. "I guess you could be."

"All right, Leigh." He hesitated to give her an opportunity to protest. When she didn't, he went on. "Can I get you a drink?"

"No thank you," she replied politely.

Alex shrugged and turned his attention back to his drink.

"But there is something you could do for me."

Alex's gaze went back to her. "What's that?" he asked as he raised his drink to his lips.

"Will you fuck me?"

Alex struggled not to spit the Scotch out of his mouth. He raised his fist to his lips as he choked down the fiery liquid. Satisfied that it went down, Alex gasped for air and turned to the woman. "Excuse me; I think I misunderstood what you just said—"

Leigh cocked her head to one side as she gazed up at him; her blue eyes darkened slightly. "I don't think so."

"But I thought you asked me to..." his voice trailed off.

"Fuck me," she said. "Yes, I did."

Alex snorted. "Is this some kind of joke?"

"Not at all," she replied nonchalantly. "I'm surprised you'd ask. Most men would jump at the chance. God knows, I've been hit on enough tonight," she said in disgust.

"So you figured you'd hit on me?"

She shrugged. "Why not?"

"Have you considered the fact I might be in a relationship?"

"If you are, it's news to me."

Who the hell was this woman anyway? "You know me?"

"I know *of* you," she supplied. "You're Edward Diamond's eldest son. You own a ranch in Manitoba."

Alex's eyes narrowed as he looked at her. He ignored the fact his cock was in overdrive. "Go on."

"You're a loner. You don't like complications, hence the fact you aren't involved with the family business. That's not to say you don't enjoy the company of women, but you prefer to keep it casual." She hesitated. "How much more do you want to know?"

All right. She had him pegged. But what of her reasons? "Why do you think I'd want to fuck you?"

Long eyelashes fluttered. "I don't. That's why I asked."

Alex watched her closely, looking for any signs of deception. She was a beautiful thing, could probably have any man here tonight. So why target him? There had to be more going

on inside that pretty little head than she was willing to admit to.

That was his sensible side. The side that told him to be careful, very careful, when it came to being anywhere near his father. There was no telling what the old man was capable of. He'd pulled many stunts in a bid to bring Alex back to the fold...to where the old man could keep his thumb on him.

Still, there was something different about this woman. No doubt, she had an agenda but he knew instinctively his father had nothing to do with it. And Alex could not ignore just how alluring she was. His cock hardened the moment he heard her soft, almost lyrical voice. He imagined his mouth on hers, his hands on her breasts, and her legs wide open for him as he rammed his cock inside her moist pussy.

But still...

"Look, Leigh-Ann," he began, "you'll have to forgive me for being hesitant. I'm not used to women approaching me like this—"

Blue eyes blazed as she popped off the barstool. "It's Leigh-Ann now, is it? So much for thinking of you as a friend."

"Well, shit, I don't even know you."

She poked a finger into his chest. "Be honest," she said. "You just don't like a woman approaching you. Alexander Diamond prefers to think of himself as the hunter...the one who bags women. God forbid a woman should make the first move."

Well, okay, Alex had to concede she was partly right. He liked being the alpha male but that whole hunter thing was

way off-base. "Look, don't get all freaked out on me," he said, hoping to calm her down.

"I'm not freaked out," she said tightly. "I'm just sorry you're reading more into this than you should." Alex noticed her gaze went to the crowd. Her eyes darted back to him. Clearly nervous, she offered a strained smile. "I've got to go," she said.

Alex frowned. "Wait a minute," he said. He wasn't ready to let her disappear just yet. But she was already fading into the crowd.

Damn! Alex sighed as he signaled the bartender for another drink. He had a sinking feeling this was going to be one long night.

"Hey, bro!" Zach said as he slapped Alex on the back. "Told you I'd find Max."

Alex turned toward Zach and his kid brother. He stopped short when he saw Max's arm draped around Leigh. She looked stressed; the smile on her face didn't reach those incredible blue eyes. "Good to see you, brother," Max said jovially. "Hell of a party for Dad, huh?"

"You could say that." Truth be told, he'd had enough of dear ol' Dad's party long ago. He'd have left if it hadn't been for the petite blonde his youngest brother was now holding close.

"Have you met Leigh-Ann Percival?" Max asked as his arm flexed, forcing her into a tight hug.

"She almost got away on us," Zach said, "but Max caught her just as she was going to disappear into the crowd."

Alex gazed at Leigh, noting she kept her eyes focused on the floor.

"She's Dad's administrative assistant," Max supplied. "And she's damn good at her job. If you want something, just ask Leigh-Ann."

Her friends called her Leigh. Clearly, Max wasn't considered one of them. Why? There was no mistaking that he liked her...a lot.

At twenty-nine, Max was second only to his brother, Zach, as the most eligible bachelor in Toronto. Women fell at his feet on a daily basis. Why wouldn't Leigh want Max in her bed? And why would she choose Edward Diamond's most elusive son to hit on?

There was more to this story than she'd been willing to share and Alex decided to stick around to find out just what she was up to. Judging by the way she was squirming, she wanted to escape his youngest brother's grasp. Alex's interest in the lovely woman deepened. He wasn't about to let her get away now.

"Leigh," he said, smiling widely. "The stool you vacated is still available. Have a seat."

Max looked astonished. "You've already met?"

"Yes," Alex replied. "We chatted earlier."

"I'd really rather not," she said as Max finally released his hold on her. "In fact, I'm sure Mr. Diamond needs me."

When she would have backed away, Alex grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him. "Nonsense. I'm sure Dad can manage without you for a few minutes."

With his grip on her arm and his brothers blocking her path, Leigh had no choice but to take a seat on the stool beside him. His hand fell from her arm to her thigh, careful to keep his touch light but making sure she knew she was to stay put.

“Shit, Alex,” Max said. “So fucking good to see you. It’s been what? Two or three years?”

“I wasn’t keeping track,” Alex replied, “but yeah, it’s been awhile.”

He’d had no inclination to keep up with his half-brothers. When, at twenty, his father delivered an ultimatum, either he remain a part of the Diamond Empire or walk away with nothing, Alex chose to walk away. He had no interest in keeping the ties that bound him to the Diamond fold. When he bought the ranch in Manitoba, he’d severed all ties with his father and, as a result, with his half-brothers as well.

His hand warmed as he continued to hold Leigh in place on her stool. Her skin heated under his touch, driving him to look at her. When his gaze collided with hers, he couldn’t help but notice the strained look on her face.

He leaned over and whispered into her ear, “Are you okay?”

“No,” she replied. “I want to get out of here. The sooner, the better.”

“Do you still want me to fuck you?”

Leigh winced. “I hate that word.”

Alex frowned. “What word?”

Leigh’s face pinched, her face flushed to a beautiful pink. “That word. Fuck.”

Alex chuckled. “You’re the one who said it first.”

“I know,” she said. “I just wanted to get your attention.”

“You got it,” he replied. “But I want to know if you meant it.”

“At this point, I’m willing to negotiate,” she said. “Just get me out of here.”

“All right,” he said as a slow song began to play. “Just follow my lead.”

Chapter 2

Leigh's head swam as Alex grabbed her hand and pulled her off the stool.

"You don't mind if I dance with the little lady, do you?"

Zach shook his head but Max's face clouded. If Alex noticed his youngest brother's displeasure, he ignored it as he led her onto the crowded dance floor.

She'd have kept walking, right out the door, if it hadn't been for his hand tightening on hers and then swinging her into his arms. Leigh thought vaguely that the moment might be very romantic if it hadn't been for the fact she'd had way too much to drink. Not to mention the fact she'd asked Alexander Diamond to fuck her. She'd fully expected him to push her away in disgust.

So, why was her employer's eldest son holding her so close? This wasn't how she expected it would be. And it wasn't supposed to feel quite this good either.

Leigh's head whirled as Alex placed a firm hand on the small of her back while the other wrapped around her fingers. As they swayed to the music, Leigh rested her head on his chest, hoping she'd finally get a grip of her senses. His rock-hard chest offered no comfort; in fact, it only served to make her head swim a little more.

She tilted her head back and looked up at him. Towering over her five-foot-four frame, he could easily have rested his chin on top of her head. His deep-set dark brown eyes...in the dimly lit ballroom, they almost looked black...were focused ahead of him.

There was no mistaking the fact that he, Max and Zach were brothers. They had the same chiseled features, the long, angular nose, high cheekbones and firm jaw. But Alex's face was more rugged, almost weather-worn. Deep lines framed his eyes. She imagined the lines would deepen when he smiled. Hard to tell since, at the moment, he neither smiled nor frowned. His lips were in a straight, noncommittal line. Not quite bored but not exactly content.

Unlike his half-brothers, Alex's hair was light brown with sun-bleached highlights. Cropped short and combed back from his face, there was no mistaking the fact his hair was as unruly as his reputation.

Alexander Diamond, eldest son of the famed and formidable Edward Diamond, unruly, temperamental and very much his own man. Even his father, whose reach was far and wide, could not control him. He was something of a legend within Diamond Industries, where Leigh worked as Edward's administrative assistant.

Administrative assistant. Hah! What a lark! It was her job title but she tended to the old man's every whim, making things right when he deemed them wrong. Her job was all-consuming. It wasn't unusual to get a call from Edward at two in the morning. He depended on her for everything.

Edward!

Leigh suddenly landed in the here and now. She'd been away from his table at least half an hour, maybe more. If Edward hadn't missed her, his fifth wife most certainly would. The end of the song came with a certain measure of relief. Not only was it an opportunity to escape Alex's grasp, but it also meant she could check in with her boss.

As the music faded, Leigh stepped back. "Thanks for the dance," she said.

But Alex's hold on her didn't diminish. Instead, his dark eyes finally looked down at her. He cocked his head to one side as his dark gaze burrowed into her soul. "I believe we have something to discuss," he said, his deep voice sending shivers down her spine.

"No, we don't," Leigh said nervously, "and I really need to get back to your father's table."

Alex ignored her words and continued to hold her closely. When the next song began, another slow one, he began to sway to the music, dragging her with him every step of the way. "Edward will be fine without you for a little longer," Alex replied. "There's something we need to talk about."

"If you mean what I said earlier—"

"You asked if I wanted to fuck you," Alex cut in.

Oh Lord! "Well, yeah, that," she stammered. "I was just joking. You know how it goes."

Leigh's heart almost stopped when Alex smiled. The lines around his eyes really did deepen. "I guess I don't know how it goes. I didn't get the impression you were joking."

"Well, of course I was," she replied nervously. "I mean, come on, why would I just ask you something like that out of the blue? I don't even know you."

He nodded lightly as he whirled her on the dance floor. "So you weren't serious."

"No...I mean yes." Leigh grappled with her thoughts. "Yes, I wasn't serious." Did that make sense? She wasn't sure.

"Did you consider the fact I might have taken you seriously?"

"Well, no," she replied.

"Yes."

Leigh blinked. "Yes?"

"Yes," he said firmly as his hand slid from the small of her back and gently cupped her butt. He pulled her against his rock-hard thighs. He leaned his head down, softly nuzzling her cheek. Her body sizzled as his lips slowly glided over her skin to her ear. "I want to fuck you," he whispered.

Leigh froze. She couldn't have heard him right. She had to be mistaken. Yet, a warm sting began in the pit of her stomach and quickly spread south to her core. Alex's fingers tightened over her hand, reminding her of his strength.

She looked up at his handsome face. Another quake rippled through her body as he smiled down at her. She struggled to ignore the need she felt deep in her soul. "This is a mistake," she said, hardly able to recognize her own voice. "I mean..." She hesitated. How could she explain it was a ruse in an effort to spurn his younger brother's advances? "I didn't intend for you to take me seriously."

When the song ended, Alex released his hold. He took a step back and reached into his pocket. He grabbed her hand and pressed a keycard into her palm. The plastic felt cool against her heated skin as his gaze slid over her. "Room 620," he said.

Leigh stared at him, her mind a complete blank. She knew she should respond, but the heat of his touch muddled her brain. *And oh, that smile.* It was all she could do not to melt against him on the dance floor and beg him to take her right there.

His chest shook softly as he closed her fingers over the keycard. "Don't lose it," he said.

Lose it? Did he have any idea just how close she was right now? "No...no," she stammered.

When she continued to look at him, he placed his hands on her shoulders and whirled her around. He leaned over her shoulder and whispered in her ear, "Go tend to Edward's needs. I'll be waiting for you when the party's over." With that, he gave her a gentle push and Leigh was suddenly propelled forward, one foot falling in front of the other as she numbly walked through the crowd toward her boss' table.

Leigh's mind cleared with every step she took. By the time she reached the table, she was wondering why she'd allowed Edward's eldest son to run roughshod over her so easily. Sure, Alexander Diamond was sexy as hell...her skin still sizzled where he touched her...but he was a Diamond.

Granted, he seemed a lot different than the rest of the Diamond family, rugged and down to earth. But the last thing Leigh needed was to become entangled with any of her boss'

family. She'd gone to great lengths to avoid Max Diamond's advances. In fact, she'd hoped propositioning Alexander would filter down to Max and thereby turn him off. Instead, the eldest Diamond son had taken her seriously and appeared to be interested...very interested.

Alex's spicy cologne still messed with her senses. Her body still sizzled. And, oh man, she had to admit the very idea of being alone with the man made her shiver with anticipation.

"Where in the hell have you been?" Samantha Diamond shrieked when Leigh finally made it back to the table. "We're ready for fresh drinks and I might have had to go to the bar on my own."

"Now, now, Sammie," Edward said as he patted his twenty-five-year-old wife's hand. "Don't get yourself all upset. Leigh has the right to enjoy the evening as well."

The bleach blonde's collagen-filled lips pouted. Her surgically enhanced breasts almost burst from the skimpy sequined gown when she took a deep breath. "But, Eddie," she said sorrowfully, "you know I don't like to leave your side for a minute. If Leigh doesn't refresh our drinks, who will?"

Gee, how about a waiter, you brainless twit?

Leigh smiled at her boss. "I don't mind getting you another drink, Mr. Diamond."

He shook his head. "Not for me," he replied. "I think I'll call it a night."

"Oh no," Samantha whined loudly. "I'm just starting to have fun."

He patted his wife on her hand again. "I know, Sammie. But I'm not as young as I used to be. I need to turn in."

No, he wasn't as young as he used to be...but his new wife was young enough to be his granddaughter. As much as Leigh despised Samantha Diamond, she understood why the young woman wasn't ready to turn in just yet. Damned if Leigh could figure out why she suddenly felt sorry for Samantha. "I'll make sure she gets home safely, Mr. Diamond."

Samantha's eyes brightened as Edward's darkened. Leigh knew the look...one screw up and she'd be out on her ass. But Leigh had no intention of screwing up. In fact, it served her purpose well. If she had to watch over her boss' new wife for the rest of the night, there was no way his eldest son could expect her to appear in his suite.

"All right," Edward said.

"Yay!" Samantha cried gleefully as she clapped her hands in a childlike manner. Leigh knew she'd probably taken on more than she could handle but, in the end, it would be worth it.

The moment Edward left the table, Samantha turned to her. "Get me a margarita, Lisa."

"My name is Leigh."

The young woman frowned. "Do I look like I care what your fucking name is? Just get my drink."

Leigh growled inwardly as she turned on her heel and made her way to the bar. She looked left and right, ahead and behind...Alex Diamond was nowhere in sight. She let a relieved breath out as she ordered Samantha's drink.

When the drink arrived, Leigh nodded her thanks to the bartender and made her way through the crowd back to the table. She knew she should be relieved she hadn't seen Alex, but she couldn't help the feeling of disappointment. In spite of herself, she did want to see him again...and her body quaked at the thought of the invitation to his suite. To feel his hands on her body, to feel his lips caress her throat...

"Shit, Lisa! It's about time!"

Leigh was drawn from her erotic fantasy when Samantha tore the margarita from her hand.

Oh! Leigh struggled to keep her temper in check. Samantha was completely impossible. Leigh bit her lower lip as she took a seat at the table. She glanced across the table just in time to see Samantha drain her drink. The woman smiled as she placed the glass on the table and cocked her head to one side. "Guess I need another one, Lisa."

After working for Edward Diamond for a few years, Leigh thought she'd dealt with it all. But the old man's new wife continually stroked her the wrong way. Shouldn't Samantha be grateful she'd offered to make sure she got home safely after the old man decided to retire early? Wasn't it enough she'd moved heaven and earth to accommodate the woman? Did Samantha really think she could use her in that manner and not get told about it?

Everything inside Leigh seemed to come to a head. It was bad enough she had to see to her boss' every whim on a daily basis but now she was expected to serve his spoiled wife as well!

Oh, I don't fucking think so.

Leigh rose from the table, her eyes hammering into the young woman. "Listen, Samantha," she said tightly, "I've made every effort to be nice to you but I'm sick of—"

Leigh was suddenly pushed aside, the harsh words for her employer's young wife left unsaid. "Sammie!" Alex leaned over the table and grasped her hand. "We haven't met. I'm Alexander, your husband's oldest son."

Samantha's eyes washed over him, appreciating every sinew of his body. She offered a feline smile. "So glad to finally meet you," she purred. "And what a handsome stepson I have too."

Alex smiled as he reached down to cup her hand. "Allow me to escort you to the bar to get another drink." His gaze fell on Leigh briefly as Samantha rose from her chair. Leigh felt her body stiffen and sizzle before Alex looked back at his stepmother.

Samantha smiled widely as she allowed Alex to draw her from the table. "That's so kind of you," she purred as she let him lead her away.

Alex's eyes caught Leigh's before he led Samantha away. If his father's new bride was being treated like a spoiled feline, Leigh felt as though she was the much maligned dog.

Sit. Stay.

Leigh sighed heavily as she plunked down onto a chair at the now empty table. All that was missing was the treat placed upon her nose in an effort to show her uncanny restraint and her master's will over her.

Leigh's blood came to a slow boil as she sat alone. Who the hell did Alex think he was anyway? Wasn't it bad enough

that she spent her days ordered around by his father? Why in the hell should she take it from his son...especially the one who'd walked away from his family a few years ago?

Leigh placed her small beaded purse on the table and opened it in search of a pill for the headache forming over her eyes. When her fingers touched hard plastic, she peered into her purse. Alex's hotel room keycard. She picked it out of her purse and looked at it. How could she have forgotten? Alex was trying to get rid of Samantha so she'd be free to have sex with him.

What was she thinking? Why had she allowed Alex to lead Samantha away when her boss was depending on her to keep an eye on his new wife?

Just as Leigh rose from the table, Alex appeared. He smiled down at her, almost as though he'd seen that she hadn't eaten the treat he'd placed on her nose. She wanted to slap him, to show him she was not about to give in to his will anytime soon.

"Where's Samantha?" Leigh asked, her voice firm and demanding.

"Some guy at the bar asked her to dance," Alex supplied as he pointed to the dance floor. "Look, she's right there."

Leigh sighed with relief when she saw her boss' wife dancing the *Macarana*. She had mixed feelings about Samantha dancing with a stranger. She gazed up at Alex sourly as he sat down beside her. "Is that supposed to make me feel better?"

A broad grin split his handsome face. "No," he replied. "Making you feel better is my job." He grasped her hand and

held it tightly. Leigh was acutely aware of his strength as his work-roughened hand caressed hers.

Making you feel better is my job. How lame was that? If anyone else had said those words, Leigh would have laughed hysterically.

But this was Alex. And in spite of the statement, she simply could not resist him. The idea of being in his arms made her body sizzle with a kind of need she hadn't felt in years. Surely she could leave Samantha on her own for just a few minutes.

"I'm angry with you," she said, knowing her soft voice would not convince him.

Alex frowned. He lifted her hand to his lips and gently kissed her wrist. Leigh closed her eyes, sighing softly. His touch did something to her, something she knew she shouldn't want and yet...

"What are you trying to do to me?" Leigh asked weakly.

Alex pulled his mouth away from her hand and smiled wickedly. "Making sure you'll use the key I gave you."

Leigh gazed at him, her body trembling with need. "This is crazy. I don't even know you."

Her heart tightened when Alex smiled. She wanted to touch the crinkles around his eyes. "You started it when you asked me to—"

Leigh's hand went to his mouth to silence him. "I know," she said. "But I had a reason for it."

Alex nodded lightly as he held her hand to his lips. He gently kissed each finger. "Yeah, I know. And it worked. You managed to chase Max off. But you lured me in."

He knew. She liked Max Diamond but his recent attention could only mean disaster for her as his father's personal assistant. But was Alex any safer? "I didn't intend to."

"But you don't regret it."

Leigh wanted to lie. She knew she should have lied. But his lips against her wrist made promises of delights she had only dreamed of. She wanted Alex more than she'd ever wanted any man in her life.

What harm could possibly come from following her instincts? In the morning, Alex Diamond would be on a plane heading back to his ranch in Manitoba. She'd never hear from him again and life would continue as it always had.

"No," she said finally. "I don't think I do."

Leigh's body sizzled when Alex's dark brown eyes penetrated hers. He released her hand and slowly rose from the table. "This old rancher needs to turn in," he said. "I've got an early flight in the morning."

Leigh stared up at him. "Oh," she said, trying to cover her disappointment. "Well, it was really nice to meet you."

Alex's eyes darkened. "You didn't lose the key to my room, did you?"

"No, it's in my purse but—"

"Then maybe our paths will cross again." Alex's gaze was intense as his eyes raked over her.

Leigh's mouth went dry. He wanted her as much as she wanted him. A man like Alexander Diamond, virile and sexy as hell, actually showed an interest in her. Every fiber of her being went on full alert...her nipples hardened, her core moistened.

Still...

"I have to make sure Samantha gets home safely," she said regretfully.

"Yes. Of course you do," he said, with a certain measure of bitterness in his voice. "My father's needs always come before anyone else's."

Leigh wasn't sure how to respond. But Alex didn't seem to expect her to reply. He quickly walked away, leaving Leigh watching after him, her mind a muddled mess, and her body aching for his touch.

As she watched Alex disappear through the ballroom doors, her heart sank to her toes. She'd never see him again, never feel his hands on her again. She felt abandoned...and used. Alex had been playing a game with her all along...tempting her to the point where she could barely think straight.

The moment Alex disappeared, Leigh went in search of Samantha. The sooner she got the woman in a taxi for home, the sooner she could...well, decide if she would go to Alex's suite.

She quickly spotted Samantha by the bar, the man she'd been dancing with was almost plastered to her. Leigh gingerly tapped Samantha on the shoulder. "Hey."

Samantha peered over her shoulder and, when she recognized Leigh, turned around completely. "Hey, it's Louise."

Leigh bit her tongue. What was the point of telling the bimbo her name again? "Yeah," she replied glibly. "It's time for you to go home."

Collegened lips pouted. “Oh, but I’m not ready yet.” Samantha turned her attention to the man on the other side of her. “Jeff said he’d like to take me to view the hotel gardens.” She gave Leigh a pointed smile. “Apparently, there’s a full moon tonight and the gardens are simply breathtaking.”

Leigh sighed. “I’m sure they are but Edward asked me to get you home safely.”

“Edward?” Samantha laughed. “His teeth are in a cup by the bathroom sink by eight every night.” Then the woman leaned in closer, speaking words meant for only Leigh’s ears. “I hate it when he gums my tits.”

Leigh reeled back. *Way too much information!* “Look, Samantha,” she said tightly, “I’ve been told—”

“I’m a big girl,” Samantha fired back. “I’ll get there when I’m good and ready. Besides, I can’t believe you’d let my hunky stepson leave so easily. If I were you, I’d be going after him. I’d fuck him myself if he wasn’t for the *ick* factor.”

Well, maybe Samantha had a redeeming quality after all. “I can imagine it would be too weird to have sex with your husband’s son.”

“What?” Samantha reeled back, her body shaking with laughter. “I don’t have a problem with him being Edward’s son. I’d fuck Zack and Max in a second.”

Leigh’s body shuddered at Samantha’s blatant revelation. How could she be so stupid? Didn’t she know the paparazzi were everywhere? Leigh knew she should shut this conversation down right this moment. In fact, it was her job to do so. But curiosity got the better of her. She simply could not im-

agine why anyone would not want Alexander Diamond. "What's the difference between Alex and his brothers?"

Samantha's eyes glistened. She leaned back and closed her eyes. It was then Leigh noticed that Jeff was stroking her back, his hand slowly lowering until he kneaded her ass. She hummed softly before she replied. "I never fuck losers."

"Excuse me?" Leigh asked, unsure of what she'd heard.

Samantha offered her a wide grin. "I never fuck anyone if they don't have money," she said. "And, come on, Eddie's oldest son is sexy as hell but we all know he's penniless. Eddie made sure of that when he walked away from Diamond Industries."

Leigh wasn't sure why she was surprised by Samantha's statement. Of course she was all about money. After all, why would a twenty-something woman marry an eighty-year-old man? Leigh supposed she'd expected Samantha to be a little coy about her needs. The fact she had no problem sharing with Leigh made her very uncomfortable. How was she supposed to look her boss in the face on Monday morning knowing what his young wife had been up to after he'd left his birthday party?

"What's keeping you here?"

"Uhm, what?" Leigh tried to focus on the here and now.

"I saw how farm boy leered at you all night. Why haven't you gone after him?"

The words struck Leigh on her blindside. Thrown off kilter, she peered at Samantha. "I don't understand—"

Samantha rolled her eyes. "The man wants to fuck your brains out, stupid!" She turned to Jeff, laying gentle, sugges-

tive kisses on each of his lips before she rested her gaze on Leigh again.

Leigh blinked at her boss' wife. Oh, she hated *that* word. Still couldn't believe she'd had the guts to say it out loud when she met Alex.

But desperate times called for desperate measures. Maxwell Diamond was putting too much pressure on her for what he thought would be a one-night roll in the hay. While she liked him well enough, he didn't appeal to her in that way and certainly wasn't worth losing her job over. Leigh had hoped by approaching Alexander, word would filter down to Max and thereby turn him off.

She certainly hadn't expected Alex's response and, she was loathe to admit, the sudden need she felt. What harm would come from simply slipping away for a little while? Going to his suite...

No!

"Edward insisted I see you home safely," she said.

Samantha chuckled. Leigh wasn't sure if it was her words that caused the soft laugh or the fact Jeff was nibbling on Samantha's neck. "Look, Lena," she said as her head fell back, allowing Jeff access to her flesh. "I'm sure you can see that I'm not ready to go home yet. It's only midnight. Meet me in the lobby in two hours and I'll let you take me home. In the meantime, you're cramping my style, so get lost."

Chapter 3

Alex's body had been in overdrive from the moment he left Leigh in the grand ballroom. He couldn't remember when he'd wanted a woman more. He especially hated that he lay in bed, his cock ripe and aching, hoping she'd use the keycard he'd given her.

What was it about Leigh-Ann Percival that filled him with a need he'd never known before? He lay in the dark, trying to figure it out. It wasn't that he lacked women to screw. There'd always been a long line for him to pick from, women who wanted his devotion but were willing to settle for sex. Each and every one fed his carnal needs over the years.

The *Diamond A Ranch* filled all his other needs in the years since he'd left his father behind. He had the companionship of his foreman, Del and the other ranch hands. And then there was Mona, his housekeeper who was there to put breakfast on the table and left just after dinner.

And, when the human race disgusted him, his two border collies, Rex and Duke, offered quiet support. What more could a man ask for?

Nothing. Nothing!

So why was he waiting for Leigh? What was it about her that made him want her so damn much?

The moment he heard the soft click of the door opening, all questions left his mind. She had come. The suite was completely dark and while she made no sound, his senses were filled with her unique scent.

He lay in bed, his ears in tune with the gentle sounds her feet made as she walked into the suite and across the room. She was coming toward the bedroom. *Yes!* Soon he'd own her, body and soul. Just a few more steps...just a few more...

"Come into my lair said the spider to the fly."

Alex was drawn from his thoughts when he heard a loud thump followed by a low oath.

"Shit!"

He sprang from the bed and ran into the living room. "Leigh?"

"Yes," she moaned.

His hand hit a switch that illuminated the living room and found her standing over the large oak coffee table, rubbing her shins. She glared at him. "Would it have killed you to leave a light on?"

Alex grinned as he leaned against the doorjamb. "I wasn't sure you'd show up."

Leigh offered a wry smile as she rounded the coffee table and tossed herself down on the overstuffed leather sofa. "Well, it seems I have a couple hours to kill while your stepmother has some fun," she said.

Thank you, stepmother number five.

Alex watched as she kicked off her stilettos and put her feet on the massive coffee table.

He walked through the living room toward her. "So you figured you could kill some time here."

"Yeah," she said. She ignored him while she leaned over to rub her shins. "Figured I might as well put in a couple hours here since I really had nowhere else to go."

Alex rounded the coffee table and stood in front of her. He placed his hands on his hips as he gazed down at her. "Glad I could help. Do you still want me to fuck you?"

Leigh's face soured as she pulled her legs off the coffee table and planted them on the floor. She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I told you I hate that word."

And then her eyes lifted and looked at him. First at his legs, then her gaze skittered over his erection to his chest. When her gaze met his, her eyes were the color of the deep blue sea. He offered her a reassuring smile, letting her know he wanted her to look at him. Her eyes slowly slid down his body again and this time, gazed at his cock.

"Oh," she gasped barely able to catch her breath. "You're naked."

"Is that a problem?"

Leigh struggled to draw her eyes from his cock. She sat back on the sofa, clearly forcing herself to drag her gaze from his groin to his face. "No," she said nervously. "I mean, it's your room so you can dress any way you like. Or, I guess I should say, you can be naked if you want and it's none of my business. I mean, it's not for me to say what you should wear," her eyes fell to his cock again and swallowed hard before she continued weakly, "or not wear."

Alex chuckled softly. Women usually loved to see him naked and were always quick to tear off their own clothes so the fun could begin. Even though he'd surprised her by being naked, he hadn't expected Leigh's nervous reaction. But he had to admit, he liked it. He liked it a lot.

"Seems to me that you're a little overdressed for the occasion," he said as he brushed the coffee table aside with his leg and moved toward her. He loved the look of uncertainty in her eyes as he grabbed her hands and pulled her up. When she would have protested, Alex placed his finger under her chin to tilt her head up and then covered her lips with his. She melted against him, her hands splaying on his chest, as his mouth explored hers.

She gasped softly when his fingers located the zipper on the back of her gown and pulled it down. He pulled back slightly to watch the fabric fall away from her and pool at her feet. His eyes raked over the red strapless bra and matching bikini panties. He bit back the urge to tear them away with his teeth. Leigh needed tender hands to coax her to give all she had and he was determined to do just that.

When Leigh's head fell back, her long honey blond hair cascading behind her, Alex touched his lips to hers as his fingers found the hooks of her bra. He slowly picked at the hooks until they finally gave way. Letting her bra fall to the floor with her gown, he took a step back and gazed at her breasts. They were smaller than he preferred. As a rule, Alex liked big breasts, the kind he could hang onto while he fucked a woman. Leigh's were barely a handful...a bit of a disappointment.

But when his hands covered them, her nipples came alive in his palms, begging to be kneaded and stroked. She sighed when he caught the tips between his fingers and pinched them. They grew tighter under his touch and Leigh gasped when he tore his mouth from hers and gently suckled one.

Her hands slid over his chest and down his torso. He moaned when he felt her fingers slide over his engorged cock. The touch was tentative at first, as though she wasn't sure about his reaction. But when his cock hardened even more, the strokes became more assured, stronger and urgent.

Alex pushed her down on the couch. Her eyes brightened as his fingers grabbed her panties and pulled them away. He fell to his knees in front of her and ignored her shocked gasp as his hands pushed at her thighs.

"You're moving too fast," Leigh said, her voice coming in small gasps.

Alex knew she was right. He was pushing her too hard. But his need was great and he wanted to see all of her. He couldn't think of a single word to say to reassure her. Instead, he pulled his hands off her, splaying them in the air as he leaned his face to hers and covered her mouth with his. Her lips parted and his tongue darted inside, kissing her sensuously. When her arms wrapped around his shoulders to pull him closer, Alex moved his hands to her waist. One hand slipped up to caress her breast while the other moved back between her thighs.

Leigh moaned softly when his fingers grazed her thigh and then skittered over her core. She threw back her head and arched her back, lifting her hips for his touch.

Alex's cock ached with the need to fill her. He was growing tired of playing the cat and mouse game. So much so that he was in no mood to stroke her into submission anymore. When she arched her hips in a silent signal that she wanted his touch, he moved in for the kill. His thumb stroked her clit just a couple times before he pushed a finger into her moist core. When she gasped and lifted her hips to receive him, he quickly placed a second finger, and then a third into her. Her head thrashed back and forth, her hair flying around her face, as he stroked his long fingers inside her, pushing into her as far as he could.

He wanted to taste her, to bury his face in her core, but his cock was too needy. He pulled his fingers out and braced his hands on her hips, pressing his cock against her moist core. The moment he pushed his cock into her, she cried out...this time not in pleasure but in pain.

Alex stopped though his cock wanted him to press forward. "What's wrong?"

Leigh grappled to get her breath. "You're too big," she said finally. "You'll rip me to shreds."

Alex fell back on his haunches, taking deep breaths in an effort to contain his need. He knew he'd fit her pussy but he have to take a different approach to assure Leigh of it.

Alex moved onto the sofa beside her. "Climb on top of me," he demanded.

Leigh gazed at him with unsure eyes. "How will that help?"

"Trust me," he said as he pulled her over him. "Sink over my cock slowly; if it hurts, raise up."

Leigh braced her hands on his shoulders, her small breasts dangling just above his mouth as she splayed her legs on either side of him. "Like this?"

"Yeah," Alex replied, quelling the urge to grab her hips and force her down on his cock. "Now just lower yourself until you feel my cock against your pussy."

Leigh's eyes never left his as she slowly lowered herself over him. The moment his cock touched her moist portal, she stopped.

"Push down a little more."

She did, and his cock opened her slightly.

"Now a little more."

She lowered another inch. Her eyes closed; her lips parted.

Alex wasn't sure how much more he could take. He gritted his teeth in an effort to keep from driving his cock up into her. "Okay," he said, his voice strained with need. "You're doing great. Now just let yourself come down all the way so I can fill you completely."

Leigh did as she was told. Her face contorted. "Oh!"

Alex's cock felt like it would explode if he didn't move it in Leigh's tight depths. His hands gripped her hips and pulled her down over him. Leigh's body contracted, tightening around his cock as he rocked his hips, first up and down and then side to side. Leigh's tiny breasts hovered just over his face as she rocked on top of him. Alex opened his mouth, attempting to catch a nipple but her rapid movements kept him from meeting his goal. It wasn't until he lifted one hand from her hips to grab one of her breasts that he was finally able to

wrap his lips around her nipple and suckle as his hips continued to pound against her.

He could feel the intensity build in her body with every stroke. He knew she was close to orgasm. And this was a good thing since he realized his body was about to erupt as well.

Alex could feel the tension building. She moaned louder, her head thrashed back and forth and her pussy tightened around him with each stroke.

He wanted her to tumble into orgasm first before he gave himself up to it. Alex's hand left her breast and circled her neck. His pulled her face down to him and opened his mouth over hers. While he kissed her deeply, his hands went to her hips, pulling her down hard against him as his hips rose. The tension built even more. Her pussy contracted around him.

Just as Alex thought both he and Leigh would climax, she tore away from him. She fell to his side on the sofa, her body quivering. His abandoned cock had gone too far to stop now. It spewed forward, emptying its load on the carpet. Even though he felt a certain measure of relief, it wasn't exactly the target he'd imagined.

Alex reached for Leigh and pulled her against him. "What the hell was that?"

Leigh rested her head against his chest. "What?"

"You know what I'm talking about," he said as his hand ran down her back. "The sudden escape."

He felt Leigh's shoulders shrug. "Don't know."

"Liar."

Leigh pushed off his chest and glared at him. "I am not a liar," she said tightly.

“Then admit it.”

“Admit what?”

“You don’t like losing control.”

Leigh rolled her eyes and pushed off the sofa. “Typical male. You blame the fact that I didn’t have an orgasm on me.”

Alex shot up from the sofa. “Hey, you would have had one if you hadn’t suddenly bolted.”

Leigh grabbed her bra and panties off the floor. “Sure,” she said absently. “Where’s my dress?”

But Alex wasn’t ready for her to leave just yet.

Chapter 4

Leigh woke slowly. She stretched, loving the feeling of Alex's sleeping body pressed against her. She wished this moment, their moment, could last forever. But she'd learned long ago that all good things must come to an end. And so her time with Alex was over.

Every muscle in Leigh's body ached. Alex's lovemaking had been thorough. He'd touched and kissed every part of her body. Leigh used muscles she didn't even know she had.

Leigh reluctantly moved. Alex growled and tightened his arms around her.

"I have to go," she said.

"A few more minutes." Alex's arms pulled her against him again.

"No," she said firmly as she pushed out of his arms and got out of bed. "I have to make sure Samantha gets home to your father."

As she searched for her clothes, a glint caught her eye. She walked toward the window and pulled the curtains back. Sunlight almost blinded her. She backed away as though it had burned her skin. It was morning. She'd spent the entire night in Alex's suite.

No! It can't be.

“Good morning,” Alex said as he tossed back the blankets on the bed and got up.

“Good morning?” Leigh cried frantically. “Is that all you have to say?”

Alex absently scratched his chest and then brushed his fingers through his hair. “I don’t usually make much sense until I’ve had a cup of coffee.”

Leigh wanted to rip him limb from limb. How could he be so glib? “I spent the night here, you...” She searched for the right word. “Boob!” Okay, not the best word she could have come up with but she was feeling pressured. “I told you when I got here that I had two hours and then I had to make sure Samantha got home.”

Alex frowned and rubbed the stubble on his chin. “Sorry. You seem to think it’s my fault but I can’t make the connection.”

Leigh wanted to scream. Of course it was his fault. She never would have come to his suite at all if he hadn’t given her the keycard and then proceeded to lure her in. Leigh threw up her hands in frustration. She knew it would do no good to tell him anything. After all, he was a man and worse than that, he was a Diamond. While he might have chosen to march to the beat of a different drum, the beat was no different than it was for the rest of his family.

“Where are my clothes?” Leigh asked as she peered around the bedroom.

“I think we left them in the living room,” Alex replied.

Alex was blocking the bedroom door. Leigh marched up to him. “You’re in my way.”

His eyes darkened as he focused on her breasts. Her nipples hardened. She hated that in spite of a desperate situation, just one look from the man and she was ready to give herself to him again. When he raised his hands to touch her, she quickly stepped back.

“Get out of my way,” she said. “I have to get dressed.”

And then she had to find out if Samantha found her own way home last night. God, she hoped so.

Alex let out a long breath and stepped aside, allowing her to pass into the living room. “All right,” he said. “I’ve got a plane to catch in a couple hours anyway.”

Just as he disappeared into the bedroom, Leigh heard her cell phone ring. It took a few seconds for her to finally locate her purse and pull the phone out.

“Hello?”

“Where the fuck are you?” Edward Diamond growled.

Leigh swallowed hard. “I’m still at the hotel, Mr. Diamond.”

“So why didn’t you make sure Samantha got home?”

Leigh’s heart tightened. “Is she okay?”

“Yes,” he replied angrily. “She’s traumatized but managed to fight off a guy and get home safely. No thanks to you.”

Leigh sincerely doubted Samantha fought anyone off last night. She was having way too much fun. Leigh knew there was no point in telling her boss she’d tried to get Samantha to go home earlier. The fact was she agreed to watch over her boss’ young wife. And she’d failed.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Diamond,” Leigh said. “I got side-tracked.”

"You mean you took off with Alexander." The words were matter-of-fact. How the old man knew was beyond her.

"Yes." Her simple but honest reply was met with silence. "Mr. Diamond," she said, "you can be assured it'll never happen again."

"No, it won't," Edward replied.

Another long silence followed. Leigh braced herself as she peered around the living room to locate her clothes. Spying her gown on the back of the sofa, she picked it up and held it against her chest. She had a pretty good idea of what was coming next.

"You're fired, Leigh."

The air whooshed out of her lungs as she fell onto the sofa. Yes, she expected Edward would fire her. In fact, after failing him so badly, she'd have done the same thing. But to hear the actual words, to know he wouldn't give her a chance to redeem herself, left her feeling completely empty.

She held the phone to her ear until the line went dead and then let her hand fall to the sofa. She stared ahead as the reality of the situation sank into her muddled mind.

"You still here?" Alex said as he walked out of the bedroom, a towel wrapped around his waist.

"Yeah," Leigh replied as she watched him pad across the room to the little kitchenette.

Alex poured water into the coffee maker, grabbed a pre-measured pouch of coffee grounds and placed it into the basket. When he touched the on button, he busied himself looking in the small fridge. "You should check out the ensuite

bathroom,” he said absently. “There’s a showerhead that’ll do things to you that you never imagined.”

“How nice,” Leigh said, her mind still reeling.

“How about bacon and eggs for breakfast?” Alex asked. “After all the activity last night, I think you’ll need some nourishment before you leave.”

“I’m not hungry.”

“Oh come on. Of course you are.”

“No,” she replied, still clutching her gown to her naked body. “I’m not.”

Alex’s eyes darkened slightly as he walked toward her. He sat down on the coffee table and gazed into her eyes. “What’s going on?”

Reality slammed into her at that moment. She struggled to keep the tears at bay while she looked at Alex. She would not let Alex see her as weak. “Your father fired me.”

Alex frowned. “Shit, I’m sorry. Guess he’s pissed you weren’t there to get Samantha home.”

“Yeah,” she said. “That’s pretty much the gist of it.”

“Well, screw the old man. Who needs him anyway?” Alex turned to the coffee maker. “Want some coffee?”

Leigh glared at him. How could he be so callous? She’d lost her job and it was his fault. “Do you care at all that I no longer have a job?”

Alex shrugged as he poured coffee into an oversized mug. “My father’s an ass,” he replied calmly. “Can’t imagine why anyone would work for him.”

Leigh tossed her gown aside as she leapt up from the sofa. She walked to Alex and jabbed her finger in his chest. “Those

of us who need to buy food to live have no problem working for him,” she said angrily. “After being his administrative assistant for two years, I’m forced onto the street. And do you know why?”

Alex captured her hand and drew her finger away from his chest. He gazed down at her, his eyes raking hungrily over her body. “Yeah,” he said softly. “I know why. But the fact you are naked while you’re trying to make a point isn’t helping me focus. All I can think about is sinking my cock into you again.”

Leigh ignored the warmth that enveloped her body. She turned away from him and searched for her bra and panties. “You’re the last thing I need now,” she said furiously. “You’ve made my life hell already.” She spied her bra peeking out from beneath the sofa and leaned down to get it.

“God, I love your ass!”

Leigh whirled around. “Stop looking at me!” she cried as she quickly put her bra on. Now, if only she could find her panties. Leigh’s eyes darted around the suite.

“Looking for these?”

Leigh shuddered, knowing Alex had found them. She braced herself and turned around. Her panties dangled on the end of his finger.

“Give them to me.”

Alex held them over his head, far out of her reach. “I will, but there’s a price.”

Leigh sighed. “Fine,” she said. “What’s your price?”

“Come home with me.”

Leigh blinked. Her mouth fell open. "You're kidding me, right?"

Alex cocked his head to one side as he lowered his arm and held her panties out to her. "I'm serious. Why not come back with me?"

Leigh snatched the panties from his fingers and stepped into them. She turned to her gown and wiggled into it as well before she replied. "That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. What would I do on a ranch in the middle of nowhere?"

"Administrate."

Leigh looked at him incredulously. "Administrate what?" She had an idea of what he wanted and administrating would have nothing to do with it. Not that she'd mind spending another night with him...maybe even a week. Her body warmed at the memory of his touch.

Alex shrugged. "Every time I expand the ranch a little more, my accountant complains that it's getting too big for him to handle on a part-time basis. He's going to freak when he finds out I just recently bought another seven hundred acres."

Leigh shook her head. "Are you offering me a job?"

"Yes." Alex sat down on the sofa and peered up at her. "A two-month contract; we'll see how it goes after that."

This was crazy. She had to be dreaming. Any minute she'd wake up and realize it was all a bad dream. Well, not all bad...the sex was amazing.

"I'm a city girl. I've never even set foot on a farm."

"It's not much different than any other business. At least, not from your standpoint."

Leigh hesitated. "I don't know—"

"What have you got to lose? You don't have a job in Toronto anymore and if, after the two months are up, you want to leave, you can."

"I can't just pick up and leave today. I have an apartment and a cat."

"I'll pay the rent for your apartment while you're away," Alex said. "And you can bring the cat with you."

Leigh felt her resolve weaken. Alex had a point when he said she had nothing to lose. "There's the question of my pay. I want the same salary I got from your father."

"Fine."

He said that now but when he found out just how overpaid she was, he might feel differently.

But when she quoted her annual income, Alex didn't flinch. "Done." He reached for the phone on the end table. "I'll cancel my flight this morning and rebook it for this afternoon."

* * * *

The Diamond A Ranch was a flurry of activity when Alex drove his Ford F250 into the yard. Del Jones, his foreman, met him as he got out of his truck.

Alex slapped his shoulder. "Did you manage to hold the fort down while I was away?"

"Only just," Del replied as he rubbed his hand over his unshaven cheek. "We brought Shikira in from the lower forty. Looks like she's gettin' ready to calve."

Alex frowned. "She's not due for another two weeks." Shikira was his prize cow.

Del's brown eyes darkened, his craggy face frowned. The old man didn't like being questioned. "She's baggin' up."

Alex heard the passenger side door slam closed. Del's eyes darted to the woman as she rounded the front of the truck, cat carrier in hand. "Bagging up?" Leigh asked.

"Her udder is filling up. It's a sign she'll have her calf soon."

Del tipped back his cowboy hat. "Who the fuck is she?"

Alex laid his arm on her shoulder. "Leigh-Ann Percival, meet my foreman, Delbert Jones."

Leigh placed both arms around the cat carrier as she smiled at Del. "Nice to meet you."

Del spat on the ground; his aim was as good as it had ever been. The gob landed an inch from Leigh's patent leather shoes.

Alex winced. Del had been working for him since day one. In fact, he'd worked for the previous owner. Opinionated, foul-mouthed and almost always cranky, Alex could never have gotten his ranch off the ground if it hadn't been for Del.

While he'd grown used to his foreman's ornery ways, he felt sorry for Leigh having to be exposed to Del so early in the game. To her credit, Leigh didn't flinch at the bubbling mound of spit at her feet.

"Her name don't tell me nothin'," Del said through clenched teeth. "What's she doin' here?"

"I'm the new administrator for the ranch," Leigh supplied gingerly.

Del snorted, his old brown eyes darting to Alex. "Shee-it! Is that what they're calling it these days?"

Leigh tensed. "Excuse me? Would you care to clarify what you mean?"

As Del's mouth opened his mouth to respond, Alex quickly cut him off. "No need to elaborate," he said. His gaze fell to Leigh. "I'll take you inside the house so you can get settled."

"Tell Mona to get her arse in gear and bring me some lemonade," Del called after them. "I'm drier than a popcorn's fart!"

"Nice guy," Leigh said sarcastically as they walked up the stairs to the porch.

"He's a little rough around the edges but he'll grow on you eventually," Alex replied as he opened the screen door and ushered Leigh inside.

"Somehow I doubt that."

The smell of fresh-baked bread enveloped them as they walked into the old-fashioned kitchen.

Mona quickly greeted them with a wide smile. "Alexander!" she said as she wiped her hands on her apron and then hugged him. "So good to see you home safe and sound."

"I was only gone a few days," he pointed out.

"But you know how I worry." She stepped back, her expressive hazel eyes falling on Leigh. "And who have we here?"

Leigh put the cat carrier down and smiled. "Leigh-Ann Percival," she said as she smiled. "I'm the new administrator."

Her eyes rounded. "Really?" Her gaze darted to Alex for a second and then turned back to Leigh. "Well, you'll have

your job cut out for you here, my girl.” The plump woman, her graying hair tucked back in a bun, placed an arm around her and led her to the massive harvest table in the middle of the kitchen. “I’m Mona Jones.”

Leigh blinked. “Are you—”

“I take it you met my husband,” she said in her lyrical voice. “Don’t worry about him. His bark is much worse than his bite.”

“He spat and almost hit my shoes,” Leigh said.

“He must like you then,” Mona said. “Otherwise he’d have hit them. I just made some fresh lemonade. Come sit and have a glass. You look parched.”

With Mona fawning over Leigh, Alex knew he could leave without being noticed. He grabbed a glass of lemonade and quickly walked out of the house. While he never questioned Del before, surely he was wrong about Shikira being so close to calving. He kept close records of all his prized cows and this one, being his most expensive, shouldn’t be ready to calve for at least another month.

But the moment he saw the cow in her stall, he knew Del was right. He placed the glass on the barn windowsill and sighed heavily as he leaned on the stall gate staring at the large black cow. Her udder was almost bursting at the seams.

“Told ya,” Del said as he walked up behind Alex.

“I know you did.” Alex pushed off the gate and peered at the old man. “I paid fifteen hundred dollars to have her bred artificially.”

“And if you’d listened to me, I’d have told you she’d already been bred by that scrub Hereford from the next farm over.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Told you the minute that herd broke the fence and got onto our land that old bull would have bred her first chance he got.”

“The animals were starving,” Alex replied. “You can’t blame them for breaking the fence to get to our lush pastures.”

“But you shoulda done somethin’ about it before that happened.”

Alex shot Del an annoyed glance. “I bought the Reynolds out, didn’t I? Bought seven hundred acres I didn’t need.”

“Too little too late,” Del said as his gaze fell on the cow in the stall.

Alex shrugged. “So Shikira calves out earlier than we’d planned by a scrub bull. It’s not a big loss. She’s young and will calve again next year.”

“You’ll lose thousands by not producing the right calf for our buyers,” Del pointed out.

His foreman wasn’t telling him anything he didn’t already know. Shikria’s calf had been contracted by a buyer in Japan. “There’ll be other opportunities.”

An uneasy silence fell between them for a short time. Del reached for the glass of lemonade. He tipped it to his mouth and drank it down quickly. He plunked the glass down and wiped his mouth on his sleeve.

“So what’s with the new administrator?”

"I got her fired from her old job," Alex replied. "It was the least I could do."

"No," Del said. "The least you could have done was leave her in Toronto where she belongs."

"There's more to it than that."

Del chuckled. "Yeah, and I bet it involves your dick."

* * * *

"Another glass of lemonade, dear?"

Leigh peered at the older woman sitting across the huge harvest table. After two glasses of the bitter homemade drink, she'd had more than enough. Wasn't there any sugar in the house? "Thanks, but no, I'm good."

Mona rose from her chair. "I'm surprised you drank two glasses," she supplied. "I make it to Del's taste but everyone else complains that it's not sweet enough."

No shit. "I didn't mind it."

"I expect you'll want to get settled in then."

Just point me to the nearest bathroom. "Yes, I'd like that." She rose from her chair at the table and followed Mona to the door leading out of the kitchen.

Leigh retrieved the cat carrier. She peered inside to find the calico fast asleep...surely worn out after spitting and hissing her displeasure for hours.

Mona eyed the carrier with disdain. "Alexander doesn't like animals in the house," she said matter-of-factly.

Leigh placed a defensive hand over the carrier. "Fancy and I came as a package deal."

Mona smiled. "Of course," she said as she turned to the hall. "I'll take you to your room."

Leigh followed Mona down the hall a short way and then up a massive staircase to the second floor.

The older woman pushed one door open. "That's the bathroom," she said absently as she continued down the hall. She stopped at another door and opened it. "This is the bedroom."

The moment Leigh stepped inside, she was assailed with Alex's manly scent. The room was decorated in dark earth tones and a massive four-poster bed dominated the room.

"This is Alex's room," Leigh said.

"Yes. Is that a problem?"

Leigh's body trembled, she gripped the cat carrier tighter against her chest. While Mona was much softer than her husband, she clearly thought the same thing. "Well, yes, it's a problem," she replied. "I'm here as an employee not..." Leigh couldn't finish the sentence.

"Oh." Leigh wasn't sure but she could have sworn Mona rolled her eyes. "In that case, you can have one of the spare rooms."

"And where is that?"

Leigh followed Mona down the hall a bit further and waited as the older woman opened another door. She stood aside as Leigh stepped into the room and looked around. "It's not ready for guests," Mona said. "Alex never has women staying here who don't sleep with him."

The words stung as Leigh gazed at the bare room. Just how many women had Alex drawn to his bed? Certainly, this room had not been used in a long time. The double bed had no sheets, pillows or blankets, the single window had a torn

blind and the painted floor felt cold under her feet. She walked into the room and pulled at the blind. It gave way and tumbled to the floor at her feet, dust flying up around her.

Leigh coughed as she turned to Mona. "If you have some extra bedding, this room will do nicely."

Mona's eyes brightened. "No problem." As she turned to leave, she quickly looked back at Leigh. "Maybe I'll see if I can find a lock for the door too. If you really are here to work, you might have a hard time keeping Alex at bay."

"I am here to work." Leigh set the cat carrier down. "In fact, I'd really like to see the office."

Mona's face split into a wide grin and then she laughed heartily. "Girl, if you think you're here to work, you've been duped."

"I am here to work. Alex hired me to be administrator of the ranch."

Mona sighed. "Let me get the bedding and then we'll talk."

Chapter 5

Alex deposited the bags on the kitchen floor and walked to the sink to wash his hands. As usual, dinner smelled wonderful. It was almost four so he knew Mona would be leaving soon. Still she was nowhere in sight.

Good. This has to be good. His housekeeper and his new administrator... Alex stopped for a second...his new administrator, what a lark! Better to go by their names. Mona and Leigh must have hit it off, otherwise the older woman would have been running out the door by now. Del left every day at four sharp. If Mona wasn't out there soon, she'd have to walk the couple of miles to their home. Why she put up with him was anyone's guess. Any other woman would have left Del years ago.

After Alex washed his face and hands, he reached for a towel and wiped his face. Something struck him, it wasn't a sound, not even a scent but for whatever reason, he knew Leigh was nearby. He pulled the towel from his face and looked over his shoulder. She stood in the door between the hall and kitchen, a calico cat in her arms. Her delicate fingers ran over the cat's long fur as she gazed at him with dark, angry eyes.

Uh oh. Maybe leaving Mona alone with Leigh wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Where's Mona?" Alex asked as nonchalantly as he could muster.

"She left."

"Didn't see her go."

"She went out the back door."

Okay, if Mona left by the back door, that meant she didn't want to meet up with him...and that was not a good sign at all.

"I see." Alex tossed the towel aside and walked to the stove. He pulled the oven door open. "Smells like dinner's ready. You've never tasted shepherd's pie until you've tasted Mona's. Hope you're hungry."

"As a matter of fact," Leigh said as she stepped into the kitchen, "I can wait for dinner. I'd like to see the office I'll be working in first."

Damn! Mona did do some talking. Alex grabbed a pair of oven mitts and pulled the huge roast pan out of the oven. "Who wants to talk business on an empty stomach?" he asked as he peered at Leigh.

Leigh's eyes narrowed as she bent to let the cat down on the floor. "Where's my office, Alex?"

Alex opened a cupboard door and pulled out two dinner plates. "Well, I don't have one per se."

"So where am I supposed to be working?"

Damn! They'd only just gotten here. He hadn't expected to work that little detail out until the morning.

"I'm two seconds away from calling a cab to take me back to the airport," Leigh warned him.

"All right," he said, putting the plates on the table. "I'll show you where you'll be working." He led the way to the living room and pointed at an old card table piled high with papers.

"Are you kidding me?" Leigh asked, her voice squeaking in disbelief.

"Nope," he said. "The pile of papers is what I intend you to work on. My accountant wants it all sorted by the end of the month."

"That's just a week away," Leigh cried as she walked to the table. "How could anyone sort out this mess in that time?"

Alex grinned. "That's why I hired you."

When Leigh would have rebuffed him, he quickly added, "And why I'm paying you the big bucks."

"So I'm a glorified bookkeeper," Leigh said between clenched teeth. "I guess it's better than what Mona suggested I was."

"What did Mona say?" Alex wasn't so sure he wanted to know but asked anyway.

"She said I was just one of a long line of women you've had to the ranch to satisfy your sexual needs. She told me if I was hoping for something long-term with you, it wouldn't happen."

All right, Mona. She'd done his dirty work. Alex bit back a grin as Leigh went on.

"Seems Mona thinks because your father dumped your mother when you were a kid, you have decided it's okay to

use women without getting personally attached. After all, the only role model you have of a real marriage is hers with Del. And even she admitted that wasn't a very good model for you."

Worked for him. *Thank you, Mona.*

"But I don't buy that for a minute," Leigh said.

Shit!

"I know you hired me to do a job, not because you want to have sex with me again. That's why I insisted on my own bedroom. I never mix business with pleasure and now that you're my boss, well..."

No! He didn't want to hear it.

"...we can't be involved sexually."

Alex eyed her and offered a slow smile. If she thought she'd won, he'd let her think so for now. He hadn't created a job for her for the next two months to find himself in bed every night without her in it. "Understood," he said. "Now that we have that settled, let's have dinner."

* * * *

Leigh waited for the lights to go off. She looked at Chloe, who was fast asleep on the bed, before she ventured out of her room. She winced as the floorboards creaked with every step as she blindly made her way to the stairs. She breathed a sigh of relief when she made it to the kitchen. She dared not turn on the light for fear that she'd wake Alex. Instead she stumbled her way to the fridge, knowing the breadbox was on the counter right beside it.

She fumbled with the bag of bread in the dark and pulled out two slices. Feeling for the butter dish, she smeared butter

onto the slices with her fingers. She should have been satisfied with just that but she remembered Mona mentioning her homemade jams. When she pulled the fridge open, the light seemed to illuminate the entire room.

“The elderberry jam is on the lower shelf.”

Leigh jumped at the sound of Alex’s voice and slammed the fridge door closed. Without light, she wasn’t sure where in the heck he was.

A match suddenly lit and touched the oil lamp on the table, casting a low glow. When Leigh’s eyes adjusted to the muted light, she saw Alex sitting at the head of the table, a crumb-filled plate in front of him. “I toasted my bread,” he said.

“I wasn’t expecting to see you,” Leigh said, her heart still pounding.

“Are you kidding? I was starving.”

Leigh sighed. “I’m really sorry. I couldn’t believe it when we found Chloe on the counter eating the shepherd’s pie. She’s never done anything like that before.”

Alex gazed at his scratched hand. “I guess she didn’t expect to be taken from her feast so abruptly either.”

Leigh moved forward, looking down at his hand. “You shouldn’t have grabbed her like that,” she said. “Is your hand okay?”

“I’ll live.”

“That’s good news,” Leigh said, unable to think of anything else to say.

After a long, awkward silence, Leigh shoved her hands into the pockets of her housecoat. "Well," she said, "I guess I'll head off to bed then."

"Without getting something to eat?"

Leigh offered a nervous smile and shrugged. "Guess I'm not that hungry after all."

"Nonsense," Alex said as he leapt up from the chair. He placed the two slices of bread she'd abandoned on the counter onto his plate and held his knife out to her.

She stepped up to him and reached out for the knife. His hand covered hers the moment she made contact. The touch was electric, sending shivers down her spine and pooling in her core. She tried to ignore his touch as she turned to the fridge to get the elderberry jam. She felt his breath on her back as she slathered the slices of bread with the dark red jelly.

When she would have picked up a slice, his arms circled around her. He dropped to the chair, hauling her down on his lap. "Allow me," he said as he picked up a slice of bread and held it to her lips.

When she took a tentative nibble, jam smeared on her upper lip. Alex chuckled softly. "Messy girl," he chided as he leaned his face to hers and gently, carefully licked the jam from her upper lip.

Leigh gasped, her body warmed and her fingers curled into his chest. Alex moved the slice of bread to her lips again. When she would have taken a bite, the bread touched her cheek and then slid to her throat. Alex quickly followed it

with his tongue, quickly lapping up the sticky mess. Leigh sighed, enjoying the touch of his lips on her.

Suddenly, Alex had her sitting on the table. He pushed her housecoat off and pulled her nightgown over her head. He dipped his fingers into the jar of elderberry jam and smeared it over one nipple. Before Leigh could react, his mouth covered her nipple, sucking, as his fingers massaged her breast.

Leigh's fingers buried into his hair, pulling him closer, wanting so much more. But Alex pulled away, taking a step back. She peered at him; his eyes were dark, glistening in the dim light. She took a deep breath when he dipped his fingers into the jar again and held it up over her. Her gaze never left his as he slowly lowered his fingers and smeared the jam from her navel to the V between her legs.

The moment he dipped his head, Leigh threw hers back. She splayed her legs wide and moaned as his mouth licked its way to her core. She felt his breath against her clit as he held still for a moment. Then his hands slid over her thighs and curled under her hips. Leigh cried out when his mouth closed over her clit, sucking, nuzzling, his tongue lapping against her.

When he slipped two fingers inside her, Leigh convulsed, her body tightening around him. Sweet torture ensued as he began to pump his fingers, pushing as far into her as his hand would allow. He pulled his fingers all the way out, allowing her to close before he jammed back inside her. He set the rhythm to which her body would dance for several minutes, in and out, harder and harder, until she could take no more.

Just when she thought she'd explode with the sheer pleasure of his touch, he pulled his fingers out of her. A moment later, she felt his hard cock pressing at her slit. She gasped when the tip pushed her just slightly open and held still.

Leigh wiggled her ass, trying to persuade him to move deeper. When he didn't, she opened her eyes and looked at him.

Burning brown eyes glared down at her, eating into her soul, digging at her conscience.

"Tell me you want this."

"You know what I want."

"Say it out loud," he said through clenched teeth.

Unable to take another moment of the torture, Leigh conceded. "I want this."

"What do you want?"

"You," she said, barely able to contain her need. "I want you inside me." There, she'd said it.

Apparently, that wasn't good enough for Alex. "Tell me you'll share my bed for the rest of the time you're here."

Leigh didn't care anymore. They could argue about living quarters later, right now she just wanted to feel his cock open her. "Yes, yes, I'll be in your bed from now on."

With that, he sank his heavy cock into her, stretching her folds to the point of pain yet drawing out her carnal need to be fulfilled. He held her legs apart as he moved between her thighs, delving deep and, as he did with his fingers, pulled out of her completely before letting her body suck him back inside. He moaned softly as he picked up the pace, driving hard-

er against her with each stroke. His fingers tightened on her legs as he continued to pound into her.

Leigh tried to ignore the pain with each thrust. She did not want to break the spell they were under. But the table was just too damn hard and her back began to ache. Unable to contain it any longer, she grasped at Alex's chest. "I'm sorry," she said, gasping. "It just hurts my back too much."

Alex said nothing as he pulled her off the table. With his cock still firmly planted inside her, he wrapped her legs around his hips and carried her upstairs to his bed. They disconnected for only a second when he laid her down on his massive bed. He crawled on top of her and immediately filled her again. His mouth covered hers in a deep, soul-searing kiss as he began to move again. Slow at first and then, when she pulled him tighter against her, harder and harder until a tension so strong built within Leigh that she knew she would soon explode into a million pieces. She cried out as her body gave way to an incredible climax. Alex moaned loudly as his cock convulsed within her and then gave way to his own orgasm, filling her body with his hot seed.

Chapter 6

A rap on the bedroom door drew Leigh from a deep sleep.

While the knock was soft, there was nothing soft about the woman who walked into the room and stood over the bed.

“Time to get your ass out of bed,” Mona said briskly.

Leigh blinked. “What time is it?”

“Nine,” the older woman supplied. “Before Alex left to ride the range at six, he told me to let you sleep in. But I doubt he knew just how long you’d sleep.”

“I’m sorry,” Leigh said as she pulled the blankets up to her chin, covering her naked body. “I’ll be right down.”

“Breakfast in this house is at seven a.m. sharp,” Mona said sternly. “Since you’re new here, I left a loaf of bread and a jar of jam on the table. Elderberry. Alex said you enjoyed it last night.”

Leigh blinked. The woman clearly had no idea just how much she had. When she didn’t reply, Mona went on. “I expect you to clean up after yourself. Wash what dishes you use and put the bread and jam away. I may be Alex’s housekeeper but I am not the maid.”

“Of course,” Leigh replied.

Mona's eyes narrowed but she made no further comment before she turned and walked out of the room.

When the door closed, Leigh moaned and pulled the covers up over her head. She didn't blame Mona for being so cold. She'd insisted on having her own room and then spent the night in Alex's bed. *What must the old woman think?*

Truth was, even she didn't know what to think. She hadn't intended to fall into bed with Alex again. And yet here she was, lying in his bed, every fiber of her being having been touched by him.

Leigh quickly showered, dressed and ran downstairs. After having toast with strawberry jam...she couldn't look at the elderberry jam without shivering...she put everything away and warmed a cup of leftover coffee in the microwave.

Cupping the warm mug in her hands, she ventured to the living room. The piles of paper seemed even higher than when she'd seen it yesterday. Being the ranch administrator would be no easy task. Leigh sighed and got to work.

Leigh spent the day sorting the papers. Feed bills, veterinary costs and the odd receipt for a sold beef cattle were among the mountain of paper. She cleared an area and carefully sorted them in piles.

"Lunch is ready," Mona announced briskly from the living room door. "The boys are still on the range so it's just you and me."

Leigh offered a weak smile. The idea of being alone with Mona for any length of time didn't appeal to her. Besides, she feared losing her focus. "I'm not very hungry," she replied. "I really need to keep at this."

Mona nodded stiffly. "Suit yourself."

Leigh sighed as she turned her attention back to her work. She picked up a veterinary bill coated in what looked like dried blood and perhaps even manure. She wrinkled her nose as she tried to make out the total.

"Having trouble?"

Leigh looked toward the door to find Mona hadn't left.

"A bit," she replied. "Alex isn't much of a bookkeeper."

Mona chuckled. "Nope. He was never big on the financial details. Prefers to be out on the range, working with his men. His accountant has threatened to quit several times."

"It's no wonder," Leigh replied as she held the vet bill up to the window in an effort to see the total.

"Look," Mona said, "I hate eating alone. Why don't I bring lunch in here and we can work on this stuff together for a while?"

Leigh smiled. "That's very kind of you but I don't want to take your time—"

Mona brushed her off with a sweep of her hand. "I'll bring a pot of coffee in too. When it's done, I'll get back to my own work."

As she turned away, Leigh called out to her. "Mona?"

Mona turned back, dark eyes looking at her closely.

Leigh wanted to explain things. That she really hadn't intended to be in Alex's bed last night. Tell her that she wasn't like all the other women who'd paraded through this ranch house. Instead she just smiled and said, "Thanks."

Mona's face brightened a little as she eyed the filthy bill Leigh was still holding. "Put that down and go wash your hands," she ordered.

* * * *

Leigh rose and looked down at the sorted piles of paper spread across the table. After eating salmon sandwiches, homemade dill pickles and brownies, she and Mona got to work. They had accomplished more in the hour and a half together than Leigh had managed on her own all day. True to her word, when the twelve-cup coffeepot was drained, Mona went about her own business.

During their time together, very little was said between them. But when Mona poked her head into the living room door at four to say she was leaving, Leigh knew she'd managed to gain some respect.

"The boys are still on the range," Mona said. "I'm headin' home but there's chili in the crock-pot and fresh buns on the counter. Make sure Alex eats before he goes to bed."

"I will."

"And if you see Del, tell him to get his ass home."

Leigh chuckled. "I will."

Mona's eyes twinkled as she smiled at Leigh. "You got a lot done today."

Leigh sighed as she placed her hands on her hips and stretched her back. The day had really been a success. Not only had she managed to put a huge dent in the piles of paper...with Mona's help, of course...she managed to win a bit of Mona's respect.

Leigh wiped her forehead. She wasn't sure why it was important to her to earn Mona's respect but just knowing that she'd made strides toward it, made all the hard work she'd done today worthwhile.

Perhaps it was because she'd landed in the foster care system at five years old after her single mother could no longer deal with raising a child. Perhaps it was because she'd worked for Edward Diamond for two years, had gone over and above time and time again but never seemed to earn his respect.

Or, perhaps it was because Alex had great respect for Mona. So if Mona respected her, then maybe Alex would too.

Leigh shook her head. What an insane thought. Alex wanted just one thing from her. It wouldn't matter how hard she worked as the ranch administrator. He never would have talked her into coming to the ranch at all if he hadn't been hoping for more sex. And while she had insisted she was just his employee, she'd given herself to him again last night. What bothered her most of all was the fact she knew she would not deny him again and again...and again.

When Leigh's stomach growled, she gazed at her watch. She'd been so absorbed in the work she hadn't realized the time passing. Mona had left over two hours ago. She'd expected Alex to walk into the house to draw her from her tasks but since he hadn't, she ventured out of the living room to the kitchen.

The chili still simmered in the crock-pot and the buns Mona had made earlier in the day smelled divine. Her stomach growled again but Leigh ignored it. She peered out the

kitchen window. It was almost dark but lights were blazing through the barn windows.

Alex was there. And since he hadn't come in, something had to be wrong. Leigh unplugged the crock-pot and took the inner bowl out. She placed it on a tray as well as the buns, some bowls and spoons. The last thing she did was grab a thermos of coffee. She wasn't sure why but she had a sinking feeling there was a very long night ahead of her.

Chapter 7

Alex winced when Shikira let out another low moan. The large black cow lay in the straw inside the box stall, her massive body wracked by contractions.

"I keep tellin' ya she'll be fine," Del said, his voice even more starchy than usual after riding the range all day.

"And I keep telling you to go on home," Alex said through clenched teeth. The old man was getting under his skin. Alex never doubted his advice as a rule but this time, he just had a feeling and resented that Del wouldn't give an inch.

Why couldn't Alex just have a feeling about something and be left alone with it? Del had no idea how he was playing on Alex's nerves, reminding him of the days when his own father wouldn't allow him to have a single independent thought.

When the barn door opened, both Alex and Del looked to see Leigh enter with a large tray. The woman was a sight for sore eyes as far as Alex was concerned. While he and Del checked fences all day, his thoughts seldom strayed from Leigh. Her soft voice, her soft body, her sweet—

Del nudged Alex's elbow. "Now's not the time to get boinked." Clearly Del saw Leigh as an intrusion.

Alex ignored his foreman as Leigh placed the tray on a bale of hay. "Mona made chili and buns," she said. Then she turned to Del. "She told me to tell you to get your ass home."

Alex snickered as he grabbed a buttered bun off the tray. "Best to listen to your wife," he said before he took a bite.

Del grimaced. He snagged a bun off the tray and eyed both Alex and Leigh. "Yeah, whatever," he said resentfully. "Only reason I'm leaving now is because I'm an old man and need my rest."

Alex grinned.

"I can't be runnin' my ass off after you anymore. Gotta take care of myself."

"I hear ya," Alex replied, trying to keep from laughing.

Both he and Leigh watched as Del made a quick exit.

"That does my heart good," Leigh said.

"How so?"

Leigh grinned. "An intimidating guy who's intimidated by his wife. It looks good on him."

Alex chuckled before he took another bite from his bun. "I couldn't agree more. But once you get to know Del, you'll see he's not nearly as crusty as he wants you to believe."

Leigh's eyes widened in disbelief but she made no comment. Instead she turned to the tray. "I hope you're hungry. Mona's chili smells divine."

He was. In fact, he was starving. Mona had packed a lunch for them to take on the range today but that was several hours ago. And Alex had always loved Mona's chili. She claimed it would put meat on anyone's bones and Alex believed it. There was nothing low carb or low fat about Mona's

chili. It was meant to fill the working man's stomach. The fact it was delicious was an added bonus.

He accepted the bowl Leigh filled and immediately tucked in, eating a few spoonfuls of it before he turned his attention back to the cow in the stall. He leaned his elbows on the gate as he dunked his bun into the chili.

Shikira had calved six times before. Why was he so sure something would go wrong this time? The fact she'd been bred by the neighbor's bull, who was much smaller, didn't help alleviate Alex's gut feeling that something wasn't right.

"She's pretty."

Alex was drawn from his deep thoughts to find Leigh standing at his side, gazing at the cow. "You think so?"

Leigh's brows knit low as her eyes focused on the cow in the stall. "Yes," she replied. "I love her black coat and how it shimmers in the light. But what strikes me the most are her expressive eyes. She's in turmoil."

Alex glanced at the cow in the stall. Her eyes were hooded, almost as though she was falling asleep. Shikira was between contractions.

"Of course she is," Alex said. "She's in labor."

Leigh's eyes narrowed. "It's more than that," she said. "She's afraid."

Alex struggled not to laugh out loud. Had he just walked into an episode of the *Twilight Zone*? Would Leigh admit she was really from another planet and claim the old cow was their long-lost queen?

"Screw you!" Leigh said angrily as she turned away from the stall.

Had he said his thoughts out loud? Apparently so. *Damn!*

"I'm sorry," Alex said quickly, placing his bowl aside. "Please don't leave."

Leigh reached for the thermos of coffee and filled a mug. "Leave? I don't intend to." She nodded at the cow in the stall. "No matter what you think, Shikira needs both of us tonight."

When Leigh settled on a bale of hay and cupped her coffee in both hands, Alex reached for the thermos and filled his mug. He sat down beside her, his hip barely touching hers.

The woman continued to confound him. She was like no other he'd ever met before. Unlike the women who had passed through his life, he wanted to know more about Leigh-Ann Percival.

Alex took a sip of his coffee and leaned forward, bracing his elbows on his knees. "What's the story between you and my kid brother?"

The temperature in the barn fell several degrees as Leigh stiffened. While she tried to remain on an even keel, Alex knew his question threw her for a loop.

"I'm very fond of Max," she said cautiously. "He and Zack will take Diamond Industries farther than your father could ever have imagined."

She hadn't told him anything he didn't already know. Alex knew his two younger brothers were the stuff dreams were made of years ago. While his father thought the family wasn't complete without Alex, he knew the Diamond Dynasty was better off without him.

"I know what my brothers are capable of," Alex said. "What I asked is why you were trying to escape Max."

Leigh sighed. She took a sip of her coffee and then set the mug down on the cement floor. She threaded her hands and kept her focus ahead of her. "I like Max," she said. "But he is considered elusive to the people who work for him. He's distant and, well, cold."

Alex wasn't surprised. His father had built Diamond Industries in that way...elusive, cold and all around unfeeling about the people affected by his corporate takeovers. So Max was made of the same cloth. The apple seldom fell far from the tree. Alex was grateful that, in his case, the apple rolled far away...

Alex said nothing. He reached for the thermos and refilled her mug before he drained the last of the coffee into his.

"Max took a liking to me when I started working for your father. At first, he made little innuendos, harmless comments. But over time, he made it clear he wanted to have sex with me." Leigh reached for her mug of coffee and took a long sip. "I liked him but not in that way and I tried to tell him. But he persisted."

"So you thought by asking me to fuck you—"

"Oh!" Leigh cried, cutting him off. "I hate that word!"

"Did you think I'd tell Max?"

"Yes."

"And you thought Max would be turned off if you came after me because I'm the outcast of the family."

Leigh winced. "Yes."

Alex drained his mug and leaned back. "I expect if you had the chance to do it all over again, you'd have taken a different route."

"I don't know," Leigh replied.

Alex leveled his gaze on her. "Are you sure about that?" After everything she'd been through, it was hard to imagine she didn't have regrets.

Leigh shook her head. "No," she said. "I'm not sure about anything. But I don't have any regrets about coming here."

"Not yet anyway," Alex said.

Leigh ignored his comment as she peered at the stall. She placed her empty mug aside and shivered. The night air was beginning to infiltrate the barn. "How long do you suppose it'll be before Shikira has her baby?"

Alex had no idea. It could be hours before the calf was born. He pulled his heavy winter coat off a hook. "It might be a very long night," he said.

* * * *

Leigh woke to find herself snuggled under Alex's heavy coat. It was warm and his spicy scent filled her senses. She smiled softly, loving his scent. In fact, she loved everything about him but most especially his touch. She'd fallen asleep cradled in his arms but woke alone.

Leigh realized night had come while she was sleeping. As her eyes adjusted to the low light in the barn, she gazed toward the stall.

She heard Alex's soft, gravelly voice talking to the cow. "Come on, Shikira, you can do this." The cow offered a low, agonized moan and Alex swore softly, "Shit, shit, shit."

Leigh tossed the coat aside, leapt up and went to the stall gate. The massive black cow lay in the soft straw, her body straining in an effort to give birth. Alex sat in the bedding be-

hind her, gently pulling on a pair of long black legs. When Shikira let out another low moan, Alex let go and rested his arms behind him. "Damn," he swore softly.

"Can I help?" Leigh asked as she walked into the stall.

Alex didn't even look up at her as he waved his hand in dismissal. "No, there's nothing you can do." He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't think there's anything anyone can do. I should have called the vet long before now."

Leigh frowned. "Why?"

"He'd have been able to do a C-section if I hadn't waited so long. Now the calves are in the canal and even a C-section won't save her."

Leigh's heart almost stopped. "Twins?"

"Yeah," Alex replied. "And they're tangled up with each other. This one," he nodded to the legs dangling from Shikira's vagina, "is breech. The twin is trying to come head first at the same time."

Leigh dropped down beside him. "There must be something we can do to save them all."

"Sometimes you can push the second calf back to give the first one room to be born," Alex said. "But every time I try to push my hand in, there isn't enough room for me to push it back far enough. My hand is just too damn big."

"Can't the vet help?"

Alex smiled sadly. "You haven't met our vet yet," he said. "His hands are as big as hams."

There had to be something they could do. Leigh couldn't stand by and watch this beautiful cow and her babies die. She

held out her hand. "What about mine? Is my hand small enough?"

Alex eyed her with what was clearly uncertainty. She could see his mind at work. City girl, what did she know about cows?

"Please let me try."

Alex moved aside and motioned for her to move over. He nodded toward a pail filled with soapy water. "Wash your hands and arms."

When she did, he coached her further. "Push your hand inside, slide it along the legs."

Leigh did as she was told and followed his instructions to push her arm further. When her hand met an obstruction, she held firm. She winced when her fingers grazed across something sharp. "What is that?"

"You've just touched the mouth of the twin," Alex told her. "Slide your hand up a bit until you feel the forehead."

Leigh's hand fumbled with the move but finally felt a wide spans of wet fur. "I think I've got it."

"Okay," Alex said. "Now push it back as hard as you can."

Leigh pressed her free hand on the stall floor as she pushed as hard as she could. Suddenly the obstruction moved back and Leigh found her arm buried inside the cow up to her armpit. "I think I did it!"

"Good! Pull your arm out. We have to move quickly." Alex pushed Leigh aside and braced his hands over the legs of the first calf. As he pulled, Shikira had a contraction and the calf slid out easily. Seconds later, the twin followed, gliding out of the cow with ease.

Two beautiful calves lay on the stall floor between Alex and Leigh. When the first, and then the second, took their first breaths, Leigh breathed a sigh of relief. Tears began to stream down her cheeks as she ran her hands over the new babies. The coats were slick and sticky but she didn't care. She'd not only witnessed two new lives come into the world, she'd had a hand in it.

She looked at Alex through bleary eyes. Her heart almost stopped when she saw the intense look in his eyes as he watched her. He must think she'd gone absolutely mad. Why else would he watch her so closely? Well, she'd make no apologies for crying. It was a beautiful moment.

Shikira rose. Both Leigh and Alex remained on the stall floor as the big cow loomed over them. Suddenly, Leigh felt the cow's tongue scrape against her hand as the new mother licked the first of her newborn calves. Alex grabbed her elbow and pulled her up with him.

"I think Shikira wants to take over from here," he said as he led Leigh out of the stall.

They stood at the gate for a few minutes as Shikira set about licking her calves' slick coats.

"They are so beautiful," Leigh said, letting the tears of joy fall freely.

Alex wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her against him. "You did well," he said. "You saved three lives tonight."

Leigh smiled as she looked up at him. "Did I?"

Alex nodded. "I'm going to get some feed for Shikira," he said. "You head up to the house and get cleaned up."

Leigh stepped back from the stall gate and peered down at herself. She hadn't realized just how covered she was with, not just blood and Shikira's wet placenta, but with dirt and straw from the stall. She looked up at Alex. "You won't be long?"

Alex smiled. "Nope."

Leigh looked at the cow and calves in the stall. "And they're okay?"

Alex nudged Leigh toward the barn door. "They are better than okay. Get going."

Chapter 8

Leigh gazed at the bedside clock radio and was amazed to see it was almost three in the morning. Every fiber of her being had been in overload from the moment she helped bring Shikira's twins into the world. She walked to the bathroom and turned the knobs in the shower. She stepped out of her clothes, leaving them in a sticky puddle on the bathroom floor, before she stepped under the hot spray.

Leigh closed her eyes as the hot water sluiced over her body. The excitement of the day would never be erased from her memory, nor would the dark brown bewildered eyes of the two wonderful calves.

As Leigh slid a soap-laden cloth over her skin, she pushed her face under the spray of water. Nothing, not even a hot shower, could ever measure against the sheer joy she felt when she witnessed the birth of those calves. Twins! She'd seen Shikira's worried eyes and then those same eyes bright with joy as she nuzzled her babies.

Suddenly Leigh felt a cool breeze as the shower curtain was pulled back. She turned and wiped water from her face.

"Is there room for two?"

Her heart leapt as Alex stepped into the shower.

"Shikira and the calves are okay?"

Alex pulled her against the length of his naked body. "Yes," he replied. "All is well."

Hot water cascaded over them as Alex's mouth closed over hers. All coherent thought tumbled from her mind as she wrapped her arms around him. Her body sang with need as his hands slid to her buttocks, pulling her core against his rock-hard need. His hands slid over her body and lifted to cup her aching breasts. Her body rocked against him, needing him, all of him.

Alex wasted no time. Quickly, his hands left her breasts, slid over her hips and cupped the back of her thighs, raising her legs as he pressed her against the shower wall. As he pushed his cock into her soft folds, Leigh wrapped her legs around his waist. She accepted him, letting herself open to accept all of his massive girth. Alex's hips undulated against her, pushing her to pleasure she knew she'd never know without him.

As release slammed into her, Leigh buried her face in his shoulder. Tears flowed down her cheeks as she gasped. Alex moaned as an orgasm wracked his body. He rocked against her. Out of breath, he released his grip on her legs and slowly let her glide down his wet body. His body continued to quake as his cock slowly slid out of her.

As the hot water continued to slide over them, Leigh kept her arms wrapped around him. He felt so good against her and her body didn't want to lose contact with his. Not now, not ever.

Leigh tipped her head back, letting the hot spray from the shower wash away her tears. When she leaned her head for-

ward and opened her eyes, Alex was gazing down at her. His gaze was as intense as it was when he gazed at her in the barn after the calves were born. She knew in her heart there was something he wanted to say. Yet he held back.

Leigh closed her eyes and placed her forehead on his chest. She gathered all her nerve and said the words, "I love you, Alex."

* * * *

Del leaned against the gate of the box stall as he looked at the cow and twin calves. "Guess yer mighty proud of yerself," he said through clenched teeth. Clearly he was none too pleased with the situation.

Alex glared at the old man. "I'm glad I stuck around if that's what you're talking about," he said. "If I'd listened to you, I'd have found a dead cow and two dead calves this morning."

Del's eyes narrowed as he stared at Alex. "You sayin' I don't know my stuff?"

Alex wouldn't back down. He had a lot of respect for the old man but this time, he was wrong. "I'm saying I'm glad I didn't listen to you."

Del grinned and slapped Alex on the back. "Well, thank God!" he said. "After all this time you finally found the balls to go with your gut feeling."

Alex frowned. Up until now, Del made his displeasure crystal clear when Alex didn't agree with him. Why was today any different? "What the fuck are you talking about?"

"You've always depended on my experience but last night you made your own decision for the first time since you took over this ranch," Del said.

Alex's eyes narrowed. "Did you know Shikira was in trouble?"

"Hell no," Del replied before he spat a plug of chewing tobacco into the stall. "But you did and that's a damn good thing. Mona's been after me to retire and now I know I can leave without you fucking up the place."

Alex felt his heart thump in his chest. He had no idea how old Del was but retirement never occurred to him until this moment. "Del—"

"Not quittin' now," he said. He turned and walked out the barn door. "But sometime soon."

As relief rifled through Alex, Del's feet shuffled over the floor.

Knowing there was more the old man wasn't telling him, Alex gritted his teeth. "What?"

Del turned his gaze to Alex and looked him squarely in the eye. "How long are you gonna keep playin' with Leigh?"

Alex couldn't help but be shocked. Del had never asked about any of the women he'd brought to the ranch before. He tried to keep his demeanor mild. He shrugged. "Don't know."

Del grimaced. "Mona's gettin' fond of her. Told her Leigh's just another cunt feedin' yer needs—"

Alex cut him off by grabbing the old man by the collar. He peered down at Del with anger in his eyes. "Don't ever refer to Leigh that way," Alex said through clenched teeth.

Del's eyes brightened as he raised his hands defensively.
"Okay, okay, don't rip my ol' head off!"

Alex released him and took a step back, realizing what he'd done. "Shit, Del, I'm sorry."

Del straightened his shirt. "That's okay. Guess I'll be more careful when I talk about yer lady love next time."

Chapter 9

“Hard to believe you’ve been here a month already,” Mona said as she rolled out pie dough on the counter.

“It’s been almost five weeks,” Leigh supplied as she finished peeling another apple and began to slice it into a large bowl.

“Have you decided if you’re going to stay on after the two months are up?”

Leigh’s heart tightened. It had been almost a month since Shikira’s twins were born. While the twin girls...Leigh stopped to correct her thoughts...they were heifers, when would she ever remember that?...were doing well, her relationship with Alex seemed to have taken a down turn. So much so she felt more comfortable sleeping in the spare room upstairs, a fact Mona had quickly taken notice of.

It wasn’t that Alex didn’t want to have sex with Leigh. He did on a nightly basis. But since Leigh felt so disconnected from Alex, she only gave in to his needs when hers were great as well. He wanted her to come back to his bedroom to stay, but Leigh couldn’t do that knowing Alex resented her for reasons she could not understand.

While the twin calves grew over the past month, Leigh could not help but feel her relationship with Alex faltered with each day.

“Leigh?” Mona’s sharp voice infiltrated her thoughts, drawing her back to the question she’d been asked.

“I think I’ll have to head home,” Leigh said, her heart heavy at the thought. “I’m sure Alex doesn’t want me to stay any longer than the two months he hired me for.”

Mona didn’t say a word as she rolled dough onto the rolling pin and uncurled it over a pie plate. Leigh dutifully filled the shell with apples laced with flour, sugar and cinnamon.

As Mona set about rolling the dough to make the top of the pie, Leigh wiped her hands and untied the apron around her waist. “I’m going to the barn to see the girls,” she said.

Mona nodded briskly. She knew Leigh was referring to the twin calves. As they grew over the past month, Leigh had become more and more attached to them. And the twins had come to know her as well.

Leigh absently batted flour off her jeans as she walked into the barn. Shikira moaned a soft greeting as she opened the stall gate and stepped inside. The twins quickly scampered toward her and greeted Leigh with soft licks. “Hello, my darlings,” Leigh said as she ran her hands over the calves’ slick black coats. Their stark white faces, a sign they were Hereford crosses, turned up to Leigh begging for her attention.

Shikira quickly stepped forward and bowed her head. Leigh had come to understand over the past month that this was the old cow’s silent demand for attention too. If she knew her babies should be completely black like her to be purebred

Black Angus, she didn't seem to care. Shikira loved her twins as much as Leigh did. As the twins danced around her, Leigh scratched the old cow's forehead.

"Well, ain't this a pleasant scene?"

Leigh wasn't the only one surprised by the voice. The calves ran to the back of the stall and Shikira raised her head, looking at the source of the intrusion.

"Del," Leigh said breathlessly. "I didn't see you come in."

Del grinned...or was it a sneer? "You gettin' all acquainted with them calves, are you?"

"No," Leigh replied. "You know I've been acquainted with them since birth."

Del's eyes narrowed. "Bet you named them too."

Leigh nodded. "Of course."

"And just what did you name those little bundles of joy?"

Leigh knew Del was toying with her. "Why do you care what I named them?"

"Just askin', is all."

Leigh looked back. Shikira had walked to the back of the stall and nuzzled her babies. "Well," she replied, "their names are Precious and Precocious."

Del reeled back, his laughter echoing off the barn walls. "Pre what?"

Leigh was offended by the sarcastic laughter. She was instantly sorry she told Del anything and had no inclination to explain the names.

When Del recovered, he leaned on the stall gate again. He wiped his eyes, trying to contain his laughter. "I guess Alex

didn't tell you that we ain't keepin' 'em. You'd have been better off callin' 'em dead and deader."

Leigh glared at Del. "What the hell are you talking about?"

Del laughed. "Can you be that stupid?" he asked. "The neighbor's bull got out and bred the cow. They're crossbreeds and don't belong on this farm. They're headin' for the slaughterhouse very soon."

Leigh glared back at Del. "Alex would never let that happen," she said.

Del shook his head. "Then you don't know anything about him," he declared. "Alex is a businessman. And his business is breeding Black Angus cattle. He's not going to keep crossbreeds...not even when they are out of his best cow."

"You're lying," Leigh cried as she brushed by Del and ran out the barn door. As she made her way to the house she wiped away tears. Surely Alex would not send those two calves to be butchered simply because they were not the breed he desired.

* * * *

When Alex got home from the meeting in town, he was tired and hungry. Mona met him at the door.

"Made macaroni and cheese," she said as she headed for the door. "It's in the oven."

Alex stared after her as she quickly went out the door and got into Del's truck. As the pickup sped down the dusty lane, Alex slowly walked to the sink and turned on the taps.

It had been a bitch of a day...he'd been riding fence lines all day and found himself fixing more fences than he'd intended. After that, he still had to go into town for the meeting. When he'd walked into the house and found Mona in a hurry to get by him, he knew something was up. Dog-tired, he hoped it wasn't something to do with Leigh. He was looking forward to curling up with her in his arms tonight.

Alex splashed water over his face, taking pleasure in the cool liquid washing away the grime of the day. And then he heard Leigh's voice.

"Are you really going to ship the twins out to be slaughtered?"

Chapter 10

Leigh watched as Alex took a towel and carefully dried his face. He reached for two oven mitts and retrieved the casserole dish out of the oven.

"I'm starving," he said as placed the dish on the counter and lifted the lid.

Leigh's heart clenched. He was telling her what he'd intended to do without saying a word. She bit back tears. "You do intend to get rid of them."

Alex turned to the cupboards and pulled out two large plates. He placed them on the table without a word.

Leigh wanted to scream. "Alex!"

He retrieved forks from a drawer and placed them by the plates. And then he finally spoke. "They don't belong on the ranch," he said solemnly. "I breed purebred Black Angus. They are crossbreeds."

"They are beautiful!" Leigh stomped her foot on the floor. "I don't care what they are."

"My buyers do!" Alex yelled back. "Shikira was contracted to calve out a very expensive Black Angus calf. Instead she was bred by a neighbor's scrub bull."

"So what? She had two beautiful girls."

Alex's face darkened with anger. "So what?" He tossed the oven mitts on the floor. "So what?" he repeated, his voice getting louder. "So what about the fact I have a lot of money invested in that cow? So what about the fact you have no idea what's involved with raising cattle?"

Leigh bristled. "I admit that I don't know anything about raising any kind of prime beef," she said. "But I do know no matter what kind of money you have invested in that cow, she loves her babies with all her heart."

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Alex said as he threw up his hands. "This is exactly what I'm talking about. Shikira is a cow. No one cares how she feels."

Fresh tears sprang to Leigh's eyes. "How could you have witnessed the birth of those beautiful calves and not felt something?"

"I'm in this business to make money," he said angrily. "If you haven't figured that out yet, you're in the wrong place."

Leigh turned away, unable to look at Alex for another moment. As she walked up the stairs to her room, she stopped. "Just to be clear, you're the one who asked me to come here."

"And I'm sorry I did. You don't belong here."

Alex might as well have taken a knife and carved her heart out. His words cut clear to her very bones.

* * * *

When sleep finally came, Leigh's dreams were filled with memories of Alex. His touch, his kiss, his long, thick cock filling her. When she cried out, he was there...his hands cupping her breasts, his mouth closing over her lips. She wrapped her

arms around his shoulders as he drove into her, taking everything she had and demanding more. In her dreams she wrapped her legs around his waist, urging him on, wanting him so desperately that her heart ached.

“I love you; I love you.”

Alex didn't reply as he held her close. Even in her dreams he could not admit his feelings.

Chapter 11

When Leigh woke in the morning, she found herself alone. Had the night before been a dream or had Alex been there? She didn't know.

But she did know one thing. She had to leave. She couldn't stay another night in his house.

She packed her bags and carefully chose the time to drag them down the steps. It was long after breakfast, only Mona would be in the house as both Alex and Del would be out on the range by then.

As Leigh walked into the kitchen, two suitcases jammed into one hand and the cat carrier in the other. Mona's craggy face frowned. "What the hell are you doin'?"

Leigh bit back tears as she looked at her friend. "I've got to leave, Mona. I can't stay here another day knowing Alex..." her voice trailed off, unable to finish.

Mona's gaze narrowed as she filled two mugs with coffee. "If you're taking off, the least you can do is have a cup of coffee with me before you go."

"Can I call for a taxi first?"

Mona snorted as she pointed to the phone. "Be my guest."

When Leigh got off the phone she smiled at Mona. "Lucky me," she said. "Seems the taxi is nearby after taking a

neighbor home after a night on the town last night. He'll be here in a few minutes to take me to the airport."

Mona frowned, her eyes glazing. "Dang! I thought you wouldn't get a ride to Winnipeg until tomorrow." Her face brightened. "You haven't booked a flight yet."

"No," Leigh replied. "But I'm sure I'll easily be able to get a flight to Toronto."

"And then what?"

Leigh shrugged. "I don't know. I'll figure it out as I go."

"And what about Precious and Precocious?"

Leigh winced. "It seems their fate is sealed. Apparently I know nothing about ranching."

When Leigh heard the sound of a car horn outside, she got up from the table and smiled at Mona. "I will never forget you."

Tears flowed down Mona's cheeks as she wrapped her arms around Leigh. "And I will never forget you either."

* * * *

When Alex walked into the house that evening, he knew something wasn't right. The house felt cold, as though it had been abandoned. He knew instinctively Leigh wasn't there.

Mona glared at him as she grabbed her coat and purse. "There's a chicken stew in the oven for dinner," she said as she made her way to the door.

"Where's Leigh?"

She shrugged. "Why would you care where she is?"

Alex felt a cold fist circle his heart and squeeze. He wanted to grab her but knew better. Instead he replied honestly before she walked out the door, "Because I like her."

Mona laughed. "You just like her?"

"Yeah, I like her," Alex replied. "I like her a lot."

"You'll have to do better than that—"

Del suddenly appeared in the door. "Oh, for fuck's sake, just admit you love her!" he howled. "Mona's not gonna tell you where to find her unless you do and I'm not gonna get dinner anytime soon for the same reason."

"Is that what you want from me?" Alex said as he peered at Mona.

When she nodded, Alex quickly said the words. "I love her. I love her with all my heart."

"Then you better hurry," she said. "She left this morning for the airport. If you're lucky, she just might still be there waiting for a flight."

* * * *

"Air Ontario, Flight two seven nine to Toronto, Ontario is boarding at Gate Eleven."

Leigh picked up her bags and headed to the gate. Ted, the taxi driver, who owned a small ranch not far from Alex's, pulled out all the stops to get her to the airport as soon as possible. It wasn't that Ted thought she should get out of Dodge as fast as possible, it was more about the fact his wife had recently broken her arm after tussling with an ornery steer. He had to get home to feed his livestock since his wife was out of commission for the next few weeks.

Ted didn't ask why he was driving her to the airport though he did mention he'd heard rumors that Alex had a new woman staying at the ranch. Considering what she'd heard about Alex's conquests, she suspected Ted wasn't surprised

that yet another woman wanted to leave Alex Diamond's ranch quickly.

Leigh sighed as she stood in line to board the flight back to Toronto. What would she fly home to? She realized Edward wanted her back but knew she wouldn't go. The moment the plane landed in Toronto, Leigh knew she'd be a free agent...open to opportunities, ready for anything that came her way. Despite the fact her heart would always be on a ranch in Manitoba, owned by a man who did not have the ability to love. Yet she knew she'd land on her feet and find a way, some way, to carry on.

"Leigh-Ann Percival. Please come to the courtesy desk."

Leigh had been so deep in her sorrowful thoughts she wasn't sure she'd heard the announcement as it echoed through the airport speakers. She stayed in line, waiting for her turn to board the plane.

As she handed her ticket to the attendant, another announcement sounded over the speaker system.

"Leigh-Ann Percival, please come to the courtesy desk immediately."

The attendant smiled as she took the ticket from Leigh's hand. "You're in seat forty-five. Your flight attendant will show you to your seat."

When Leigh hesitated, her ears focused on the second announcement, her heart pounding in her chest, the attendant's soft voice spoke firmly. "Ms. Percival," she said, "you're holding up the line. Either board or get out of the line."

Leigh didn't know what compelled her but suddenly passengers were passing her as she stood to the side. She took a deep breath and walked away from the boarding line. She had to find out what message had been left for her at the courtesy desk. Even if it was bad news, it would be worth waiting for a later flight. It was better than flying home not knowing what the message was.

And then she saw Alex. Sexy as ever in his tight blue jeans, white shirt and cowboy hat. When his eyes focused on her, she knew why he'd come after her. He loved her as much as she loved him. Her heart swelled with sheer joy. Yet she held herself in check as she lugged her cat carrier with her and put it on the floor a couple feet away from him.

"Look," he said as his eyes caressed her. "I don't know what the future holds for us. I don't know if I can be the man you want me to be. But I know I'm a better man with you in my life. Besides, the twins miss you. They won't be going anywhere as long as I have something to say about it."

She was glad he'd changed his mind about those beautiful calves, but it wasn't enough to keep her from leaving. He didn't love her. Leigh's heart ached as tears streamed down her cheeks. She shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said. "I need more. I need to know you love me."

Alex's eyes blazed as he stared at her. "Then I'll say it, I love you. I don't think I have ever loved anyone in my life the way I love you. Stay with me, Leigh. Be my lover, be my..." he hesitated before he said, "wife."

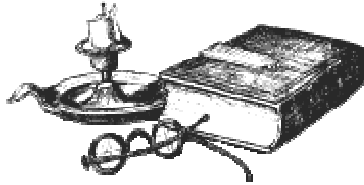
Sobbing with joy, Leigh fell into his arms. “Yes! I will marry you and I will always be your lover,” she said as he held her tight. “Always and forever!”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peggy Hunter is thrilled over the release of the first of a three book series called *Diamonds Are Forever*. She sincerely hopes her readers will fall madly in love with Alex, the eldest Diamond son.

Peggy Hunter lives in midwestern Ontario with her husband and son. When not writing, you'll find her digging in the garden or running after the various animals sharing space with her family.

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